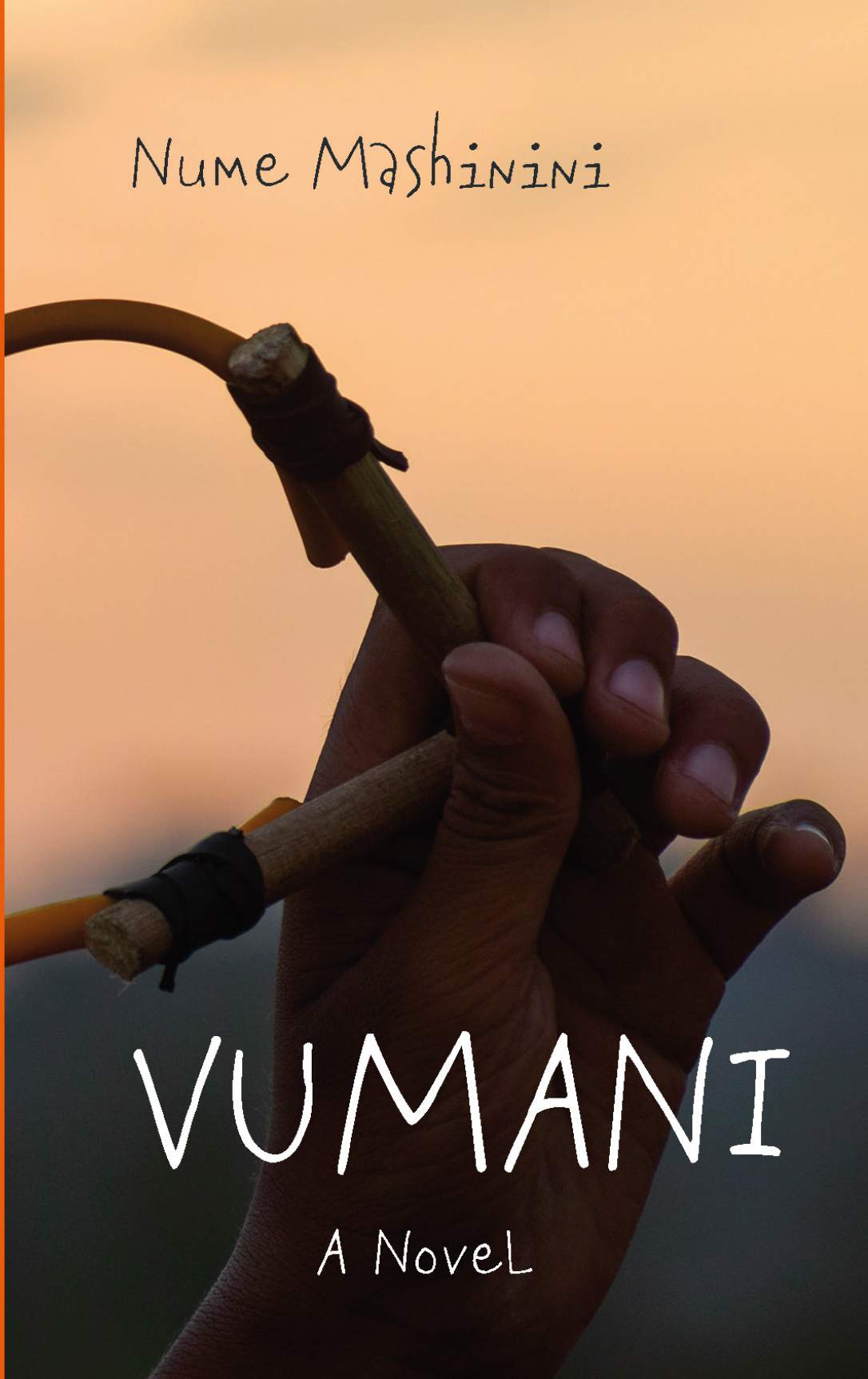
Nume Mashinini



VUMANI

A Novel

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UNIVERSITY OF JOHANNESBURG

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A Novel

Nume Mashinini

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Dedication

In memory of all the children who die in senseless wars all over the world. A special tribute goes to my twin brother, Lume Mashinini, who lives in me. This book also stands as a monument to honour the short lives of my late siblings: Sibusiso Mashinini (nom de guerre Minus Kgosing), Jabu Mashinini, Buyi Mashinini, Sherty Mashinini, Zanele Mashinini, my only sister Makhosazana "Khosi" Mashinini, my nephew Vuyo Prince Mashinini, my late mother Catherine Nomoya Mashinini, my late father Johannes Delani Mashinini, and the unsung liberation fighters, especially Vusimuzi Theo "Yster" Zwane and Nelson (real name unknown).

Prologue

The Burden of Memories

It was always the case. Vumani Mzondeki verily believed he would not live beyond adolescence. He accepted this possibility and made peace with it. His age notwithstanding, he secretly went to the cemetery to identify his grave. As luck would have it, or perhaps unluckily so, he did not die when he expected to. He lived long enough to see adulthood, with a solid career as a private school teacher. Despite his vocational success, Vumani too was once caught up in the tidal currents of his times, which made his life read like a script of a horror movie. Like his entire generation of black children, he lived in the shadow of his painful childhood memories, which he concealed well behind his calm exterior.

Unlike the other young, black men who anaesthetised their feelings with alcohol and Mandrax, Vumani created a steel carapace around himself and blocked out his childhood. He dared not talk about his past to anyone. Above all, he refused to let the load of his tumultuous past shatter him. Every so often, fragments of his past would appear in his mind. A scent, fumes, colours, music, pelting rain, a tone of voice inflamed these buried memories. These thoughts came when he least expected them, but he controlled them and avoided the downward spiral.

One day that tight lid on the intrusive thoughts and images burst open. He was staring at an email on his computer screen. His heart sank. Utterly dejected, he stood up slowly, staring at the sun rising on the horizon from his office window. His psyche was suddenly and violently flooded with an eruption of scenes from his childhood and youth. He lurched out of his office, rushed past his colleagues and out through the main entrance. The receptionist called out, "Vumani, where should I say you are when they look for you?"

Without responding, he dashed out, confused and enraged, overcome by the horrific memory.

He was barely ten years old on a sweltering Sunday morning. His mother Maye and his twin brother Vumile were walking down the dusty road to church. His elder brother, Bohloko, had taken two younger ones to their regular church, and left the two infants with their father. Maye was visiting this Zion Church with Vumani and Vumile at the suggestion of her cousin, *Mzala* Emily. Vumani feared that Maye had brought him and his brother there because of the superstition against twins.

They reached the corrugated iron shack that doubled as a house and a church. A man with a long beard, unkempt hair, and a long, white, starched shirt with a rope girdle stopped them. This was Mabulala.

"Wash your feet here before you enter this holy place," he said, brandishing a wooden rod like the biblical Moses. The twins recoiled, thinking he was about to strike them. They left their school shoes by a pile of footwear.

They could hear the preacher's zealous voice shaking the corrugated shack: "Yes, this country bears a grudge against children. It resents them for no reason. They die as if someone has pronounced anathema on all of them..."

They entered the small, sweaty room jammed with women, children, and a few men. The men wore long beards and carried staffs like the one held by Mabulala. The dusty congregation wore long, blue and white, starched robes girdled with thick ropes, and crosses on their backs. *Mzala* Emily beckoned Maye to sit next to her on the edge of a bench in the third row. Vumani and Vumile stood beside her.

The shack oozed poverty. It was not like their regular church, where the congregation looked down on their old and torn clothes. There were no ornate religious icons – only a modest homemade altar covered with a white cloth, a candelabra with seven lit candles, a notebook, four Bibles, a benefaction dish, and a bucket of holy water beneath the table. The entire congregation was crammed into four rows of 12 rickety pews a few metres from the table. Next to a tiny window, a huge painting depicted a contemplative, bearded man holding a staff, with the words, 'Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me' written on it. On three wooden

seats sat the priest, his wife, and a 14-year-old boy named Lunga who played the role of interpreter from Zulu to Sotho.

Lunga's face beamed with joy when he saw his favourite buddies. Although seven years older, he was fond of the twins and considered them his younger brothers because their mothers were cousins. He was in high school and spoke nine languages almost fluently, including English and Afrikaans. This was thanks to his 'kitchens' upbringing and his township life. The township people were jealous of his extraordinary talents, and sought to take him down by shaming him with whispered rumours that he was a bastard and a product of incest, causing his mother to be expelled from her home.

His mother's employer, Mrs Chand, had adopted Lunga and paid for his education at a private school and raised him as her own. Lunga was a scholarly young man who read the English, Afrikaans, Sotho, and Zulu versions of the Bible at church. He played the piano quite well and was also a fine artist. Yet, Lunga was a humble and refined young man.

The priest continued his sermon: "My brethren, the very heart of our Creator is in the cries and the aches of our children." His words electrified the congregation.

"Hallelujah," they chorused.

He roared, "Our Creator will deliver our children from the evil that floods our country as He delivered the Children of Israel. He created them out of His love. Let them receive your love in return..."

Emily positioned the opened Bible for Maye to see, and pointed to the verse her son Lunga had read earlier on, on which the sermon was based: *But Jesus called them unto Him, and said, "Suffer little children to come unto me, and forbid them not: for of such is the Kingdom of God. Verily I say unto you, whosoever shall not receive the Kingdom of God as a little child shall in no way enter therein." – Matthew 19, Verse 14.*

The priest paced the tight space next to the table, wiping sweat from his brow. "My brethren, I repeat: There may be people in this country who play the Creator and mercilessly kill

these children. They may be here. They may not be here. But I want to remind you that the Creator strongly rebukes every person, authority, or anyone who contributes to the demise of children. We have already buried many children this year. We pray that the children who are here today will not meet such a fate. May the Creator protect them from the perils of township life. Today, we ask the hand of our Creator to be upon them, now and forevermore."

"Amen," the congregation replied in unison.

But during his sermon the priest heard someone mumbling the superstition about Vumani and Vumile: "But this is one person in two bodies! One of them must be sacrificed to the gods."

The priest ended his sermon abruptly and looked at his congregation one by one. He could not trace the origin of the murmur, and thought it was his imagination. He fixed the collar of his sweat-soaked robe and stroked his beard, humming a mixture of chant, scream, and song.

It was a circle song. Emily chuckled. She was happy that it was time for the circle, referred to as *isiguqo* – a sacred dance to perform divination and heal the sick. Three young boys quickly removed all benches from the room and created space for the circle.

The preacher continued, his right hand on his chin as he sang, the staff held in his left. The barefoot gathering joined in the singing and formed a circle like a flock of birds. They danced and marched inside the room, pointing their staffs heavenwards. One would vow that the congregants imagined themselves crossing the biblical River Jordan en route to Heaven. The corrugated iron sheets threw back echoes of the songs, whistling, clapping of hands, and thunderous drumming. By now, everybody was dancing and spiralling continuously in the overpowering heat and sweat-drenched robes. The crescendo of drumming swelled the congregants' song and fervent dance, raising clouds of dust. The space was filled with the holy spirit, and a few congregants were induced into trance.

The singing stopped and the dust settled. Meanwhile, Mabulala stood aside, throwing surreptitious glances at Vumani and Vumile, who watched the process in awe. He moved towards them, but the one-eyed man (who had psychic powers, and was called the prophet) pushed past him and collapsed on Maye's legs. He shook violently, as if convulsing.

"The spirit says I should speak to you, mama. Yes, mama, when I see you, I feel like crying." He belched, screamed, and stood, gently hitting Maye on her shoulders.

"*Yebo*, I am listening, *khulumani*... speak, doves of Heaven... give me messages – I am listening," said the prophet as he spoke with the void. He ran towards the corner of the room, his one eye staring into space, and hit the corrugated iron wall. He returned, quivering, more from pain than being moved by the spirit. He quickly regained his composure and continued where he had left off, speaking to Maye with his eye closed.

"*Yebo* mama, the spirit says... you won't have rest, my parent... It tells me to tell you this... 'and it shall be, that the time will come... your life will change... you will be thrown in the furnace of fire and there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth'. This is taken from Matthew 13, Verse 42 or 32. The spirit gave me this verse... Yes, it is for you, my parent."

He stamped his staff on the bare floor and lay his ear on it as if listening to it. "*Yebo*, *khulumani*, tell your secrets... the spirit informs me that... there is a rising tide that will sweep across the country... many will shed tears over loss of their loved ones, particularly children... It seems as if you will also be affected, my parent... Yes, you will... the spirit tells me to protect you..." He rested his hand on the staff and continued, "After church, we will make amulets for you and your children... they will be made from yellow, black, green, and white wools... wear them around your waists.... These will be your protection."

He dashed out and came back with a dish full of ash. By now Maye and the twins stood frozen in a circle. He signed the cross on the brows of the twins and Maye, and used the very same dish to draw water from the bucket under the table and gave them to drink. The church intercessors chorused in prayer, in a rite of

exorcism of the wandering spirits that possessed the woman and her children.

Suddenly, Mabulala shouted in a frenzy of anger, interrupting the prayer. He shouted religious platitudes as he forced his way into the circle.

"Holy Christian Father! Holy Spirit! Holy Trinity! Merciful lion! Have mercy, Father! Have mercy! But these things are not supposed to be here." He lifted his hands and pointed at Vumani and Vumile, charging towards them like a man possessed. The intercessors stopped praying and the congregation watched aghast as he shoved the twins out of the door, "Out, out, out!" Lunga was about to intervene when his mother confronted the man head on.

"Whoa!" bawled Emily, running, nearly catching her foot on the hem of her long robe. "Today's sermon is still fresh in our minds and look at what you do. What wrong have these innocent children committed? You hate children, *wena*. You will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven." Her voice was thunderous. She scuffled through the door and pushed Mabulala, who lost his balance and fell by the door. He tried to stand, but Emily pummelled him mercilessly with her fist, while a few women congregants joined her. Maye and her twin sons slipped unharmed through the commotion. A cloud of dust was all that remained as they left the church. The words of the prophet would come to pass some months later.

Suddenly a car horn hooted and startled Vumani out of his reverie. He had reached Zoo Lake. He sat on a bench, observing the blue sky interspersed with white and gold from the morning sun. Pigeons strutted around his feet. A young couple in school uniform sat beneath a tree, their arms around each other. An ice-cream vendor cycled passed him. Vumani looked puzzled. Tree leaves swayed in the breeze. He remembered the email and rushing out of the office.

Just then a dog ran snarling at an old woman of regal bearing carrying a huge bag on her head. Vumani's body tensed, eyes closed, and he winced. A sudden memory dragged him three decades back, to his family household in Soweto. In his mind,

he saw Maye kneeling in supplication before a flickering candle, softly praying: "I am your humble servant, Lord. Please reward me by sparing my children and the country's children from all forms of danger. We fetch your strength and grace from You and all the angels you have assigned us. Hold our children's hands and walk with them wherever they go. In You there is protection, Almighty. We turn to You because we are helpless, and we know You are our ultimate protection. Our strength and potency are in our prayers and in our hope that You will respond."

Other memories broke through. Vumani's mind fragmented into haphazard chaos, replaying each detail of the heart-wrenching scenes as he watched the inner movie of his life. He remembered every moment of pain: the deafening sound that changed his life; the impact of the June 1976 uprisings; the streets spattered with blood and corpses; the bush; his friends; the graves; the 1985 upheavals and the state of emergency; Mandela's release and the homecomings; his disillusionment; the wildfires; the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and how it snubbed his family; the funerals...

Just then, a pensive-looking boy bent down next to him and held out his hands in supplication. Vumani rose, groping in his pockets for some coins and handed them to the boy. He felt distracted and looked for a place where he would not be bothered. For a while, he stood, staring at the 'NO ENTRY' signboard on a nearby road, while a sparrow chirped its monotonous song. He followed the narrow path along a hedge that led to the lake shore. He sat down on a bench overlooking the water, holding his forehead despondently. For a while, the murmur of the water calmed him. Seven white geese waddled towards him, circled around honking, and returned to the lake. He experienced a derealisation and felt like everything around him was a dream.

The old woman strode down the pathway, still carrying her load. She had recognised Vumani from a distance when the dog had distracted her earlier, but could not remember where she had encountered him. She put her load down and stood motionless for few seconds before she sat on the bench to his right. Vumani felt a hand on his shoulder and remained bowed. "Hey, hey *wena*" she

said jokingly, prodding his shoulders. "You could have walked to the ends of earth if that car didn't hoot. I have been watching you. What's wrong? Why do you sit here, brooding as if you are carrying the weight of the world on your shoulders?"

Vumani lifted his head, annoyed, and stared at her questioningly. She smiled and looked at him congenially with kind, brownish-red eyes. He remembered her. She had the courage of someone who had lived with pain and desperation, and she looked run down, yet she was buoyant and confident as always. She wore a sloppy dress and slippers. Vumani wondered how she could allow herself to come to this. She had changed to such an extent that she seemed light years away from his bright and scholarly first-year philosophy lecturer. "Aah, *sisi* Ntozimandla, I am so happy to see you after all these years." He hesitated, not sure whether it was correct for him to use her full name. He knew that everybody called her Nto. Vumani stood up and put out his hand to shake hers. Nto's pleasure was unrestrained. She flung her arms around him and squeezed him tightly, her body smelling of sweat.

"Hugs are in short supply in my world," she said self-assuredly. "In any case, feel free to call me Nto, like everyone else does. I am accustomed to it by now. Shortening my name won't reduce my essence. I am not my name." She snorted with laughter. Her free-spiritedness and spontaneity entranced Vumani.

"Can I hazard a guess?" she continued. "I suppose you are enjoying life because you found Paul Kruger's hidden millions?" Vumani seemed not to get Nto's joke. He eyed her, wondering if she was in possession of all her faculties.

She gazed shrewdly at him. "I have a great memory for faces but I forget names. The last time we met, you had a name – unless if things have changed."

"I am Vumani," he responded shyly and gave her a respectful glance.

"Yes, Mzondeki, I remember you!" Her voice softened. "Now, what's wrong? Why are you sitting here brooding? Are you not working? Even if you were unemployed, there is no need

to brood. There is more to life than agonising over temporary problems." She paused; her chubby face looked troubled.

The empathy in her voice and her soft eyes made Vumani open his heart and unburden himself to her. He drew a deep, shuddering breath. "I walk this earth with my gloomy past etched into my psyche..." He hesitated. "Yes, I carry the burden of my memories. I no longer value life. It is a miracle that I am alive." He recounted his story, evoking poignant memories of his childhood. Nto listened to him attentively, without interrupting. He ended his story by telling her about his work and the email he had received that morning. She frowned and narrowed her eyes as soon as Vumani had finished. "Well, of course, nothing stands between you and death. If you want to die, die now. Why do you fear blood when you are already bleeding?"

Vumani stared at her aghast, not certain whether Nto was joking – even though her stern face suggested otherwise. He arched his eyebrows in surprise. She flashed a big smile at him that changed her serious countenance and continued, "It is true that life dealt you an awful hand. But this does not warrant you giving up on yourself. Living and existing are worlds apart. Maybe you have been existing for far too long. Make a conscious decision to live now. You have oceans of opportunities which you are yet to explore." She placed her weathered hand on his arm. "You just said it in your own words. *L'univers reste noir. Nous sommes de animaux sinistres*. You remember this statement? What did Jean Paul Sartre mean when he said this?"

Nto gave Vumani time to respond. Vumani remembered that she was a strong proponent of Sartre, thanks to her French scholarship. She loved Sartre and would get carried away in class, conducting part of her lectures in French. Her fluency in French inspired Vumani to add French to the list of languages he spoke. Even so, he was in no mood to discuss this philosophy with Nto because he believed these words to be extremely pessimistic. He simply translated it: 'We are sinister animals in a dark universe.'

Nto nodded and stared at him, nudging him to continue, but Vumani kept quiet. She clenched her jaw and proceeded. "So why do you expect people to be good when they believe there is

no God who will punish them for being bad? This country treated you black children you as maggots rather than human beings. Do you think those adults would have treated you that way if they knew there would be retribution? No! To this day, people torment each other miserably because they assume there is no natural law of justice."

She rummaged through her bag and gave a packet of sweets to Vumani. "Please help yourself."

He took some, returned the packet, and eyed her cautiously. She had broached a subject that had long been nagging him. He looked at her with wide, questioning eyes. She put some sweets into her mouth. "It is true, you endured unimaginable and interminable horrors as a child. It is also true that you grew up in vile toxicity. I agree, your path was long and arduous, and wildfires ravaged your life. But, Vumani, you survived your horrific childhood. How fortunate are you that not only did you pass high school, but you also studied tertiary education. You have an excellent job. You know many of your contemporaries who disappeared into the abyss. There are many who never had the chances you had. The system was brutal, and no one was unscathed."

Vumani nodded. "But the pain is an unbearable load I carry with me always," he said, seeking sympathy. His pain provoked rage, but she didn't want to fall into a trap of feeling pity for him.

She made a wry face and whispered, "The world is a hellhole. You create your own heaven in a little corner."

Vumani scratched his head and frowned. Nto flapped her hands at a fly and continued: "We all have dark spaces within; we just have to manage them."

She moved slightly from her position and fixed her eyes on him. "You can never hide from your past. It will always trail behind you like an animal's tail, visible to those around you as reminder of where you've been and what you've experienced. Learn to live with it and don't make what is part of you a burden. Alleviate this burden you are carrying right now. It is true, your family bore the brunt of oppression. There are ghastly images

imprinted on your mind. These are the mournful chapters of your life. However, there are also gratifying ones. Why do you focus on pain? Why not focus on the joyful episodes of your life? You cannot lie under the weight of past memories. Confront your pain and create new positive memories for yourself…"

"But how can I relish my life of glory when I have none?" interjected Vumani. "In the past, me and my family were considered outcasts because of my brother's involvement in the struggle. Now we are ostracised because his assassins classified him as a spy to justify their treachery." Vumani wanted sympathy from Nto. Piqued by his self-pity, she stood up and stared at him accusingly, displeasure in her eyes. "For God's sake, why do you think you are a victim? Your story is woven with triumphs. You defied the odds and emerged victorious. Hell, you have never been a victim! You are not even the victim of circumstances you think you are. You are a victim of your thoughts!" she shouted and sat down again.

Vumani leaned back and rubbed his forehead in self-deprecation. He murmured something, but Nto interrupted. "Listen to me! Listen carefully, I am neither an apologist of history nor a reactionary. But I want you to remember this: you are a product of your thoughts. Everything that you are and will be depends on what you think about yourself and the stories you tell yourself about you. Look at what you have become. Your greatness lies in overcoming very dire circumstances. You have become a self-defined adult. Why do you let the poison of your past contaminate you? Do you not know your own mind? You harnessed your resources in the worst of times to create the person you have become. Stop drinking from the poisoned cup of your past, or you will destroy the man you have become. If you continue, you will implode. Look at how your peers have wrecked themselves. Do not fall into the quagmire of self-destruction. Your enemy is internal. If you interpret what you endured in the past negatively, it will contaminate your present."

She kept quiet, perspiration running down her forehead. Vumani remained silent, thinking about what she had said. She shook her head, her eyes fixed on the ground, and told him,

"The wise say there are two certain things in life. The first one is that we are all going to die. The second one is that we are going to live until we die. You must decide what you do with the latter. Decide how you will live until you die. You are going to do both, whether you like it or not. You may as well live your best – without grudges, with forgiveness – and be the spirit being that you are, irrespective of what people have done to you. Remember, people do things because they are not spiritually matured. You are in the same boat when you respond to them with spiritual immaturity."

Her words shook Vumani to the core. He realised that he was indeed enslaved by his past. He was perplexed. She leaned forward, determined not to miss the chance to help Vumani. "Your life seems jaded right now because of your outlook," she explained. "You are not an object of pity. Probe deeper, layer by layer, into the roots of your angst. What you are feeling right now has nothing to do with your past. It is the story you tell yourself about your past. Don't let decades of pain hold you hostage or keep you in bondage."

She cast her eyes around and continued: "Worse still, don't let those who wronged you or your family control you. You appear to have given over your life to them. Hell, take it back! Move on. Remember to forget! Travel light! Don't allow your past to render you a passenger in this omnibus called life. Life is a long haul. You cannot haul around emotional trauma where you walk. Take your life back and take charge of it even if pain is written in every line of your story. Don't be a serpent that eats its own tail. Lay down the ghost of the past and move on."

Vumani considered Nto's words. He pictured most of the people he had grown up with, who had not been as lucky as he, and he conceded that Nto made sense.

Vumani maintained his composure, his eyes fixed on the ripples that spread lazily across the lake. He wondered what had become of the atheist he knew at university and how she transformed into this spiritually minded being beside him. Her words were not lost on him. A strolling guitarist appeared and played a song for them. Nto cupped her hands to her ears in jest. The guitarist winked and continued to play. She gave him a ten

rand note as soon as he finished. Then she addressed Vumani once again.

Vumani observed her, listening attentively, nodding in agreement to what she was saying. "You are out of the woods. You were thrown a lifeline years ago. You are not a log of wood that was thrown into the fire. Remember Sartre's concept of *mauvaise foi*e? It means 'bad faith', in case you have forgotten. You are free to be anything, Mzondeki. You are not a stone or an inanimate object whose 'essence precedes their existence'. Your existence comes before your essence, like any other human. It is time to turn the page of your life. Embrace yourself. Recreate your essence through your unique experience. Rescript your life. Maybe you should become a novelist like Sartre."

Vumani had concluded eons ago that European philosophy lacked appreciation of the African way of life and what shaped their lives as Africans. He believed destiny thrust a heavy path before him, but he did not express this to Nto. Also, he doubted that it was Nto's free will for her to have turned out the way she was currently. Even so, he conceded silently that most of what she said made logical and emotional sense. He remembered what Makeda, her spiritual guide, said to him during his *sangoma* initiation back in 1996. Much to his surprise, he found himself excited at the thought of writing a book. Nto regarded Vumani warm-heartedly and went on with a carefree zest of a teenager.

"Don't be surprised when you hear me talk this way. I went through a mystical awakening – what Plato refers to as anamnesis. When you met me in your first year, I was a flat-out atheist. But now I have a quiet appreciation of God. Vumani, I am not sure where you stand in the spectrum of theism. Do you suppose your mind and your body are on the same page?" She paused for a moment, observing Vumani, and added, "My message to you is not religious. It is basic common sense."

Vumani nodded in understanding. She summarised her thoughts, just like she had always done in class: "To recapitulate, you were born free, but you have surrendered your liberty to those who have wronged you. You have the choice of remaining entrenched as a young, hapless, and hopeless boy. Or you can

embrace life as an adult who exercises his right to choose his daily experiences. Don't let anything compromise your freedom. It is not a crime to be free. Review your life and map your way forward. Maybe you need to reformat your life. You have existed for a long time. Maybe now it's time to turn the page of your life and actually live. Maybe it is time to change your narrative and think about all the positive events that helped shape you, rather than the darkness that threatened to destroy you. Remember, you may have been a hapless victim of oppression, but you are not helpless. Flip the script, Mzondeki. Don't wish for death; death will find you. Just recalibrate yourself and rewrite your narrative!"

She remembered something that provoked loud, frivolous laughter. She stood slowly, picked up her bag, and put it on her head. "By the way, I needed to say something about your work," she said, remembering. "Well, well, well. The only thing I can say about your work right now is that unfortunately modern-day employment is akin to slavery and it does not have to be."

She smiled broadly. "This is because people have replaced humanity with profit. What is the difference between a slave-master and a so-called boss?"

Vumani thought about what Nto had said about work. Nto continued. "At best, the so-called bosses act like slave-masters, or even mafia bosses. These pseudo titles make people behave the way they do. Don't be deluded. They will not recognise your efforts or value your contributions, no matter how exceptional you may be. I control my destiny now. I have no master."

The large bag on her head seemed too heavy for her to carry, but she remained standing.

Vumani mulled over Nto's words, then asked, "Do you think I should leave my job? And what do you think will happen to me if I do?"

"I don't know. The outcome can necessarily be only an educated guess."

With that, she moved off slowly. "I will see you, Mzondeki. They say the best dreams happen when people are awake. Dream

as a decision to wake up to the truth of life. I don't know where your road will lead after today. Godspeed!"

She chuckled as she waved Vumani goodbye. "*Les jeux sont faits*. There are many who want to know what it was like growing up in Soweto in the 1970s. They want to understand why your generation was so violent. Why the alcoholism, why the apathy? Tell your story. It may answer these questions and heal a lot of people, including yourself... Take the plunge, my dear friend. Never say die..."

He waved back, watching her swing into her easy stride and disappear into the crowd. He knew that *Les jeux sont faits* came from the title of Sartre's novel. He also knew that, loosely translated, it meant, 'The dice are cast'. Nto meant that he had been given a second chance in life, like the characters of Sartre's novel. He needed to act to change his fate.

It was almost lunchtime. He glanced at his watch; it was 12:52. He had been at the lake for almost five hours. He headed determinedly back to his office. By now, the park was bustling with life.

Vumani's heart felt lighter after absorbing the wisdom of Nto's words. He almost wept with relief as his spirits lifted. He smiled heartily, thinking that the woman was a godsend. He felt like a flower that had just been transplanted into fertile earth. On his way back to the office, he saw an emaciated, naked man about his age walk placidly along Jan Smuts Avenue, holding a Bible. The man appeared unaffected by the onlookers, the honking cars, and the people who took pictures of him with their cellphones. As Nto's words wafted through his mind, Vumani noted the stark contrast between his own life and that of the naked stranger. He returned to his desk and stared at the screen of his computer, still thinking about his conversation with Nto. He re-read the email:

> 26 November 2015
>
> Hi Vumani,
>
> I have heard that you are teaching things that are outside the curriculum. As you may know, we strictly teach what is

> in text and nothing outside. I am not happy about this, and I want to see you in my office for you to explain to me why you do this.
>
> Best,
>
> Peter

A surge of anger came over Vumani. Peter's reproach reminded him of the pointless ill-treatment he had suffered as a child. Vumani possessed a strong work ethic and had never displayed laziness. He had developed numerous teaching aids for various schools, including a study aid that was replicated by all schools in the province. However, in his ten years working for the institution, instead of an acknowledgement from his superior, he received this email. Who did Peter think he was? Vumani resolved to project a fresh, beautiful story about his life. From that day, he would be his own master and control his destiny. These thoughts spurred him to write his resignation letter:

> 26 November 2015
>
> Dear Peter,
>
> I tender herewith my resignation from Moya Academy, effective November 30, 2015. My leave days will serve as my notice period for the month of December.
>
> Thank you for the opportunities you have given me during my decade's tenure with the company.
>
> Sincerely,
>
> Vumani

Vumani did not proofread the email or think twice about its contents. He pressed the 'send' button, sending a note that ended his solid career of almost two decades, in spite of the fact that his family would suffer as a result of his resignation. He trembled even as his existential angst receded. The young boy he once was had emerged, crying for his story to be told. His story would start with his tragic birth.

Part One

The Beginning

1967–1984

One

The Familiar Grave

The birth of the twins, Vumile and Vumani, was considered a curse – an evil spell that had been cast on the Mzondeki family and that might contaminate every aspect of the community. Some community members treated Maye, the mother of the twins, as a witch, silently judging her. She was hurt and mystified that her two beautiful sons were fingered as bad omens. And when Vumile died inexplicably, the community whispered their fabrications. Perhaps he was killed by a stray bullet or a lightning bolt, they whispered to each other out of Maye's earshot, but finally they decided that it had to be the spear of the gods. They declared that the spear was Maye's punishment for refusing the ancestral call to become a *sangoma*, an indigenous healer, and that she would endure grief until her death. Her children and her children's children would inherit agony. Her only recourse would be to accept her spiritual vocation and become a *sangoma*.

Yet others said that Vumile's death would rid his family and the entire community of evil omens. Only Ngoho, the bearer of truth, would know. Ngoho was reputed to be a seer of great knowledge, wisdom, and intuition, but she remained silent.

Vumani's family wished to be left alone to mourn their seven-year-old son in dignity. They had no interest in finding out why or how Vumile had died inexplicably. They worried whether Vumani could cope without Vumile. Vumile was to Vumani what nails are to fingers. Apart from being identical, they had done everything together since they were toddlers. They liked and disliked the same things.

Vumani appeared unfazed by his twin brother's death. He was nonchalant and showed neither terror nor anxiety, even when his father, Mzondeki, called him and explained, "Son, tomorrow before the funeral we will have to go to the mortuary early in the morning. You know that you and Vumile are one. So, for him not to

summon you to the land of the spirits where he has gone, you will have to perform certain rituals."

Vumani was not sure how to respond to his father, whom he referred to as Bhaye. If indeed his brother was dead, he wanted to die with him. In his mind, life would be bleak without his brother. He could not imagine living normally without someone who had been with him ever since he was in his mother's womb. He did not want to waste time on what he considered unnecessary rituals. He simply wished to follow his twin brother wherever he had gone. He wanted to spit out these thoughts to his father, but something stopped him. Instead, he looked at his father disapprovingly.

"I know it's tough, my boy," his father continued, as if reading his thoughts. "But for my sake and your mother's, you need to go through this ritual. Your mother will not survive if she loses you as well."

It was not Bhaye's words that made Vumani rethink, but the grief in his voice. He had never seen his father so distraught. He knew him as a brave, robust person, but his countenance had changed dramatically since Vumile's death. Now he seemed to carry a heavy rock. Vumani could not understand how the temporary departure of a child would transform his father like this. In his mind, his twin brother had disappeared briefly. He was confident that, in time, he would meet with him again. Do they not talk about people parting for a short time and soon reconnecting? Does the song not say that in the end, the sound of a blaring trumpet will echo throughout the world and all who have parted will meet again? Once more, as if reading his mind, his father continued, his voice faltering from the lump in his throat. "Yes, in the end, those who part will meet again, my son. But it is not a good idea for you to follow your brother now. Everyone has their own journey. It was his fate to part with us so soon. Perhaps yours is different. You need to accomplish many things before you leave. The Creator has given us roles to fulfil. That includes you. You must carry your role fully. Only after you accomplish your tasks can you join your twin brother. You will not get your rewards unless you complete your responsibilities."

Vumani thought about Vumile. How strange life was; just days ago, his life had seemed perfect and blissful as they played outside their parents' home. Then, unexpectedly, everything changed. Did Vumile have tasks on this earth? Were his tasks accomplished already? Why did he leave at such a tender age? Would he get his rewards? He thought of asking his father why he and Vumile had different fates, even though they had been born simultaneously. But he refrained, sensing how distraught his father was. He vowed to postpone following Vumile. Perhaps his father's suggestions had merit. He did not want to cause his parents further misery. Didn't Vumile also ask him not to come with him? He well remembered their conversation some time before he died.

"Do you see the sun, Vumani?" asked Vumile, blissfully happy. He gazed at the sun with open eyes. It did not seem to blind him. Vumani didn't answer, surprised at how his brother stared at the blinding sun without squinting.

"One day, I will go to the sky to be part of the sun. I will flood your days with light. You will be the moon when I become the sun. You will illuminate everybody's nights. Do you want to go with me to the sun?" Without giving Vumani a chance to respond, Vumile seemed to reconsider what he had asked his brother and said, "No, I think you must not come with me. There is so much you need to do before you follow me. I will turn into a bird when I reach the sky. I will come back and put you under my wing. We will fly higher and higher together, far above the clouds, and stay there. It is better that you do not come with me now. I will come and fetch you once I have seen the place. Do not follow me now. I will go alone."

Vumile's words had not made sense to Vumani's young mind at the time. He pondered whether they had made sense to his brother himself, despite being the one who spoke them. That marked one of the last conversations he had with Vumile before his passing. What happened afterward remained a mystery to him. He was surprised to see people surrounding him with questions on their faces as if he was responsible for Vumile's untimely death.

He could not explain. In truth, he did not know what happened. He wished he knew. He was too young to fathom death.

Vumani cast another glance at Bhaye, but no words emerged as he entered the bedroom. A sense of despair washed over him as he surveyed the dismal little room. Maye and his aunts were gathered inside the room, huddled beside the mattress that had been placed on the floor. Maye sat on it, alongside her older sister, *Mmamogolo* Maria, and *Mmangoane* Busi, her face concealed beneath a black shawl. The candle's flickering bathed their faces in an eerie light, casting shadows that became monstrous apparitions on the walls. As part of the ceremony, Vumile's school uniform hung from the wardrobe in Maye's bedroom, which had been made into a reception area for mourners.

Vumani wondered why his uncles and other men in the family were not also keeping vigil in the room. He thought perhaps they were afraid of the wailing inside this tiny space. Deep in thought, he noticed Maye wiping tears from her eyes. He went to her, kissed her and sat on her lap. He wished he could do more to soothe Maye's broken heart. When he heard his aunts sob as soon as he entered the room, he knew his presence reminded his aunts of Vumile, now lying motionless in the mortuary. Most could not distinguish between himself and Vumile. They were like an apple split in half. His other half was likely to be devoured by worms, and would soon serve as fertiliser. He sat on his mother's lap until he fell asleep. Bhaye came and tucked him into bed. They both needed strength to face the next day.

Bhaye woke up Vumani and his elder brother Bohloko before dawn. The day seemed stricken by an unknown disease. Bohloko helped Vumani wash and dress. At 04:30 am, they set out for the mortuary along unlit, dusty streets like dusky shadows. They walked silently almost 2 kilometres, like shades of dawn. Bohloko, who always chattered and made jokes, did not utter a word. Only the birds, the howling wind, and their footsteps filled the silence.

The mortuary was bleak, its massive walls overlaid with barbed wire. They stood outside for almost ten minutes; Bhaye hesitated to enter. The door opened just as Bohloko decided to knock.

"Be brave, boy. Be very brave," Bhaye spoke in the same subdued voice of the previous day, patting Vumani's hand to soothe him. Perhaps he was addressing himself more than Vumani. The mortician took them into a dingy room, then brought in a small, corrugated iron stretcher. There lay his brother's tiny body, motionless. Playing in the background was Brahms' 'The Cradle Song'. Vumani imagined his brother's soul lying still, resting in a rose garden, with angels guarding him until the time came for him to wake up on earth again. A white coffin was placed next to the stretcher. According to the custom, Bhaye instructed Vumani to prostrate himself on the bare floor. The mortician knew the ritual well, having seen it performed by many families in more than a decade of practice. He lifted Vumani from the floor and put him inside the coffin and closed it.

Inside the coffin, Vumani felt like a toddler in a crib. He heard Brahms' lullaby in the background as his father fell to his knees in supplication of the ancestral spirits. His father's sobbing voice addressed the void and Vumile's corpse on the stretcher. "Benevolent ancestral spirits, you the mighty bones who sleep the transient sleep, we venerate you as we humbly call upon you today. We call upon the matrilineal clan of the ancestors, and we call upon the patrilineal clan. We call you, our chthonic deities who inhabit the underworld. We summon you, upon whom we all rely for direction and protection. You, who know the unknown and the unknowable, hear our cry."

He paused, took out a nip of brandy from his jacket pocket and a snuff. He cast the snuff and a nip to the ground as libation to the gods and continued. "You from whom we get protection, you from whom we get direction, hear our invocations... We cast our libation to you, all our mighty ancestors, those who are known, and you who are unknown to us. You who rest in proper graves, and you who lie in bushes and gorges all over the world. You who perished in great seas and rivers during the slave trade and the many wars you fought all over the world. You whose bodies lie in caves, rivers, valleys, hills and mountains, and inlets. You who died in fires, on land, and in water. You who live in the ether... We cast our libation to the four corners of the universe and summon all of you here. We cast our libation to the spirits of water, earth,

wind, and fire. We call upon you and cast libation to you all who are now within the realm of the Creator. As we pour libation to your sacred well and release the spirit of Vumile to you, we ask you to please accept him and supplicate to the Creator on our behalf to accept him as well."

He wiped his face with a handkerchief and addressed Vumile. "As we offer our libation to you, and our great ancestors, we call upon your spirit. We say to you, Vumile, this is your brother, Vumani. He is here with you today. As you know, you and he are one person and his spirit is with you there. We request that you allow his body to be with us for a while. He will join you later in the land of spirits as he arrived with you on this earth. He is committed to follow you. Just give his body a chance to live longer than you. It is not fair for him to leave so early, as you did. Give him a chance to commit all his earthly duties. Surely, he will join you later. Intercede on our behalf now that you have joined our ancestors to spare Vumani's life. Let them be lenient to us and allow Vumani to be old enough before he follows you. Remember that he is you and you are him. Therefore, you are in him, and he is in you. Let him exist on this planet Earth while you exist in the world of the ancestors. Do not trouble him. Be a good angel to him and protect him against all evil."

Vumani napped inside the coffin as his father made supplications to the ancestors as well as Vumile. He woke to find Bohloko washing his twin brother's tiny body, spraying it with perfume. Bhaye assisted Bohloko to drape Vumile's body with school uniform in preparation for the following day. Bohloko sobbed inconsolably as he dressed Vumile's corpse; Bhaye also wept. Vumani hated this day as he loathed to see people cry. He sensed that this was just the beginning, and that more distress awaited him on the day of the funeral. He anticipated that there would be more anguish at the cemetery when he performed the last funeral rites in honour of Vumile. These thoughts sent shivers down his spine.

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The morning was serene. Avalon Cemetery felt like a dry dam. A sign that read "Beware of Open Graves" greeted the mourners'

cars that slowly followed the hearse into the graveyard. Vumani looked at the sign and wondered what it meant. He thought people he was with in the family car would comment about the sign or explain its meaning to him, but all had their heads bowed. No one seemed to notice the sign, their thoughts meandering in different worlds, far from the cemetery.

The mourners sang songs about Heaven as they congregated around the open grave where Vumile's immature bones were to be interred. They sang about the Second Coming, when everyone would be rewarded according to their spiritual and religious accomplishments on Earth. They sang about the day when they would conquer death. They sang or cried, or watched those who were singing and crying.

"Most things have been said," said the master of the ceremony. "There is, however, a request from a young lady to pay homage to the late Vumile. We will give her a chance now and then give over to the family to perform their final ritual. Over to you, my girl." He signalled to the girl to move closer.

Intensely angry, Libembe shot to the front like a bullet and addressed the mourners in a trance-like state. "The song you just sang, ushering me into this platform – '*Jesu oa makatsa. O ntša pelo ea lejoe o kenye pelo ea moea*' – celebrates the power of Jesus and commends him for replacing our hearts of rocks with spiritual hearts, which are supposedly loving and caring. I do not mean to be cynical or disrespectful, but this song is not appropriate for this occasion. In a country like ours, we should entreat our deities to restore our hearts of rocks. Spiritual hearts domesticate us. They make us docile and we accept our subjugation as natural.

"As we ask the Creator why She allows this evil and adversity, we should stop singing Christian hymns that make us submit to the evil that is perpetrated on us. We don't need this. We need action. We cannot sit back, relax, and pretend that all is well when everything is going amiss.

"What does it say to you when you witness the burial of a seven-year-old boy? Do we appeal for a meek heart? Do we bury our heads in the sand and pretend as if we see nothing?

"I do not believe that there is nothing we can do. True, where there is life there is death. Yes, he got called home to the Creator, as the priest said. Poor child, whose bones were not even fully developed. But how do we justify the death of a young child like Vumile? Who should we blame? The Creator? Fate? The abhorrent system? We know that Vumile's passing was not an accident. It was deliberate. We know this because we know that we children are endangered in this country. Enough is enough! We need to end this before it is too late. We call upon you, our parents, to give us your support. We know that we will not grow old."

She paused, observing the mourners, then continued. "Certainly, we should sing songs that give us morale and power. Through these songs we also summon the spirits of the Creator and our ancestors. These songs were sung by those who came before us – songs of hope, songs of anticipated victory. Yes, we should sing songs that will remind us that the time ahead is challenging. We will need songs that make us stronger and not meek or weak. We surely will need to sing songs that will pave our way forward. But we should not sing the song you sang again.

"As you know, we do not get a chance to meet. They have banned all gatherings except the funerals. We should use this occasion to address critical issues that affect us as a community. Help us make this the last funeral of a child.

"To the Mzondekis, I say, do not be troubled; do not be disheartened. Your son's death will not be in vain. He has disappeared for a little while. That which is taken will be given back. That which is lost will be found. That which is forgotten will be remembered. We will claim victory in our path only if we journey in unity. Do not rest in peace, Vumile. Fight wherever you are to ensure that your death is vindicated. Let your little body strengthen our big fight so that we walk a path filled with triumphs. Black Power!" She clenched her hand into a fist and raised it above her head.

"Where does a 16-year-old – let alone a girl – get the nerve to stand up at a funeral and speak in that manner?" It was the voice of an old man leaning on his walking stick near Mabulala and another a little away from the grave. "Worse still, she spoke

too much. I would have stopped her if it weren't a funeral. I just didn't want to add salt to the grief of the Mzondekis by chastising that girl."

"She is poison! A 16-year-old must not speak like this. Worse, she refers to the Almighty as a woman. Oh no! This heralds difficult times ahead." The man with a haughty expression who stood next to the old man commented in disgust and spat out the gum he had been chewing.

"No," retorted a woman mourner standing near them. "These are the signs of times. The youth is taking over now because we adults have failed them, and we have failed ourselves."

Mabulala butted in, "You must never condone this presumptuous behaviour. Can't you see that the world is coming to an end, all because of you women? You women like to sanction morally and culturally repugnant ideas," he said, staring at the woman in the face and scoffing.

The woman stared down Mabulala with open disdain, incensed at this useless powermonger who enraged the community, declaring himself a custodian of culture. *I will not lower my standards to argue with this moron*, she thought as she moved away from Mabulala, directing her gaze to Libembe, who had merged into the crowd while mourners shook their heads. It was unclear whether they approved or disapproved of her speech, or perhaps were in total disbelief. Vumani's schoolmates hardly paid attention to Libembe's speech. They were nonplussed by the spectacle and stared at Vumani, who stared back at them neutrally.

Now it was time. "We are ready to perform the last ritual," the priest announced. "We request the other twin to step forward before we commit Vumile's body to the soil." He adjusted his heavy robe.

From where he stood, Vumani could see his brothers and his only sister mourning his twin brother. He looked at his schoolmates, all in school uniforms, grieving in song. To Vumani, they looked unwell, forlorn, and wretched, and he wondered what life had in store for them. They watched him as he stood up for the final ritual. Lunga wept as he held a portrait which could

have been Vumile or Vumani, bearing the inscription, "He came but briefly to greet the world". Vumani imagined Vumile sitting in God's lap in His embrace. His heart throbbing, he held his breath. If he and Vumile were one, he could be bold. If Vumile had died, it meant he too knew how to die, and took courage.

The cemetery was completely quiet. Even the wind stopped swaying the trees, and birds ceased tweeting. The silence whispered a hymn that they could hardly understand. The mourners waited in anticipation. Around seven-year-old Vumani were his mom and aunts, heads bowed. To Maye's right sat Bhaye, Vumani's brothers Morena and Wetsi, and his sister, Manini. Bohloko and his friends stood nearby, just a few metres from the grave. He looked at Bohloko, Heke, Libembe, and their schoolmates, flanking Vumani as a guard of honour. Heke was Afro-haired, bespectacled and a studious youth, reputed as the best debater. He got his nickname because he was fond of saying '*heke*', which is an isiXhosa word for 'yes'. The Mzondekis had taken him in as an adopted member of the family, and he often discussed the Bible with Maye.

Anticipation covered the graveyard as the mourners waited eagerly to see what was going to happen. At that moment, stepping forward to the mouth of the grave, Vumani intensely felt the loss of his twin brother. He stared down into the fresh grave that was to be home to Vumile. It was so familiar, he felt he had been in that same grave before, many times over. He stood next to the coffin, hanging precariously on the burial device. He moved his eyes. The epitaph "Where there was no God" on a small headstone a few graves away took his attention. He sighed, hesitated, then paced slowly to the mouth of the grave and waited next to the head of the coffin. The pallbearers removed the little casket from the device and in its place a family elder carefully placed a reed mat while Vumani lay down on the stony red soil of the cemetery as directed. The elder then picked up Vumani and laid him on the reed mat. The funeral worker released the lock on the mechanism and Vumani slowly descended into the brand-new grave. He felt claustrophobic, smelling the pungent wet soil. For a moment he failed to breath. He closed his eyes; his hands touched the cold, slimy walls of the grave. Soil and small stones

dropped into the cold and clammy grave. Terrified, he repressed a scream. A surge of anxiety churned his stomach. He hated the custom of putting a twin through this ordeal. Mzondeki intoned the invocation he recited the previous day in the mortuary. Then Vumani was lifted out of the grave, his face covered with tears and soil particles. Vumani's bravery of performing the ritual as if it had all been rehearsed, impressed the mourners as he slowly walked into Bohloko's arms.

Vumile's coffin was then lowered into the grave. The priest read from the prayerbook. "'Into the Lord's most gracious mercy and protection we have entrusted our son Vumile Mzondeki, and we now commit his body to the ground; from dust we come, to dust we shall return; earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust; in sure and certain hope of resurrection to eternal life; through our Lord Jesus Christ who died, was buried, and rose again for us.'"

All the priests present sprinkled soil into the grave. The officiating priest continued. "We have now committed our son to your mercy, God, our maker and redeemer. Now let your servant go in peace. Your word has been fulfilled... Vumile, may the angels lead you to paradise. May they welcome you and take you to the Holy City. May the Heavenly choir welcome you. God has called you. He will not fail you."

Mourners wept copiously as the gravediggers hurled earth into Vumile's grave. Languidly, Vumani gazed at puffy, phantom-like clouds in the sky above. The horizon and everything was shrouded in red and brown, like the grave he had lain in a moment earlier.

Suddenly, a dishevelled, drunken man appeared and strutted up and down, as if modelling his rumpled suit for all to see. His crooked, red tie was impossible to miss, and his shirttails whipped about in the breeze. He shoved past the mourners and scrambled towards the grave, stopping right next to it. He looked at Vumani. The school children stopped singing and stared at him, giggling. He lunged at one of the gravediggers and snatched a spade, trying to assist, but then he staggered sideways, falling into the half-filled grave, and let out a loud wail.

"*Yo*! Help me! Help me out of this place! I am dying! Help me out!"

"Stop yapping," said Mabulala. "You made your grave, now lie in it." Vumani recognised Mabulala as the man who had them expelled from the Zion Church a few months back.

"No, this man is dying. Let us help him." The appeal came from a man in a heavy military coat. He rushed towards the grave but retreated as the gravediggers helped out the drunkard. He was covered with soil and had wet his trousers out of fright. The mourners found the incident amusing.

Vumani's uncle placed a few wreaths and a wooden cross to mark the grave as soon as it was filled. The cortège snaked solemnly out of the cemetery, leaving Vumile's tiny body with its thin flesh and little bones in its new home.

That was how Vumile was laid in his final resting place. The funeral left a deep and wide pain in the Mzondekis, particularly in Vumani. Although Vumile's fragile body was buried, the superstitious townsfolk believed his soul did not rest but meandered all around, mostly visiting Vumani. The storytellers expected Vumani to be haunted; they maintained that he should have been interred with Vumile. The dreadfulness of these unfounded stories and declarations distressed him in addition to the alienation he felt because the funeral ritual confirmed Vumani as an oddity to be pitied.

Life after the funeral was desolate and perplexing. Images of the grave and the coffin invaded Vumani's mind with increasing frequency. Sleeping on the floor on his reed mat reminded him of lying face-up in the grave. Worse still, the house smelled of the grave. He oscillated between two polar opposite points of view. He did not know whether he was dead thinking he was alive, or alive hallucinating about death. He dreaded the nights of flashbacks to Vumile's funeral and tormenting nightmares.

He determined to divulge this schizophrenic state to Bohloko, but had no words; no language to express this experience. It was too complicated for him. He doubted that Bohloko would understand. In time, he got used to people feeling sorry for him,

and others, especially children, avoiding him. The boy distanced himself from friends, staying aloof, bearing the weight of living alone in two worlds. Bohloko sensed that something was troubling his melancholy little brother, and gave him his full support. At first, it proved difficult for Bohloko to handle Vumani, especially at night, but he did not give up. Sometimes he would hear Vumani talk and play in his sleep. He tried to listen, but the words were unintelligible.

Bohloko was convinced that Vumani's soul left his body every night and returned in the morning, or perhaps he transmuted from human into something else in his sleep. He decided to find out what was going on. Nothing would stop him.

Two

Massacre of the Innocents

It happened as foretold almost two years after Vumile's funeral. The winter evening was bitterly cold, and darkness engulfed the sky. The birds were hurrying to their roosts. Without streetlights, it was hard to see anything in Orlando East, a township in Soweto. Vumani paced back and forth on the veranda, uneasy as he watched smoke swirling from the township chimneys. All his siblings except for Bohloko huddled around the stove, trying to stay warm. In a land of peril and poverty, Maye wanted nothing but a happy home for her children. She insisted on everyone being home for the evening meal. Bohloko missed meals when he stayed studying at school, and usually let the family know in advance, but not today. Morena had searched for him at Libembe's home and was told that they had last seen him in the morning leaving for school with his schoolmates. Vumani's large, panic-stricken eyes were fixed on the gate, waiting for Bohloko's return. He had heard about marauding gangs that preyed on people at night. The thought that Bohloko and his friends might be assaulted made Vumani's blood run cold.

"Vumani, come inside, boy. Food is ready. You are getting cold standing there," Maye beckoned to Vumani. When Vumani acted unusually, Maye gave him space. But this evening, she wanted him inside, away from the cold. Vumani loved Bohloko because he cared and seemed to understand his feelings. The smell of the freshly cooked food relaxed him as he joined Wetsi and Morena on the floor because there was not enough space for the whole family at the table. The children sat on a small, ragged carpet that had holes. It did not matter. The warmth they needed was embodied in the love their parents gave them.

"God Bless our food, amen." Manini made a short prayer as Vumani settled and they all ate silently.

Although common in Orlando East, the scream they heard was now clearly on their doorstep and it pierced the entire house. Bhaye dashed to the bedroom to fetch his knobkerrie as the door creaked open. The man was already in the house, shouting angrily as loud as he could, "Hey, *voetsek, voetsek*! *Vimba,* stop the scum."

Morena and Wetsi gazed at the man, giggling.

"These scums, I am sure one of them is dead after my punch in his face... Yes, he is dead wherever he is. Bastards!" said the man, panting, his shoulders heaving. He wore a frozen smile as he continued uttering foul oaths. Vumani recognised him as Uncle Vezi or *'Mzala',* as his parents called him. Vumani's parents' home, although small, was open to strangers who came to Johannesburg to look for greener pastures. Vezi worked as a court interpreter before he retired and relocated to Mpumalanga a few years earlier. He had tried unsuccessfully to persuade Bhaye to join him in Mpumalanga.

"Hey, *Mzala*,' what's wrong? Are you hurt?" Bhaye asked, fist clenched, the knobkerrie under his armpit. He was agitated and felt personally provoked by those who tried to attack his 'cousin'. Vezi's face was smudged with pepper, but his spectacles protected his eyes from the spice. Clearly, the thieves had planned to blind him before robbing him.

Vezi snatched the knobkerrie from under Bhaye's armpits and rushed towards the door. Bhaye followed behind.

"Please, just leave them alone," beseeched Maye. "God will take care of them. Please, father of Bohloko, come back." Maye, a committed pacifist, and deeply pious woman who lived in prayer and toil, pleaded with them slowly and calmly. Maye's tranquillity and mellow appeal could not fail to catch their attention. They submitted. Bhaye and Vezi sat at the table. Vezi quietly reached into his jacket pocket, pulled out a cigarette, and stuck it in his mouth without lighting it. Maye went to the kitchen area. She always cooked more than enough in case relatives or strangers came to her home unannounced. *I wonder where my child is*, Maye thought as she put food for Bohloko in the oven, which was unusual. *He may be hungry wherever he is*. She returned to give Vezi his food.

Although Vumani was worried about Bohloko, he was elated to see Vezi. Visitors were a joy to him because they brought gifts for the children, especially Vezi, who was over-generous even though he often talked late into the night. This kept the children up as they all slept on the floor in the kitchen-cum-living room. The other room was his parents' bedroom where they slept with his two youngest brothers.

"I guess by now you are familiar with my custom," Vezi said to Vumani's parents with his rich and a throaty voice. He took out a bottle of whisky, a glass, and a huge parcel from his large suitcase. He loosened his tie and wiped his brow with his handkerchief.

"Please give these to the children, *mzala.* I hope the sizes are correct." He gave Maye a paper bag full of clothes, nibbled his food, and grimaced as he sipped his whisky. Wetsi sat on the concrete floor, took out his scrapbook, and sketched Bhaye and Vezi while they talked. He liked making cartoons of the conversations his parents had with their guests. Vumani sat on the floor under the table, where he could sleep undisturbed.

"*Mzala*, do you have a lighter for me? I seem to have misplaced mine." Vezi was about to light his cigarette when he suddenly remembered that he was in a smoke-free zone. He took the cigarette out of his mouth and frowned.

"This is expensive whisky," Mzondeki held the bottle, looking at it with admiration. "No African is allowed to buy this, let alone drink it. Where did you get it?" Maye walked to the stove and stoked the fire.

Vezi, who still had Bhaye's knobkerrie, struck the table with it, like a judge striking a gavel as a sign for him to speak. "*Mzala*, I told you long ago I have a special permit to buy any kind of alcohol. Pity you are a teetotaller, otherwise I would bring you expensive spirits every time I visit. I am not like these township scums who drink *takunyisa. Sies*! You know how they make this cheap *takunyisa?* Can you imagine a mixture of yeast, sorghum, and methanol? That's the poison beer that makes them lose their minds and soil their clothes! And guess what, *mzala*? This is exactly what those who invented apartheid want. This proves

that there is something wrong with township folks. How can you embrace what destroys you?" He chomped on his last piece of steak, biting it with relish, and took another sip.

Just then, a cockroach crawled from under Vezi's plate, moving its long antennae. Mzondeki quickly crushed it before Vezi noticed it. Vumani yawned from under the table but listened with interest to the conversation even though most of it didn't make sense to him. Bhaye kept quiet for a moment, reflecting on Vezi's comments. He knew Vezi hated Soweto with a passion and would spare no effort to lambast the township. Clearly the earlier incident aggravated his hatred. Vezi looked pedantic in his spectacles. His long, grey moustache made him seem more like the priest of an independent church than the judge he imagined himself to be.

"But *mzala*, Sowetans come in assorted colours, like a bowl of salad. There are the virtuous and the wicked, the impoverished and the wealthy – by Soweto's standards – the educated and the uneducated, the political and apolitical. Soweto is home to heroes and villains. We have the most talented soccer players, musicians, actors. The best political activists came from here; you know about James Sofasonke Mpanza, Xorile, Kumalo and many others. You cannot typecast people based on where they live. It is the same everywhere. Besides, liquor is liquor irrespective of its package, and it affects people the same whether it is *takunyisa* or whisky."

Vezi was animated. He was 12 years' Bhaye's senior and deemed himself highly educated, but he respected Bhaye for his wisdom, his simplicity, and his ability to challenge his thinking. He picked his teeth with a matchstick and struck the table again with the knobkerrie. "I am not finished. You are missing one thing. Soweto is hardly a dot on the world map, even though those who hanker for doom perceive it a winsome township."

He paused and gathered his thoughts. "Let me tell you for free, Soweto was not a creation of the people who live in it." He waved his hand dismissively. "Soweto was born from the pits of the gold mines. Right from the start, this sprawling township was meant to be a dump for black labourers. It is built like a concentration camp. That is why you are registered to be here and

given a temporary resident status. You are allowed here only if you serve the city workforce. Do you know why there are only two roads in and out of Soweto?"

Bhaye looked puzzled. He was unaware that there were only two roads in and out of Soweto. Perhaps many Sowetans were also not aware of this. Vezi continued, "The two main arteries to Soweto were made deliberately to control your access as well as your movements. You know that it takes only two security checkpoints on these two roads to seal the entire Soweto? Did you also know that no person can come in or out of Soweto without passing one of these two roads? Have you asked yourself why the authorities force you to have only one door in your houses? The reason you have two roads in and out of Soweto is the same reason you have one door in and out of your houses. Your houses are dead ends. The authorities want to enclose you easily during raids. These two roads and the one door in your house are prison bars. Soweto will remain a hard labour prison. You can call it a labour camp if you like. You are locked in a maze. I am trying to help you and your children find a way out of this maze, but you refuse. Your children will amount to nothing if you let them lose themselves in this menacing maze."

Bhaye shook his head with disapproval.

Vezi continued. "Think about this. Why do the authorities only allow adults with work permits and children in the lodger's permit to live here in Soweto? Just think, Mzondeki. Why the dirty streets? Why is the power station that electrifies the whole of Johannesburg here in Soweto and not there? They intend poverty and diseases to affect you, and not them. Soweto will become what the architects of apartheid intended – a cesspool of despair." He paused, taking pleasure in his words. He gulped down the last of the whisky in his glass, got up, and staggered outside to smoke or relieve himself in the toilet.

Vezi may have been correct. Soweto was a poignant story of rejected, displaced, alienated, and marginalised people, forcefully uprooted and stuffed into unliveable habitations. It sprawled over 200 square kilometres southwest of Johannesburg.

With the discovery of gold in the reef in 1885, people of every colour, creed, and race flocked to Johannesburg seeking opportunities. The apartheid government enforced racial segregation, obliging the races to use separate public facilities and live in separate areas. It removed black people from the sight and reach of white people, and stuffed them into settlements southwest of the city. Soweto was conceived from prejudice and deformed by the vicious brutality of apartheid.

Soweto got its name from its location: South-Western Townships – small, overcrowded, squalid hellholes of destitution for blacks who toiled all day in the City of Gold and came back to Soweto to sleep in two- and three-roomed, rat-infested square hovels dubbed 'matchbox houses'.

Soweto's dark and narrow dusty streets, fouled with detritus, trickled with raw sewerage, especially when it rained. It slowly grew into a monstrous labyrinth of poverty, disease, and misery. It was intended to distress its residents. At night, police raids – checking for passes and illegal residents – oppressed Sowetans, who had to struggle for even the most basic amenities.

Vumani's parents enjoyed no privileges or credentials in the community. Mzondeki was a railworker who attended night school and Maye eked out her living as a domestic in the suburbs. She who would sing and soothe her children's pains with her mellifluous voice. Every day, Mzondeki and Maye rose before dawn and joined other Sowetans to catch the first train to town and return at dusk.

The Mzondeki household was a typical, simply furnished two-roomed house. One room was partitioned into a kitchen and a living room. The kitchen had a stove, a cupboard, and a large urn filled with cold water. The living room had a wooden table with four matching wooden chairs, and a tattered sofa. The other room – Vumani's parents' bedroom – had a bed, a chest for storing everyone's clothes, and some suitcases stuffed with the children's schoolbooks and some Bibles. The yard was well kept, with peach, apricot, and plum trees, grapes, and a vegetable patch. The front was a neat patch of lawn and flowers. The house had only one door that faced the street and the community hall.

There was a toilet and a water tap behind the house at the end of the yard. Vumani often heard stories of people getting mugged as they went to the toilet at night. Although the house was small and inadequate, it was warm and welcoming. Relatives and extended family members looking for better opportunities in Johannesburg squeezed into that small, partitioned room.

In Orlando East, very few ventured out in the pitch dark and dreary dusks where fiendish prowlers robbed and killed. The ineffective rainwater drainage system created stinking pools by the roadside. Mounds of dangerous waste caused respiratory diseases. Sowetans endured this desolate wasteland of streams of blood, sweat, and tears with fortitude, grit, and camaraderie. The apartheid government may have thought that Sowetans would be malleable as sheep, but time would prove them wrong.

Sowetans depended on each other for survival, reaching out to anyone, offering comfort in times of distress. Funerals, traditional feasts, and most other events had become communal. But it was also schizophrenic, unpredictable, inconsistent, and prone to manic-depressive episodes. Soweto was a dysfunctional paradox.

Vezi ignored the organised political resistance against oppression. Sowetans always resisted. In 1955, 60 000 Sophiatown residents fought against 2 000 armed police when they were forcefully relocated to Soweto. It was also believed that Soweto – Orlando East in particular – kindled the flames of the 1960 Sharpeville protest. Although the liberation movements had been banned since 1964, after the Sharpeville massacre, many operated underground in the countryside. Sowetans did not accept apartheid passively, as Vezi believed.

Vezi returned, struggling to zip up his trousers. He slumped into a chair and complained, "Just imagine the distance I must walk to get to the bloody toilet. One can end up wetting himself. What about taking a bath? You must go to the tap outside and fill a bowl with water and wash from there. Is this life? I submit to you that entropy reigns supreme in this place and Soweto is a breeding ground for tragedy and ruin."

Bhaye was getting annoyed. Vezi sloshed more whisky into his glass, took a large mouthful, and continued where he had left off. "Before I went out, I told you that Soweto came from a pit – the underworld of the dead, as well as the criminal underworld. Sowetans are nothing but dead-alive criminals. Why is stealing, thieving, and mugging in the backstreets and alleyways so rampant? Why is Soweto called *kwandonga ziyaduma*, the place of wailing walls and whistling wind? This will be the permanent condition of your children. It is not a joke! These wailing walls corral every adult into an enclosure. Now whistle wistfully for the blood of Soweto's children. It has finished consuming yours. Take them out of this environment before these wailing walls and whistling winds rip them to pieces. Take your bloody children out of this powder keg before it explodes." He stood dramatically, like a Shakespearian character, preening himself.

Bhaye's brows creased, forming sharp furrows across his forehead. "You present Sowetans as hordes of mindless zombies craving mayhem and anarchy. Sowetans are more complex. Yes, the apartheid government created Soweto to increase our poverty and complicate our lives, but most Sowetans are people with hopes, fears, and dreams. They would never engage in self-destructive acts."

"Of course, I am not trying to caricature Soweto or exaggerate her faults," said Vezi, settling back into his seat. "However, this township was made from pain. I am 57 years old now. I have enough information about the system to know that it was meant to destroy a black person. It was planned to make you people destroy each other before the system destroys you. People need an outlet to release the stress of their pain. Soweto is a disaster waiting to happen," Vezi said, pursing his mouth.

Bhaye stared at Vezi, his eyes darting back and forth. He said calmly, "Adapting to situations is part of being human; we are resilient and we adjust. Like any other people anywhere in the world, we can turn an untenable situation into something we can work with and in which we can survive, sometimes even thrive. We hope our lives will get better, even though Soweto is unliveable right now."

"Of course, I agree, Bhaye," Morena said. "Our generation won't allow this to happen. We..."

"Hey, Morena, you know you don't respond to adults like that," Bhaye interrupted abruptly, raising his voice. "Besides, you know the rules of this house. Children only speak when they are spoken to. As far as I am concerned, this conversation is between myself and *Mzala* Vezi. Wetsi, Manini, and Vumani are not quiet because they are stupid."

Vezi ignored Bhaye and Morena's exchange and instead responded to what Bhaye had said earlier. "A major surprise awaits you. Those who know say you can't straighten the shadow of a bent tree. No one can save Soweto – neither your ancestors, your angels, nor any other force can save this bloody township. Who are you to think you can? This place was created as a project and a project it will remain. What you say does not mute the drums of chaos and gloom beating furiously here in Soweto. The apartheid government knows exactly what they want to achieve, and they will. As I told you, Soweto was conceptualised for iniquitous reasons and for iniquitous ends. Danger will never be far away, and death will never sleep here." He staggered outside.

Vumani could not understand why every adult complained about apartheid, although he knew nothing about it. In his little world, apartheid was a monster in fables. Sometimes he personified Apartheid and demanded to see this person who menaced the adults. Orlando East was his home and he loved it. He had no concept of oppression, and thought his life was fine the way it was. If Vumani were old enough, he would have known that something was fundamentally amiss and it was all because of apartheid. He fell asleep under the table, thinking about apartheid.

A thunderous crack of a knobkerrie striking the table woke Vumani. He got up and went to sit on Bhaye's lap. Vezi smiled. He wanted Vumani to hear what he was about to say. "I heard that you subjected your poor child to agony. How could you bury your child alive? Worst of all, how could you listen to Mabulala? Mabulala is a very limited man obsessed with power. He calls himself the custodian of culture but has no clue what he is doing.

How could you listen to him? You traumatised your child for life now. You are too smart to be so gullible."

Vumani stared at Vezi with a puzzled face. Confusion spread across his face. He stared at Vezi in anticipation, hoping he would continue. Bhaye wished to completely eradicate Vumile's funeral from his mind, let alone speak about it. He gave Vezi a stern look and pondered what Vezi said.

He cast his mind back to the day he consulted Mabulala. He was bereaved and confused. He had heard stories about burying a twin and wanted clarity. Mabulala was a reputed custodian of culture and for Bhaye he was the only person he could go to for advice. "Gentleman, I have come to you because I need guidance. As you know my son who was a twin is deceased and I would like you to enlighten me on how to bury him. I've heard stories that he would come and fetch his twin brother if I don't follow proper burial rituals. As a matter of fact, how do I bury a twin?"

Mabulala had dithered, unsure how to respond, then said to Bhaye, "Go to the mortuary on the eve of the funeral and put the surviving child in the coffin first, before they put in the deceased twin. During the burial at the graveside, the surviving twin must go into the grave before the deceased twin. This will make the deceased twin happy because the surviving twin's energy will be in the coffin as well as the grave. The soul of the deceased twin will be satisfied and think that it is with the body of the surviving twin. He will feel the same way he felt when they were in their mother's womb. Remember, the surviving twin must lie stretched out on the ground face down before you put him in the coffin as well as the grave."

Many thoughts ran through Bhaye's mind as he remembered that day. Although he would not have listened to Mabulala if he was in a right frame of mind, he found Vezi's remarks heartless and insensitive. He was lost for words and looked straight into Vezi's puzzled eyes, with a look that could have been outrage or sorrow. Finally, he said to Vezi, "Why bring up this subject? Please don't upset my boy by bringing this up."

Vezi understood Bhaye even though he was drunk. Avoiding Bhaye's gaze, uncertain what to do, Vezi stared into the void for

quite some time. He made a silly, embarrassed grin. "Okay, I hear you. You suffer more than you care to admit. Now I give you a final chance. Give me your children. I will turn them into better adults. You know I don't have children. I just want to bequeath them a better future."

Bhaye took a deep breath and said, "Every elephant carries its trunk no matter the length or the weight."

Vezi hoped to hear more but Bhaye just stared at him and exhaled. Vezi's face appeared drained. The whisky had taken its toll on his tact. He clenched his teeth to control his emotions and temper, then went on. "Soweto will always greet her children with toil and tears, while other places greet them with toys. Your children will greet their youth and their adulthood bearing the heavy chains of toil and oppression on their necks and legs. The same sweat and blood that dug those pits is the sweat and blood that will dig their graves."

He stood and strutted through the room, looking at Bhaye from the corners of his eyes. "I say, you brought these poor children into this world to become prisoners. That is why I don't have any of my own. But I want to save those that I can. These kids will be guinea pigs. Do you hear me, Mzondeki? I don't mean guinea fowls. I mean guinea pigs. They will be used as apparatus in all kinds of strange experiments. Remember, Africans are an exotic, if not enigmatic, phenomenon for white people. They will end up as factory fodder if they are lucky, which is the same as dying alive.

Vezi's remarks threw Bhaye into feverish anger. A thousand thoughts raced through his mind. He felt a tinge of tears and rubbed his aching, itchy eyes. He was a devoted family man who loved his children and wanted the best for them, and Vezi's comments pierced his heart like a sword. He feared failing his children. He thought of his job and the huge steel railway tracks he lifted and laid on the ground in continuous lines every day. He visualised the foreman constantly shouting at them as if they were morons and felt the impulse to rebuke Vezi, but his voice quivered. He sat in silent contemplation. Then, staring gravely at Vezi, he heard himself say, "Not my children... I toiled on the farms as a

kid. Now I toil on the rails as an adult. I have invested so much for my children's education to avoid–"

Vezi's drunkenness made him impatient to interrupt, but Bhaye continued. "I am saying to you, I have invested everything to advance these children through education. I want them to have a better life and have no hardship that I have. I would rather go hungry than deny them education. I am more than certain that theirs is a better tomorrow."

"You don't understand me, man." Vezi finally spoke, "I thought you were intelligent. Apartheid is a crime. It will therefore push everyone into crime. People turn into criminals once they resist crime. Even the education they feed the children is poisonous. It prepares them for cheap labour. You know very well that I am a product of royal education." He patted his chest. "I would not be where I am if I went through Bantu education. Do you remember the teachers and schoolchildren who were arrested in Alexandra in 1953 after they boycotted education? Were they stupid to boycott? No! They knew that Bantu education was poison. Under Bantu education, Soweto children will be nothing but 'hewers of wood and drawers of water'. I did not make this up. This is what the minister of education said when he introduced Bantu Education. Do you remember what he also said? In case you forgot, he said that education for black people should prepare them for their subjugate roles. Don't you remember? You read newspapers daily. Don't you remember Verwoerd's infamous quote that education must teach a black child that they will never be equal to white people? They don't have a chance. The industry perceives these children only as tools in the hands of a white man. That is exactly what the Bantu Education system was designed to do – to perpetuate the inferior status of a black child."

Vezi chuckled to himself at his knowledge of history. "This will be the sad end for your children: condemned to servitude and manual labour for white people. Their only salvation will be if you surrender them to me. You know that Soweto is a portal for thuggery and slave labour. Close that portal, Mzondeki, and surrender these children to me. You know I am not lacking. I have my own farm. I will enrol them in private schools. They will

receive British education. Imagine, British education! At least Bohloko is more than intelligent. I know he will easily cope there. Here they have little to live for and will die too soon. They were born dead. They will grow up as dead adults if they don't leave this place."

Bhaye's mind raced. Vezi continued to rage. "The effects will be long, deep, and widespread. These children are guaranteed a lifetime of hard labour. Very few will overcome their adverse situation. Many will be broken down so badly and pass that brokenness to coming generations. The architects of apartheid wrote the script of Soweto. They knew the outcome. Your children do not stand a chance of beating the system unless they move out of here. You have been sentenced to heavy manual labour. They will inherit this. The wise said the apple does not fall far from the tree. Your children are the scum of the earth. They will die as such and become scum of Heaven when they reach it, if ever Heaven exists."

Vezi stood and leaned on the table once more, swaying sideways. "I put it to you that Soweto is a pyre. You are a heap of combustible corpses, burning in flames. Yes, Soweto is modern-day Sodom and Gomorrah, and fire will destroy it like the biblical Sodom and Gomorrah!" He gave a loud belch. "You think God watches Soweto? No, He would not dare come near this pit that will swallow all of you. Unfortunately, this is the truth you refuse to see." He pounded the table agitatedly. Vumani woke up, startled, and watched them. "Accused found guilty. Court dismissed!"

Vezi's snide remarks infuriated Bhaye. He knew that Vezi's tongue loosened when drunk, but he never expected him to say the things he said about his children. A knocking pain seared through his chest. He drew a deep, spasmatic breath and spoke with a wounded voice, "We live and hope to see that day." With that, he went into the bedroom to fetch blankets for Vezi and the children. Vezi extended his hand, but Bhaye did not accept it.

The severe cold turned the Mzondeki household into a wretched house. Vezi prepared his sleeping place on the floor next to the stove. "What you just said inspires mockery, if not pity," he said as he lay down to sleep. Then he remembered something.

"Hey, bring me a bucket or a chamber pot. These scourges can skulk outside the toilet door and murder me without you knowing. Also, I hope you got rid of those rats of yours. The last time I was here your rats ate me alive."

Vumani may have been six the last time Vezi visited his parents. He remembered vaguely the story that Vezi woke up with bleeding toes and heels that had been pecked at by the rats. That was the time Vezi vowed never to set his foot in the Mzondeki house again. For all that, he did not mind spending one night each time he came to Johannesburg to organise his life. He would catch the first train and go back home.

They all retired to their respective sleeping spots, apprehensive about Bohloko's mysterious absence. Bhaye resisted the temptation to go to bed. Instead, he peered out into the night, torn between the urge to rest and the need to search for Bohloko. After turning off the lights, he grasped his knobkerrie from the table and moved cautiously through the darkened house, slipping into the night. He was undaunted by the cold and lurking dangers. He returned hours later, trembling from the chill, haunted by unanswered questions of Bohloko's whereabouts. The township was draped in sleep as he re-entered the house, but Vumani remained awake. His thoughts were consumed by Bohloko's disappearance and the recent conversation between Bhaye and Vezi. His tragic journey began the day his twin brother died and what he heard this evening augured ill for his future. He thought about it all night and eventually fell asleep.

A loud, roaring sound awakened him. At first, he thought it was his nightly terrors. Then he thought it was thunder rumbling from the heavens. But it was unusual for thunder to roll in winter. Listening intently for a while, he figured it was the bellow of a bull. It bellowed like a roaring thunder and rattled the windows. It was a forlorn, ominous, and foreboding bellow that ruptured the stillness of the frosty night. The howling wind complemented the hopeless tones of the bellow, imploring Vumani and those who heard it to pray. This was no ordinary bellow. It was a cry from the deep, bearing a message they could not interpret. Something was brewing. Goosebumps all over his body, he thought of

Bohloko. Owls hooted, horses neighed, dogs howled. A sudden gust of tumultuous wind whirled violently, clattered the roofs and withered shortly after. Vumani felt scared and uneasy. He wished it would not dawn as a sense of foreboding overwhelmed him. Unfortunately, he would soon learn that nature does not depend on the whims of a child.

Bohloko, Libembe, and their schoolmates also heard the bellowing bull. They were not in their homes, although it was midnight. They had snuck out earlier to make the final preparations for the following day. They had made ready for this day weeks ago. Now they were ready to face it. They had their T-shirts printed and placards ready. Nothing could make them abandon their purpose. Their hearts, energies, and minds were geared towards executing their plans. There was no turning back.

The bull bellowed on ominously, but to Bohloko and his schoolmates it became a rallying cry. They interpreted the bellow as a clarion call to war. As if under the spell of a fighting night, they were ready to fulfil their intentions, no matter what.

Like darkness yielding to the rising sun, the bellow faded into the eerie night as a chill crept down Vumani's spine, leaving him wondering what horrors lay ahead. In the quiet, everything slept deeply. However long the night, the day dawned crisp and cryptic and heavy. The sun rose and Vumani woke up feeling apprehensive. He moved uneasily about around the room, his eyes searching for Bohloko but drawing a blank. Remembering the conversation he had with Bohloko the previous day before he disappeared, he shivered from fear. He could not imagine this could be true. He stood motionless, his heart pounding, wondering what to do next. Vezi and his parents had gone at the sound of the first train, and his two other brothers were already at school. Vumani was left with his sister Manini. His parents had left his two little brothers, Bareng and Senzeni, with an old lady who looks after toddlers, two yards from their home.

"Vumani, what's wrong? It is not a Saturday. It is a school day today," said Manini, checking the day on the calendar which hung on the wall. She was already dressed up in her school

uniform. Although a year younger than Vumani, Manini always played elder sister.

For a while Vumani looked disorientated. He stared at Manini with blank eyes.

"What's wrong, Vumani? Are you sick?" she asked again, confused.

"I know it is a Wednesday. It is supposed to be a school day, but Bohloko said there won't be schooling today. Didn't you hear? It was yesterday when they were here writing on those cardboards," Vumani said, forcing a smile.

Manini remembered the day before when Bohloko and his friends were busy making placards at her parents' home. Though she could read the placards, she and Vumani could not tell what they meant. At the time, they did not know that Bohloko and his schoolmates were planning something for a cause greater than themselves. Manini took Vumani's explanation as an excuse and said, "Oh, you don't want to go to school because you don't know your multiplication tables. I will tell Mistress Jolobe that you have bunked school." She stood facing him, combing her hair.

Vumani pulled a face as he dragged himself outside and hastily washed at the tap. He finished quickly and was ready to leave for school. Manini held Vumani's hand as they left the house reciting the multiplication tables.

Vumani and his classmates stood up from their desks when Mistress Jolobe entered the classroom, strolling like a steady robot, her stare penetrating behind her spectacles. "Good morning, ma'am," they recited in quiet, controlled tones, their voices carrying respect mixed with apprehension.

She took a seat, putting a cane on her table, and nodded curtly in response, her lips pressing into a thin line that suggested the expectation of uncompromising discipline.

"Today we are doing the multiplication of nine. Remember, we reward wrong answers with the cane..." She looked at the register and pointed her cane at the girl who shared a desk with

Manini. "Zwane, start. You are always the last to do everything because you are last on the register. Today I begin at the end."

Philisiwe Zwane stood fearfully and recited the memorised multiplication of nine, her voice slurred out of nervousness. "Nine times one a nine, nine times two a 18, nine times three a 27, nine times four a 36, nine times five a 45..." She stopped just when she was about to do multiplication of nine times nine. There was a loud commotion across the street outside the school yard. A young boy peeked in at the door and left immediately. Mistress Jolobe stood furiously and followed the boy outside.

"Stop, Zwane! We will continue when I come back. Mzondeki, keep a list of noisemakers and those who misbehave. I'll be right back," she said and hesitantly stepped towards the door.

Vumani hated this chore because it created unnecessary enemies for him. Fortunately, Mistress Jolobe came back within a blink of an eye. "Go home quickly. Don't waste time and don't follow the crowd." Her nervousness made the children scurry for the door in panic. Outside, many older pupils from Orlando High School were marching, carrying placards stating, 'To hell with Afrikaans' and 'We don't want to learn English in Afrikaans'.

Vumani had no idea what was happening. He ran home as fast as he could, Manini alongside him. They had run as far as the corner of Mooki and Rathebe streets when they heard the continuous thrumming sound of the helicopter and the children shouting. "*Aroplane*, *aroplane*. Come and see – there is an *aroplane* landing!"

Vumani looked and saw the helicopter circling above like a hawk. The kids continued shouting in excitement and ran towards the rugby ground opposite the police station. Vumani followed them, thinking it could be tourists landing. The kids usually ran up to scrounge for food, sweets, and coins when they saw the tourists.

"Vumani, come back. Where are you going? Come back!" Vumani heard Manini calling him but turned a blind eye. He ran past the other children, intending to be the first to arrive at the

grounds. They ran past an elderly man who tried to stop them with his walking stick, "Hey! Hey, you kids! Where are you running to? Come back. Can't you see that you are running towards danger?" The boys chuckled, ignoring the old man, and raced towards the landing helicopter.

Vumani was filled with excitement as he witnessed a helicopter land for the very first time. A senior policeman disembarked from the aircraft and addressed the other policemen who gathered as if on a military parade, with gas masks and machine guns. Although Vumani and the other kids had never seen a riot squad before, they crowded just a few metres from the police to watch. Despite their surprise at the large number of police, they acted as they always did when they encountered tourists who regularly visited the community centre across from Vumani's home and handed out sweets. They stepped forward, afraid yet hopeful to receive treats, and sang, *"Shosholoza! Shosholoza kulezontaba s'thimela singen' e South Africa!"* in jubilation. One of the policemen cocked his firearm, causing Vumani to stare in fear. Their eyes met, and the policeman's eyes were filled with hate. Vumani quickly looked away and down at the ground, just as the officer fired something that resembled a can of cooldrink. The can spewed flames and smoke, making Vumani's nose burn. The children panicked and scattered in all directions, screaming in the haze. Vumani could hardly breathe and struggled to keep up with the others.

Manini saw Vumani from a distance, running back in stark terror, quivering in anguish. She looked at him, petrified, as he flew through the door. "What happened, Vumani? I told you not to go there. You are stubborn... You should have listened to me." He tried to sit on the sofa, his eyes burning and his skin stinging. He staggered towards his parents' bedroom, coughing loudly and with mucus flowing from his nostrils. Manini stormed out of the house, crying for help. She returned instantly, coughing and choking from the smoke that had filled the house. The air blurred her view. She bolted the front door, followed Vumani into their parents' bedroom, and locked themselves there. For a while, they sat there, unsure what to do. Vumani and Manini would discover later that they had been sprayed with tear gas.

About 2 kilometres away, approximately 20 000 schoolchildren marched towards Phefeni Junior Secondary School near a hillock. They came from far and wide, converging from all directions. They came armed with nothing but songs. Despite their agitation, they were carried by a wave of excitement and anticipation as they surged over the hill and through the surrounding areas, their songs exploding through the Soweto streets. They sang of mayhem and the violence of apartheid. The young boys and girls called for the system that enslaved them to be dismantled. Amongst them were Libembe, Bohloko, Heke, and many of Bohloko's schoolmates. The system was unjust and denied them their basic rights. They yearned for freedom and had nothing with which to fight for it but their voices and their will. They were inspired by the liberation stories of Angola in 1974 and Mozambique in 1975, but they were inexperienced and were powerless to confront the formidable security police. Even so, they remained determined and fervent, singing for hours.

It was the first time these schoolchildren had protested. They were demonstrating against Afrikaans, the language of their colonial oppressors. They objected to having to speak it. They marched to break the stronghold of apartheid that had been built up over centuries. They did not know what to expect. On this day, they held high hopes to change their circumstances. They sang their belief that the deities would not abandon them. Elated and light-hearted, they carried heavy messages on their placards: 'Down with Afrikaans', 'Afrikaans is the language of our oppressors', 'Afrikaans pollutes our minds', 'Afrikaans for Afrikaners', 'Away with Afrikaans'.

None of them could have imagined what was about to unfold. The charismatic Libembe climbed onto the improvised podium, taking in the sight of thousands of faces watching her. Journalists snapped photographs, adding to the intensity. Beside her stood the equally impressive 16-year-old leader, Heke. The atmosphere of anticipation and excitement bolstered her resolve. Inhaling deeply, her heart brimming with an indescribable courage, she drew strength from the resolute expressions of the assembled faces. Seizing the loudhailer, she directed her voice toward the crowd. "*Amandla.* Black power." She lifted her fist.

"*Ngawethu.*" The schoolchildren replied, becoming stirred up. Indeed, power was theirs. She continued: "They don't want to give us proper education because they fear us. They force us to imbibe poison in the name of schooling. A sweetened poison can never be palatable. Today is a defining moment. We are here to vomit this poison."

The crowd ululated and screamed.

She took a deep breath and continued, "*Amandla*! Black Power! Black sisters and brothers, you all know that years ago, an inferior education was established especially for us, because they consider us inferior. You all know they have ignored us for so long, but today we will force them to listen. They cannot continue turning a blind eye to our pleas. Yes, today marks the beginning of the end of our oppression! We have come to bury the poison we were forced to drink for years. We all know this is inferior education."

The crowd continued screaming and shouting, inflamed with rage and excitement.

"Thank you for braving this chilly winter morning to protest with us against the poison that the system feeds us in the name of education. We will continue with our peaceful march to Orlando Stadium, where we will write a memorandum together and send it to Pretoria. I am made to believe that we have uninvited guests here. Please stay calm. There is no need to panic. We want nothing but proper education. They may come to this peaceful protest armed to the teeth, but they will not intimidate us. No matter what they do, nothing will quell the fires of revolution that have started to burn – not their bullets, not their heavily armed police and their dogs. The seeds that our forebears planted years ago are germinating now. I say, their bullets can't stop us."

Libembe delivered her speech with passion and fervour. The enthralled schoolchildren hardly noticed the danger around them. "*Amandla!* Power! Black Power!" they shouted in delight and cheered at Libembe while jeering at the police.

"Let us proceed now. *Niyabasaba na*? Do you fear them?" Libembe said as she chanted the war cry that whipped the

schoolchildren into a frenzy. "*Hayi asibasabi siyabafuna.* No, we don't fear them, we want them." They dared the police and surged around the hill like a tidal wave. They repeated the battle cry, in the frenzy of the moment, "*Hayi asibasabi siyabafuna.*" Their voices merged with the loud rumblings of thunder in the distance, alarming the heavily armed police, who had by now surrounded them, holding back a pack of snarling dogs.

The police formed a human wall close to the unarmed schoolchildren. Some gathered around and behind the schoolchildren, who were oblivious to the imminent danger. None of them anticipated violence, since it was a peaceful march. They might have remembered Sharpeville, 16 years earlier, yet they did not fear. They were set on the daunting task they intended to fulfil. Nothing would prevent them. Not even the senior policeman who, with hostility in his eyes, ordered the crowd to disperse. "You are gathered here illegally. You have two minutes to leave this place."

As the senior officer's words died away, the police set the dogs on the schoolchildren and fired. The children panicked and scattered in all directions. Many fell as others fled up the hill and into nearby houses. There followed dust, smoke, and more dust, then just a cloud of dusty smoke. One moment they were united, singing peacefully. The next moment they were attacked. The children had only stones in their hands, and metal dustbin lids as shields. Live bullets spilled the blood of little children in Soweto. Sirens of police cars, ambulances, and fire engines wailed amid the drowned-out cries of the little ones being slaughtered like animals under continuous gun fire. They counted a body of a young boy, followed by another. A young girl was shot after the second boy, then a policeman, then more bodies of schoolchildren. They counted hundreds, thousands... until they lost count. The police unleashed terror on children and the streets streamed with their innocent, dust-soaked blood.

Soweto's streets filled with blood and dead bodies as the schoolchildren chanted dirges and liberation songs, asking what transgression they had committed. "Is it our fault for being on this earth?" they continued asking in song. "Where is God? Why does He not intercede? Where are the deities? Whose side are they on?"

Parents wondered about the fate of a country where ten-year-old children lost their precious lives to bloodshed. A voice from the wilderness echoed, "They pluck the twigs from trees whilst they are still thin and small. They know that with time, left unplucked, twigs grow into strong, big branches."

The weeping and gnashing of teeth that was foretold came to pass as wailing continued and tears poured in every household in Soweto. The surviving schoolchildren gathered and erupted into songs again, crying for the Divine to intervene. Some hurled stones, others lifted their hands showing the signs of peace and surrender. Once more, the police ruthlessly shot down the remaining children. Once more, the streets gushed with blood of schoolchildren. They were all children – mere, unarmed schoolchildren who only fought back with stones. Yet their blood was made to irrigate the South African soil.

The news of the shootings alarmed employers, who sent their workers home early. Bhaye left his job immediately to get Maye from her workplace. Maye had already been relieved of her duties by the time Bhaye arrived at her workplace. He was lucky. He would not have found Maye if he had waited a few minutes, because he rushed to get her without alerting her. With hearts heavy with dread, they walked briskly towards the train station, wondering if Bohloko had returned home and what had happened in the township to cause them to be released early from work.

When they arrived at Johannesburg Station, they were greeted by a sea of tired and anxious faces. They boarded the train silently. Passengers murmured quietly on the train, exchanging tense nods and worried stares. No one knew what to anticipate next as rumours spread like wildfire, increasing the uncertainty of the situation. Maye caught snippets of discussion, including accounts of police brutality erupting in the township and children caught in the crossfire. She clutched Bhaye's hand tightly, her mind overwhelmed with unsolved questions: Where was Bohloko? What was happening in Soweto? Each train stop brought a sense of tension that seemed to suffocate the air on this unusually long journey home.

At last, they reached Orlando Station and got off the train. The station, usually a centre of passenger banter and busy schedules, was suddenly a melancholy witness to the chaos of the day. Every entrance was guarded by armed police officers. The caustic smell of tear gas lingered in the air, overwhelming the usual scents of fat-cakes and potato chips.

Bhaye held Maye as they moved quickly, their strides animated with fear. The streets – usually bustling with kids playing and neighbours chatting – were now filled with nervous whispers as smoke billowed in the distance and sirens blared intermittently. Every street corner revealed another picture of chaos: storefronts with shattered windows and hurriedly built barricades, some manned by protestors and some by police. They approached their house with a mixture of relief and dread and knocked louder than usual on the door.

Cowering in the silence of the bedroom, Vumani and Manini heard a loud knock, followed by banging on the door. Looking through the window, they saw the dark clouds of smoke shrouding Soweto, even though it was mid-afternoon. The flames and smoke billowed out from the windows of torched bottle stores, government buildings, and barricades of burning cars throughout Soweto. They knew the scent of destruction was in the air, and sensed the profound loss of life lingering somewhere within.

"Bohloko, Morena, Wetsi, open the door. It's us, please open!" Bhaye announced, thinking that Morena and Wetsi were already home. Confused, Manini and Vumani unbolted the door.

"Where is Bohloko? Where are Morena and Wetsi? Where are they?" demanded Bhaye, pacing the room. Suddenly Morena and Wetsi entered, panting.

"Where is Bohloko? Where have you left Bohloko? Go and fetch him back home!" Bhaye scolded nervously and in great tension as Wetsi and Morena dashed to the door.

"Come back!" he shouted. "Can't you see it is bad outside?" They all sat waiting for Bohloko to pitch up, listening to the news on the radio.

Outside, the shootings continued provoking a fierce backlash from the enraged schoolchildren, who attacked everything connected with the apartheid system. They burned shops, beer halls, and municipal buildings to ashes. In the process, they stoned to death one of their own: a white doctor who had dedicated his life to serving Sowetans. As if that was not enough, the house of a diviner was also burnt down, apparently because he had predicted that many schoolchildren would be killed that day.

The uprising of 16 June 1976, inappropriately called the June 1976 riots, reignited the fires of resistance doused in 1960 when police killed peaceful demonstrators in Sharpeville. This tiny spark, a flicker that began tentatively in Soweto, grew rapidly into a firestorm and turned South Africa into a fierce inferno. It changed the political landscape of the country. What had simmered for years ultimately boiled over.

As the afternoon wore on, upheaval spread all over Soweto and her neighbouring townships. On that 'Black Wednesday', Sebokeng, Tembisa, Thokoza, Daveyton, and Duduza also blazed with fire. Once more, South Africa was engulfed in smoke and the country burned as the turbulence wreaked havoc. South Africa overflowed with blood and the air smelled of teargas and the corpses of children. Parents mourned as dreams for their children turned into nightmares. Indeed, 16 June 1976 was a day of the moans of parents. They lost count of the bodies again. No one knows exactly how many schoolchildren lost their lives that day. No one knows for certain the real story of 16 June 1976.

Some were killed with their hands in the air, making peace signs. Some were killed trying to bury those who were killed. Some killed others claiming it was the will of God when killing became a game of numbers. All were traumatised by this terrible nightmare. The survivors continued singing of death and lamenting. They sang of hope and anticipated victory. They spoke of going to faraway lands where their parents had never been. "*Siyavuma!* We surrender!" they exclaimed, as if possessed by Heavenly spirits. We concede! We consent! We commit ourselves to our mission. *Siyavuma*! We give ourselves to you. Take care of us as we face this monster. No matter the difficulty, we are determined to fight the

system. *Siyavuma*! We are prepared to face death. Ours is a fight for freedom. They pleaded in song for fortitude. They marched as they sang. Some marched into prisons. Others marched out of the country. The unluckiest ones marched to their graves.

The upheavals left blood everywhere. There was blood on the pavements, on the floors, on the streets, in their classrooms and churches. There was even blood on their hands as darkness hovered above the township. The graves of small children took over the Soweto soil.

Although Vumani was too distant from the scene of death to be physically harmed, he nevertheless was killed by another kind of death. Emotionally and spiritually, he died with the probability that his brother Bohloko was amongst those killed. The events of 16 June 1976 changed the political trajectory of the country. For many years, Vumani would remember this day of sad songs. He would later commemorate it as a day of mourning and endless sorrow. Most of all, he remembered it as a day he did not want to remember. On this day, his favourite brother, Bohloko, disappeared without saying goodbye.

A deadly silence hung over the township as dusk descended. Vumani stood once more on the veranda of his parents' home, waiting for Bohloko to return. The street was strangely deserted. Only police cars and ambulances could be seen now and then passing at high speed. Against dark clouds, he saw a flock of swallows leaving in a V formation. Deep melancholy and angst tore Vumani apart as he imagined the worst.

Rain poured down in torrents that night. Those who know say it was not rain, but the tears of the gods. They claimed that the tears of the gods flowed to wash away the blood of children that soaked into the earth. Scaremongers and prophets of doom predicted the end of the world, while optimists declared that the upheavals laid bare the vulnerability of the apartheid system and sounded the death knell for its plan. They announced that 16 June 1976 spelled redemption for the country's oppressed masses. Did the sacrifice of children mark the death of the apartheid system and ignite the fires of liberation?

Three

The Aftermath

The day after the upheavals, Vumani awoke to the deafening sounds of large engines that shook the house. He quickly drew back the curtain and saw a tank's turret pointing at houses as it lurched along the street, followed by armoured vehicles, police cars, and hundreds of heavily armed police and soldiers in a double column.

"Morena, Wetsi, come and see," Vumani whispered, cajoling his brothers, who were still sleeping. There was no school in Soweto since the day before, so Morena and Wetsi had slept in. They could not believe their eyes when they drew the curtain wide open.

"Hey, Wetsi, close that curtain! You will put us into trouble. Can't you see this means death?" Morena screamed, drawing the curtain back.

"No, I am going outside to watch," Morena changed his mind as he stormed out of the house. Vumani, Manini, and Wetsi followed fearfully.

The entire neighbourhood was already outside, some hurling insults at the security personnel across their fences. An old man without teeth limped towards a crowd who stood on the pavements in their pyjamas.

"These urchins went to a slaughterhouse willingly," he shouted. "Now they have dragged us all into this. They thought this government is weak. Now the government is tightening its screws. Cry havoc, we will all die like cattle in the slaughterhouse. The Angel of Death is now grasping our hands ready to deliver us to God." He spoke loudly, lisping, striving to raise his voice above the sounds of the armoured vehicles. Clearly, his words were directed more to the security forces than the crowd.

"Hold your tongue, coward!" retorted MmaDitaba, a known street bully. "You have no shame. You spent your entire life crouching under apartheid. Now you blame children who tried to liberate you. You can die anytime. You are old, but you fear death," she ranted. The crowd laughed as the old man limped back to his yard in shame.

As the armoured vehicles snaked through the township, a loudhailer from the police car announced, "Fellow Sowetans, do not be afraid. We are here to restore order and keep the peace. There's no need to fear if you are law-abiding citizens. We are here to protect you against those who don't want peace." The police and soldiers then took control of the main intersections and the two roads that led in and out of Soweto, immediately sealing the township as Vezi had predicted.

Vumani was shattered by the upheavals. He could no longer play cowboys with toy guns or marbles with his friends. He was unable to watch *Tarzan*, *King Kong*, *Zoro*, *Trinity*, Bruce Lee and Bud Spencer movies at the community hall, and he was unable to attend school. Everything came to a standstill.

Bhaye no longer allowed them to listen to the radio. Was it because it was prohibited, like most things in the country, or because Bhaye wanted to shield them from the news?

"We are joining Libembe's parents and many others to look for Bohloko. Please stay at home. I came to know there is a green Ford Granada that moves about stealthily and shoots at children randomly. Please do not venture out." Bhaye's voice was despondent as he and Maye left the house. Indeed, there was such a car, which shot indiscriminately at any child who happened to be on the street when it passed.

Bhaye and Maye searched frantically for Bohloko, joining scores of parents who scoured mortuaries, hospitals, and prisons, looking for their children. Vumani waited for them daily until midnight, hoping for positive news. The grief in their eyes spoke of their fruitless efforts. He could not sleep for days, hoping that Bohloko would knock on the door.

Over the next days, many schoolchildren with bullet wounds were arrested in hospital wards. Some were whisked out of the country into neighbouring states, while others disappeared without trace. Sensing the worst, the Mzondekis sent all their children to stay with Vezi, except Vumani who needed special care because he was so troubled by recent events. Vumani was indifferent, yet yearned for something indefinable.

The days that followed took a heavy toll on Vumani. He hardly left the house as he felt permanently penned in. The spectres of monsters dancing on the walls at Vumile's funeral seemed to be screaming at him. For hours on end, he devoured the Bible to distract his terrorised mind. In a constant state of anxiety, he felt something insidious following him everywhere in the tiny house of his parents' home. By that time, Vumani was getting emotionally drained and could not escape the dread that plagued him. An inexplicable anguish overwhelmed him that made him feel entangled in a circle of eternal torment reserved for the 'wicked' he saw in a picture hanging on the walls of his parent's bedroom. Enduring grief and suffering at the hands of a forbidding, unjust and cruel system, he could not help but wish for the same protection that he read about in the Bible when King Herod, threatened by the birth of Jesus, ordered the massacre of all children under the age of two.

Overcome by the emotions of helplessness and vulnerability, Vumani felt trapped in an eternal state of longing and the sorrow of the absence of God's grace. He may have accepted his tragic fate if he was aware of the forces at play, but the sense of being imprisoned in his parent's home became pervasive as the walls and floors appeared to be afflicted with an inescapable misery. As he desperately fought a phantom enemy to escape from this inner prison of joyless distress, Vumani felt the futility and pain of his short life, fearing that he too would disappear and never be seen again.

One late afternoon, Vumani stepped outside onto the veranda overlooking the street and watched the horses graze lazily on the overgrown grass outside the community hall. Just then, a horse without blinkers rumbled past, like foul water flowing with

debris, pulling a coal cart like a ghost with bony frame and patchy coat. It struggled through the dusty street, narrowly avoiding collisions with pedestrians and other vehicles. A young, grubby boy seated on the cart lashed its back, urging it forward. The horse pulled itself and its cargo onward and trudged wearily down the dusty street with its muscles straining against the weight of the cart. The grazing horses paused and watched with pity and terror as it stumbled through the street. Sadness and grief cloaked Vumani as he watched the cart-pulling horse disappear into the distance, the sound of its hooves fading away into the busy, dusty street. He watched the fiery sun sink, colouring the clouds with warm pink and orange. A wistful longing overwhelmed him. He remembered the days when he and Bohloko would take long walks in the township, talking and laughing as the sun set behind them. In his imagination, Vumani heard Bohloko sing along to his favourite tunes.

After about a year, life returned to a semblance of normality. Schools, cinemas, and other amenities returned, but felt bereft of the vibrant life they knew prior to the upheavals. Though Vumani's siblings returned home, many other friends were lost.

Lunga was growing into a decent young man. He had been admitted to Wits University as a law student and his education had not been disturbed because he was at a private, multiracial school in town. Lunga excelled, and in his second year the law school sent him to work at an NGO as a paralegal. He received a car. Whenever he got the opportunity, he took Vumani to amusement places in town. This became Vumani's most enjoyable and thrilling time, although he kept thinking how Bohloko would have enjoyed it if he had been there.

An opportunity for Vumani to break free came in the winter of 1979. It was after school. Walking home alone, barefoot, his lips dry from hunger, a car suddenly stopped beside him. A man and a woman with cameras got out and stopped him. Vumani thought about the green Ford Granada that shot at kids on the streets and almost ran away. But this car was white and not a Ford Granada, and the occupants did not look like they would shoot at children.

"Judith, here is the face of poverty. Look at her, shame, I think we have found an excellent subject for our assignment," said the man excitedly as he scrutinised Vumani.

"Look, she is wearing trousers. Hello, young girl. Why are you wearing trousers? Do you have a school tunic?" asked the lady. Vumani was used to people mistaking him for a girl. He gave them a puzzled looked.

"Hello, girl, do you speak English? What is your name and how old are you?" the lady asked, fiddling in her purse.

"Good afternoon, ma'am. My name is Vumani. I am ten years old," he responded in perfect English. He continued, "I am a boy."

They looked at each other and nodded, smiling. "Oh no, sorry. We thought you are a girl. You are too pretty to be a boy," added the lady, apologising.

"Where do you stay? We want to talk to your parents. We are making a documentary about the children of apartheid, and we think you are a perfect candidate for this. Do you understand?"

Vumani nodded, partially understanding. His parents would have no problem if he brought in people who could potentially assist him at home. Indeed, Maye and Bhaye approved the project. They were thrilled that Vumani would earn money that would perhaps pay for his future education.

Life took on a new meaning for Vumani. For the next few months, cameras followed him, documenting everything he did. At school, in the playgrounds, and everywhere, Goodwill, the kind camera man, recorded every aspect of Vumani's life.

The year following the recording, Vumani was playing football with friends on the street when he noticed a car parked outside his home. He had completely forgotten about the documentary, when he saw Goodwill enter his parents' yard.

"Mr Goodwill, Mr Goodwill!" he yelled as he rushed home.

"Hey, Vumani, how are you? Where are your parents? You don't have to say 'Mr' to me. Please call me Goodwill. I have a surprise for you. Come inside."

Vumani entered the house excitedly and sat on the sofa, eager for the surprise.

"Look," said Goodwill, handing Vumani a coffee table book.

Vumani could not believe his eyes. A book written about him, illustrated with photographs, was too good to be true.

"Thank you very much, sir," he said, taking the book.

"Manini! Manini, come and see." He leafed through the book and held it to his chest. But Manini was skipping rope with her friends and wanted no disturbance. Vumani was about to dash out when Goodwill stopped him.

"Do not go out. This book is banned in this country. You will be arrested if they find you with it. Where are your parents or your brothers? I want to explain something to them."

"Mom and dad are at work. Wetsi and Morena are still at school. The other two small ones are at crèche," said Vumani, trying hard to contain his excitement.

Goodwill left and promised to come back and speak to the parents. The title of the book, *Joseph of Soweto,* sent him back to the time when he was locked at home, a few months earlier.

The new, happy life that Vumani enjoyed was short lived. One sweltering afternoon, Lunga had dropped Vumani home when MmaDitaba saw them. "Hey Vumani, stop that car! Tell Lunga to stop – I want to talk to him!" she yelled and came over with alarming speed. Lunga heard her and stopped the car, getting out to greet her. He thought she wanted a lift and was happy to offer it.

"I am so proud of you. You are reaping the fruits of your hard work. You are not like these useless boys who hang around in shops. Shame, they are a wasted generation. They are not called the lost generation for nothing. I wonder what will become of their future."

"Thank you, *mme* MmaDitaba." Lunga responded in his usual pleasant and ebullient manner.

Then suddenly she lunged at him verbally. "But how can you be so stupid and so smart at the same time? How is that possible?"

Lunga smiled respectfully and stared at her. What was she talking about? She took a long breath and said, "Why do you buy your uncle clothes when you know that he raped your mother to father you? Don't you know that you are your uncle's son?"

She had caught Lunga off-guard, like a lioness ambushing an antelope. Lunga did not often get angry, but MmaDitaba's insensitive revelations flustered him and threw him into a feverish rage. He could not respond, and his words stuck in his mouth. Instead, he gritted his teeth to keep his temper under control.

MmaDitaba faced Vumani. "And you, Vumani, you see what your terrorist brother and his slut girlfriend Libembe got us into?"

Vumani was frightened, not so much by what MmaDitaba said, but by her manner. She was agitated for no apparent reason and looked like she wanted to punch him. He spoke to appease her, and not out of ignorance.

"But what are terrorists, mme MmaDitaba?"

"You don't know. Why don't you ask this educated cousin of yours? Terrorists are people who feed on the flesh of others. They are also called cannibals." With those words, she swayed her hips and left the two cousins confused.

Lunga watched her disappear, horrified. He looked at Vumani, who seemed unfazed by her words. Lunga was unbalanced. He returned to his car in utter disgust. What he had just heard was too heavy to bear. Emotions surged through Lunga like an erupting volcano. Wave after wave of shock, rage, and humiliation coursed through his body as he staggered blindly towards his car. He placed his hands on the bonnet for support, his head bowed in shame. He could barely name the surge of emotions that he was experiencing. His hands shaking, he wiped his forehead of perspiration and managed to unlock his car. He

opened the door and sank into the driver's seat. Vumani stared as Lunga drove off.

Lunga found himself driving aimlessly through the streets of Soweto. Up until that moment, he had never felt such an intense sense of isolation. If apartheid rejected black children and the community did not believe in him, no one would. He felt helpless and powerless, thinking that he had no control over his future no matter what he did. As he considered the future he was trying to build through his education, he felt the cold hands of despair grasp at him. He resigned himself to the thought that he was doomed to failure and there surely would be no escape for him. A thought seemed to overwhelm his mind that his future was doomed in this country. He could not shake the feeling that he had somehow become small and insignificant. He figured what to do next. He decided right then to abandon the lecture room for street life and resolved to disappear from his community, never to be seen again. With Lunga's disappearance, Vumani's hope of life improving disappeared. Vumani struggled to piece his life together and return to normal without Lunga.

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In the early hours of 22 July 1982, Vumani heard noise outside and saw a searchlight piercing the windows. The police kicked open the door, bringing a burst of freezing wind into the room as Vumani quickly got under his blankets. Police swarmed in, brandishing their rifles. Bhaye and Maye jumped out of bed, pulling on their clothes, alarmed by the tumultuous commotion in the kitchen-living room. A huge policeman filled the doorway while the others ransacked the house. Others surrounded Vumani and his shocked siblings, who were curled up in their blankets on the floor.

"Where is Bohloko? We know you know where he is. Don't try to hide him." The policeman at the door flashed his torch in Bhaye's and Maye's eyes as they entered. He scrutinised Vumani and his siblings, tore off their blankets and ordered them, "Up, up, up! Lean against that wall." They leapt to their feet and stood naked against the wall, shivering from the freezing winter morning. He shone his torch in their faces while looking at the picture of Bohloko in his hand.

Bhaye refused to tolerate the policeman's contempt and humiliation. Enraged, he snapped and said in Afrikaans, "How dare you do this to my children? Who do you think you are? How dare you come here into my house and order me and my children around? Can't you see these kids are cold?" He charged towards the huge policeman, angry sparks flashing in his eyes. The four other policemen closed in around him, pointing their rifles at him.

"Please, father of Bohloko, leave them," said Maye, standing calmly between Bhaye and the policeman who pushed him. Bhaye took a deep breath to calm his pounding heart.

The huge policeman gazed at Bhaye contemptuously. He ground his teeth and rudely responded in Afrikaans, "Boy, don't mess with us. We did not send you to give birth to terrorists. Secondly, this is not your house. It is the government's house. You are on a 99-year leasehold. You are a lodger here. We can enter as we please. We are the government. Besides, we have a permit to enter any terrorist's home. Where is your lodger's permit?" One of the four policeman pushed Bhaye out of the way with his rifle butt. Vumani felt a profound sense of isolation within the house, as though it were situated on a desolate island. He wondered who would protect them against these heavily armed police as they entered the kitchen side of the room and came back with Vumani's two uncles and his aunt, who had hidden there as soon as they heard the police. They had no permit to be in Johannesburg.

"*Ja*, you, why are you here? Do you have a permit to be here? Who are you?"

"I am..."

"Shut up," said the huge policemen as *Mmangoane* Dinah tried to explain who she was and why she was there.

"Take them to the pick-up truck outside. They will explain in court what is their business here in the terrorist house," he barked at one of his juniors. Bhaye wanted to intervene, but Maye restrained him. Theirs was not a serious offence. They would only be fined and given 72 hours out of Johannesburg.

The other policemen continued emptying the contents of cupboards, suitcases, wardrobe and drawers, ripping down the

curtains. They seized a few books, a photo album, a camera, and some LPs, including Bohloko's favourites, Black Mambazo, Stevie Wonder, John Lennon, Joan Armatrading, The O'Jays, Aretha Franklin, Miriam Makeba, Kenny Rogers, Dolly Parton, Roberta Flack, Pink Floyd, Mahalia Jackson, and Teddy Pendergrass. None of the items were banned.

The huge policeman surveyed the house they had turned upside down with satisfaction. He nodded, chuckled, and spoke scornfully, "If I were you, I would persuade your communist, terrorist son to surrender. We will be a regular feature in this house. We hope next time our visit will not be to inform you that your son has joined other terrorists in Robben Island or six feet under." He left with his squad of policemen.

Vumani considered his words as the door slammed behind them, leaving the family to clean up the mess. He gazed at his siblings one by one as they stood aghast, numb with fear. Maye sat on the sofa and met Vumani's grieving gaze. Her heart also bled, grieving for her inability to defend herself and her children. She grieved for Bohloko, not knowing whether he was dead or alive. She grieved for the many parents who had lost their children and the families who suffered the same invasions as theirs.

That night, Vumani's mind filled with dark thoughts, finally interrupted by the soothing dawn chorus that evoked the defencelessness and vulnerability in this torpid room. It was time for his parents to prepare for work. Vumani wondered how they could work after such an ordeal. The sound of the first train reminded him that it was his turn to prepare the fire and boil water for his siblings to wash and drink tea. On account of the police raid, his parents missed the first train to work and Vumani had to prepare for them as well. He looked at the chaotic floor and wondered where to start. Bhaye stood frozen, while they all joined Maye and prayed for God's protection.

This was not the first nor the last police raid. There had been several earlier, just after the upheavals. That day's raid was far more intense than the previous ones. Even though each raid devastated the Mzondekis, it offered them hope that Bohloko was still alive. They continued to watch, hoping Bohloko might

reappear. Weeks, months, and even years went by. Their hopes faded as Bohloko remained silent. After months of searching, Bhaye and Maye looked to have given up hope of ever finding Bohloko. Vumani assumed Bohloko had joined Vumile, hoping to meet with them in Heaven.

Until that day's raid, Vumani was not mature enough to grasp that he was oppressed, and he had lacked the vocabulary to express his situation. But that day he found the language. He had witnessed the horror of apartheid. He understood the injustice, and the ever-present plague of apartheid. He felt it, but could not see or touch this thing that permeated every facet of his life and stalked him on his way to school, at home, in class. Now he could see it, smell, touch, taste, feel, and hear it.

He grasped what oppression was. Before, Vumani thought it was normal for children of different race groups to study separately. Now he knew that it was deliberate.

It was in late 1982, at 15 years old, with constant police raids, that Vumani began to understand that almost every black person was cursed. He felt compelled to flee. Unfortunately, his home provided no solace or safe haven for him. That Bohloko had disappeared due to injustice and alienation filled Vumani with pain, anger, anxiety, and dread. He felt utterly helpless. Nothing made sense; he had no purpose. Worse, his childhood was utterly lost. The burning sorrow tormented him day and night. His family was unaware of his turmoil. He wished he were a bird so he could fly away from his problems. He prayed for a miracle, wondering why misfortune chose him and his family, oblivious that most other black families were in the same situation.

That morning, Vumani went to school haunted by the raid, unable to concentrate in class. The word 'terrorist' echoed in his head. He excused himself from school and took another route to join his devastated family.

MmaMalome, a middle-aged schoolteacher, was also crushed by the upheavals. The community respected her for being helpful, particularly to schoolchildren before and during the uprisings. Unlike other teachers, MmaMalome refused the title 'teacher', insisting that everybody call her aunt – MmaMalome.

The story went that her only daughter, Libembe, who spoke during Vumile's funeral, was sent out of the country immediately after the upheavals. Libembe's dad, MmaMalome's husband, was detained by the security branch because he would not divulge where his child was. MmaMalome tried everything to locate her daughter and her husband, ending up in the hands of charlatans who milked her hard-earned salary and made her carry out bizarre undertakings.

Since the disappearance of Libembe, MmaMalome had been persistently requesting the Mzondekis to allow one of their children to stay with her. Maye was reluctant because of MmaMalome's rumoured mental instability. Even so, Maye saw it as an answer to her prayers. She had been closely observing Vumani and was troubled by his growing despondency and lack of direction. Maye believed that MmaMalome could revive Vumani's zest for life.

Maye now seized the chance to take Vumani to MmaMalome, after she had satisfied herself that MmaMalome was sane and stable. She rushed to her bedroom, where Vumani sat, staring at a framed picture of Heaven and Hell hung on the wall. Vumani was bewildered by this picture. One side showed throngs of black people burning in flames as they walked the perilous path to Hell, with eternal fire awaiting them. The other side showed white people, clothed in white, passing through a beautiful garden on their way to paradise.

"Vumani, you like that picture?"

"Well, not really, Maye. It makes me think."

"It also makes me think, my son."

"But why is the devil and his angels black, Maye?" Vumani said, struggling to figure out what mortal sin black people had collectively committed to deserve the fire in Hell.

Maye evaded Vumani's question. She dared not broach this forbidden subject. Ever since she had heard that the security branch put transmitters in houses of suspects, she was careful about what she said. She changed the topic.

"Do you still have those nightmares?"

"Yes, ma. Yesterday I dreamt of the universe. The world, the rivers, and the mountains faced upside down. Then I saw Vumile's face reflected in the river. He was calling me. In the dream, the world turns upside down each time I try to reach out to him. In the same dream, I saw Bohloko pass through fire and Vumile standing beside him, encouraging him to carry on, assuring him no fire will scorch him. Then I saw a tiger pouncing towards me. It smelled me all over and wailed instead of mauling me. Then I woke up."

"Do you still keep the Bible under your pillow?"

"Yes, Ma."

"Don't worry, the Bible will help you. Always keep it under your pillow. In time you will see the difference. Remember also, I gave you a recipe for life. Do not forget it. It will protect you against all evils."

"I know, Ma. If I could get protection from the police. They scare me whenever they come here."

"Perhaps you need a change of scene. As you may have noticed, MmaMalome was here. She wants you to go stay with her. I didn't want to send you to faraway relatives because you are delicate, and you need special supervision. You should be here with me rather than with other relatives. However, since MmaMalome is walking distance from here, I am happy with her request if you are. I can easily keep an eye on you."

Vumani breathed a sigh of relief at the news that he would be leaving. After suffering for so long at home, he was thrilled at the prospect. He thought MmaMalome's house would provide the safe haven he desperately needed, and he was convinced that his life would take a turn for the better. He knew his mother was not happy about his leaving, but she gave him to MmaMalome because she could not bear to see him miserable. Getting away from his oppressive and forlorn home would give Vumani the sanctuary he craved.

Within a few minutes, Vumani had collected all his personal possessions – the Bible first, then his clothes, and his two books

– and stuffed in his little suitcase. He was ready for his new home. Maye mumbled a prayer, as was customary each time they left the house. Vumani set off for MmaMalome's house, not as a child escaping the meaningless emptiness of his life but expecting ample opportunity to be a child; to play and enjoy sleep like other children. Maye escorted him to MmaMalome's house to ensure his safety on the streets riddled with roadblocks.

MmaMalome's house was not a proper home. Although it was no different from other two-roomed township houses, the atmosphere was distressing. Entering the yard, Vumani felt he was strolling into a dungeon of Hell, like the picture in his parents' bedroom. Flags of different countries adorned the yard. Although it was winter, the untended dry lawn and wild plants grew haphazardly in the garden. As he walked hand in hand with Maye into the only door, he resolved to wake up early the following day and tend the garden. Two cow horns hung at the entrance to the house. These were thought to deflect lightning from striking the house and to deter evil spirits.

The unpleasant stench of what smelled like wet cow dung or rotten fish inside the house unsettled him. The dark curtains and dust in the windows obstructed the natural light. How could such a small house, so scantly lit and freezing, have so many things inside, Vumani wondered. Something seemed to be lurking in here. A huge suitcase dominated the room. Vumani looked at Maye, who looked hesitant and worried. The house had deteriorated since the last time she was there. Clearly, MmaMalome failed at housekeeping, and she wondered how Vumani would survive.

"Hey, my friend, you are here already. I thought you would come tomorrow. Welcome, no problem. Your son has grown. Welcome, boy. I am MmaMalome. What is your name, by the way?"

A bespectacled MmaMalome, with rosary beads hanging round her neck, reached out for Vumani's hand and guided them into a combined dining room and bedroom.

"Vumani is my name. I am happy to see you, MmaMalome," Vumani responded shyly, shaking her hand, moved by the haunting sadness on MmaMalome's face.

"Oh, yes, the twin! I confuse you with your other brother. I am glad you are here. I heard a lot about you. Fortunately, you are in the right place. I am very good with children. Your mother can attest to that. Is it not so, my friend?"

Maye just nodded her head.

MmaMalome touched Vumani's cheeks as if examining him. She said, "You look thin and sick. I must do something to make you healthy. I will feed you with some good herbs. You will gain weight sooner than you think."

That was a sign. Maye became apprehensive. She contemplated taking Vumani back home with her, but out of respect and a desire to not hurt her troubled friend, she chose to give her the benefit of the doubt. With a heavy heart, she gently kissed Vumani on the cheek before heading towards the door. Vumani trudged behind her, escorting her to the gate. He lingered there, his gaze fixed on her silhouette as she slowly faded into the distance. The dusty township street, lined with small, weather-beaten houses, stretched out before her. The sound of her footsteps grew fainter, blending with the hum of distant voices and the occasional bark of a dog. He felt a lump in his throat as he realised she was truly leaving. A mixture of sadness, worry, and a flicker of hope for a new beginning swirled inside Vumani.

He gazed at the orange and pink twilight sky, now fading to a velvety blue, and noticed a solitary bird perched on a wire, looking like an eerie shadow in the waning light. The bird sat in silent stillness, its small claws carefully gripping the barbed wire. It was a sunbird, its chest ablaze like fire. As the wind whispered gently through the street, causing the wire to tremble, the bird remained motionless. With bright, alert eyes, it peered over the horizon, as if seeking out untold truths.

A short distance away, near MmaMalome's house, two young boys also watched the bird. One of them, armed with a Y-shaped wooden slingshot, crouched low. He picked up a stone, placed it in the leather pouch held by two elastic bands, and drew the slingshot with precision. His gaze locked on the target. Exhaling slowly, he realigned his aim and released the stone. The tension in the air mirrored the bird's poised anticipation,

both awaiting the inevitable launch into the approaching dusk. With a swift motion, the bird took flight, disappearing into the gathering twilight.

Vumani observed the scene with a heavy heart, troubled by the boys' actions. Why were they tormenting the bird when it posed no threat to them? Why couldn't humans live in harmony with nature because they, too, are nature? Why did society prioritise labels over shared humanity? The incident mirrored his own experiences. It was a painful reminder that those in positions of power frequently oppress those perceived to be powerless.

Despite the clutter, Vumani adapted quickly to life in MmaMalome's household. He grew accustomed to the darkness and cold of the house and enjoyed hospitality and affection from MmaMalome. One day, Vumani spent hours tending to MmaMalome's garden, meticulously weeding the flower beds and making sure the lawn was nicely manicured.

A few weeks later, at nightfall, MmaMalome was preparing the evening meal, and Vumani was reading the Bible as usual when a tall, menacing, and eerie figure appeared from nowhere. He was a snooty, tawdry man who apparently desired to be worshipped. Vumani was nauseated by this paunchy man who looked like a wicked monster that ate reptiles. He seemed to dislike Vumani intensely. He was introduced as the healer who would be spending time with both MmaMalome and Vumani. He smelled acrid, like the house. MmaMalome introduced him to Vumani as Modingwana.

Vumani tried unsuccessfully to ascertain what the visit entailed. The man was reticent. He tried to force Vumani to drink water mixed with a concoction of herbs, saying that it was 'holy water'. Vumani declined.

Later, Vumani lay awake, listening to their conversation. He instinctively did not trust the man. The next night, just after they switched off the lights to sleep, Vumani crept over to MmaMalome's bedroom door and put his ear to it. He picked up snatches of the conversation between the man and MmaMalome.

"Today we should do the necessary. The sooner it is done, the better. Otherwise, I suspect this boy will disappear. As I told you before, he is an extraordinary child. He is an enigma. Do you know that he has horns? Yes, horns like cows, goats, and springboks. They are a treasure trove guaranteed to bring back your husband and your daughter. We need them before it is too late. Surely, his horns can facilitate the speedy return of your loved ones."

"But no, Modingwana! I don't see what you see in this small, innocent boy. Are not horns supposed to be on his forehead? This poor boy is troubled. We must not complicate his life further by throwing him in the deepest trough. I called you here to help me restore his life since you claim to have great knowledge about herbs," she tried to reason with the man.

"You cannot see these horns with your naked eyes. Only us healers are trained to see them. He is your water trough, in case you don't know," Modingwana said with a sardonic grin.

"Well, it is up to you," he continued. "I am here to help only you. Unfortunately, you cannot see the horns. Only people like us, with the third eye, can see what is hidden. What I am telling you about this boy is true. It is a matter of time before the horns sprout. You may think of this as demons, which we should exorcise before it is too late. We are helping him. It will be problematic once these horns shoot out. I know you are scared we will harm the boy or that your neighbours will know about this. We will put him in the big black suitcase I asked you to keep carefully. I knew we would eventually find a suitable candidate, and time is on our side. I have always been ready. We should do this in the early hours of the morning, around 4 am. Set the alarm clock to wake us up at 3:45. We must help this boy. I promise he won't die. Your husband and daughter were driven away by demons here. We need those demons, which this boy has, to bring them back."

Vumani felt a cold chill as he listened to the conversation. He felt his forehead to see if he could feel the horns they were speaking about. If MmaMalome were in her proper senses, she would have discerned the absurdity of the man's statements. But because she was muddled and dulled by her grief, she was

gullible and did not notice that the man was bent on mischief. Her only concern was for the man to give her assurance that it would be possible to purge Vumani's horns and the demons without causing any harm to him.

Obviously, Vumani would not allow it. He figured out the best way to deal with his new challenge. Otherwise, he feared, he would not live through the night. He imagined vultures circling over the house, ready for his body. He stayed awake until he was certain that the man and MmaMalome were asleep. To the sound of the man snoring, he tiptoed out of the room and crept through the darkness, carrying his small suitcase. To his utter disappointment, the door was secured with a huge bolt. His only option was the window.

The shattering of glass jolted MmaMalome and the man awake. By the time they went to investigate, they saw Vumani's silhouette receding into the distance. They made no attempt to follow him.

Vumani ran as quickly as his feet could carry him, not knowing where he was headed, until his chest was sore. He continued running in the moonlight towards the stadium, a furious wind propelling him forward. Eventually, he took shelter under the bridge by the stream and turned onto an overgrown path. Dawn found him sitting on a rock by the riverside a few metres from the railway station. He sat silently, like a wanderer, thinking, the sound of the soft, sluggish stream comforting him.

The prospect of going back home was a dilemma. He could not imagine how he would cope with the dread of constant police harassment. Now, he had earned a new enemy who would certainly come looking for him at his parents' home.

He confronted himself about the purpose and meaning of his existence. He realised that his entire life was joyless. From early childhood, he had endured unceasing gloom. He was forced to live in profound pain, an indecipherable mystery that offered only eternal torment.

Now, he was caught in an inescapable cul-de-sac. He wondered what sin he had committed, to be limping from one

misfortune into another. He speculated about other children's lives. Perhaps this was how all children lived. Maybe it was a dismal providence which he had to accept and get accustomed to without resentment.

He looked at the sky questioningly, seeing only pale clouds. His life was a quagmire; the more he tried to free himself, the deeper he was submerged. Overwhelmed by strong feelings of self-pity and nostalgia, he burst into tears and cried bitterly.

His mind drifted to 16 June 1976 and to Bohloko. The memory was too poignant to suppress. He wondered where Bohloko was and what he was doing.

He remembered his recent dream. A voice that sounded like his brother Vumile urged him forward: "Carry on, brother, carry on. All will come to pass."

This gave him courage. The advice of his mom lingered in his mind: "Always remember to pray. Pray when you have nothing to hold on to. Prayer will be your solace and your talisman." He knelt on the frosty grass and muttered a prayer. It suddenly occurred to him that it was his 16th birthday. A flurry of thick fog engulfed him and froze him to the marrow. He felt the heaviness of the previous day as he wandered like a lost bird in the wilderness all that day.

The sun cast feeble rays through frozen clouds and a mourning dove whistled a tremulous song. Vumani reflected on his past, and resolved to accept what came without bitterness.

On this forbidding day, Vumani decided to return home. Starving, tired, and thirsty, he walked through the chilling fog, taunted by a boisterous wind. For better or worse, home was the only realistic place to go. Anxiety and guilt weighed on him as he thought about his unpleasant experience. He wondered how he would explain his return to Maye. That day changed Vumani's life dramatically and brought deep fear. He concluded that life was about adversity and lived apprehensively awaiting his next trial.

When he finally returned home in the late afternoon, he found Maye and Heke reading from the Bible. Coincidentally, that was the day his siblings returned home permanently from Vezi. They welcomed him with a prayer and guessed without Vumani

explaining why he was back home. The setting sun shone red over the township and darkness crept in slowly from the horizon, like an enemy. That night Vumani sat on the sofa with a feeling of dread. The darkness of night was a harbinger of doom for him. With one hurdle gone, he knew several others lay ahead. He went to bed shivering, thinking about a possible raid and his brush with death.

Four

Apartheid Assassins

At 4 am, a blaring car horn shattered the stillness outside MmaMalome's house. Modingwana sat up instantly, not wanting to disturb the peaceful sleep of MmaMalome. He dressed quickly, without bothering to wash, and rushed outside. "Gosh, I've messed this up. I may never get another chance," he muttered as he hurried towards the revving car in the yard.

He had urged Mabulala to arrive early. Their meeting with Colonel Odi Teufel at Vlakplaas Farm was scheduled for 7am. The original plan involved stopping by at Muroyi, a dubious healer rumoured to dabble in dark arts to increase the power and wealth of his clients. Muroyi had promised Modingwana and Mabulala great power, fortune, and adoration if they brought him a boy's body parts. But, since the boy had escaped, there was no point in stopping at Muroyi's house. They had ample time before their meeting with Colonel Teufel.

Mabulala didn't mind the early awakening. He believed sacrificing sleep was a small price for the potential increase in wealth and power. His disappointment was evident as he watched Modingwana enter the car alone.

"I expected you to bring the boy. What went wrong?" Mabulala enquired, as Modingwana took the passenger's seat.

"The boy managed to escape. Don't worry, he was not our primary target. He was supposed to be an easier catch since he stayed at MmaMalome's. Our real target is still out there. We'll find a replacement without difficulty," Modingwana assured him.

Mabulala frowned. He had once saved Modingwana from Colonel's Teufel's wrath after a stupid mistake that nearly cost his life. To return the favour, Modingwana told Mabulala his secret plans with Muroyi and pledged to include him in the plan. The news could not have come at a better time for Mabulala. He too wanted something that would endear him to people, particularly

Colonel Teufel. And if a boy's body parts would facilitate that, so be it. Mabulala had been ecstatic when Modingwana had promised to bring their target the following day. Modingwana had planned to lure Vumani into the car by convincing him they were taking him to someone who would help him. They planned to overpower him inside the car and take out his body parts in a nearby field. Thereafter, they would wrap his corpse with a blanket or stow it in a suitcase and discard it. Mabulala could not understand how Modingwana had failed to bring the boy. He assumed he had done it deliberately to forestall the process. "So, you let the boy slip away. And you claim to desire fame, power, and charisma? How could you let such an opportunity escape your grasp?"

Modingwana retorted, "How dare you ask me that question? Do you think I'm like you, someone who callously takes a child's life for no apparent reason?"

Mabulala kept quiet. He remembered aiming the gun at the young boy. Indeed, he had no valid reason to kill Vumile apart from his odd ideas about twins. Now he knew better, although he had no regrets. He would do it again if the opportunity presented itself.

He shrugged and fell into a brooding silence. He could not press Modingwana further. He was aware of his aversion to over-explanations. "So, we have about three hours to spare. What's our plan now?" he finally enquired, steering the conversation in a different direction.

"Let's roam around the township. Fuel is not a concern – it's the taxpayers' money, after all," Modingwana suggested, a smirk playing on his lips.

And so, they aimlessly cruised the streets of Soweto in their inconspicuous Fiat. The community was unfamiliar with this particular vehicle – unlike the notorious green Ford Granada that they used to drive, randomly shooting children. Since the switch to the Fiat, they could drive around the township without drawing unwanted attention. Around 5:45 am, they veered onto the Ben Schoeman freeway, heading for Pretoria. As the Fiat bumped along the dirt road toward the gate labelled "Farm 66", a helicopter descended, announcing their arrival at Vlakplaas.

To the casual observer, Vlakplaas appeared to be nothing more than a farm, nestled beside a tranquil river in picturesque countryside. But Vlakplaas held a much darker secret. It was a place of countless executions. This clandestine haven for the apartheid elite undercover assassins was established in 1979 to brutally suppress armed resistance. It was both a farm and a place where innumerable activists met their end. Here, the secret police orchestrated the capture, torture, and co-opting of insurgents to work against their comrades, calling them the askaris.

Vlakplaas found these converted combatants incredibly useful, deploying them in townships to ensnare and eliminate activists without raising suspicion. For those insurgents who resisted co-operation and transformation into askaris, a gruesome fate awaited them on the farm – execution and disposal. Many activists vanished within the farm's boundaries, their bodies never discovered. Only a select few undercover members were aware of the horrifying truths of this place, including senior police and army generals who arrived by helicopter for meetings. Colonel Teufel presided over this dark domain.

Modingwana and Mabulala had been inducted into this sinister world shortly after the 1976 upheavals. Initially, they'd worked undercover, spying on suspected activists. Over time, they evolved into members of the 'third force', tasked with destabilising the country in the final days of the apartheid system. Their grim duties included indiscriminate acts such as randomly shooting schoolchildren. As the resistance grew, they were stationed around the homes of activists, monitoring their every move. This was how Modingwana ended up residing with MmaMalome under the guise of assisting her in locating Libembe.

Vlakplaas served as the breeding ground for schemes to eliminate activists using explosive devices. It was within these ominous walls that letter bombs, claiming the lives of political activists who had sought refuge abroad like Bheki Mlangeni, Abram Tiro, John Langalibalele Dube, Ruth First, and many others, were meticulously crafted. The farm was also a hub for dispatching soldiers involved in destabilising neighbouring nations. The soldiers responsible for acts such as the assassination

of uMkhonto Wesizwe (MK) soldiers in the Matola raid in 1981, the assassination of Joe Gqabi in Zimbabwe, and the Lesotho raid in 1982 were all linked to Vlakplaas.

"Who do you think it could be?" Modingwana enquired, the Fiat idling at the gate, awaiting someone to open it.

"I'm not sure. Perhaps a high-ranking government official. It must be why Colonel Teufel called us. Today we might meet one," Mabulala pondered as he observed the helicopter. The helicopter landed as the gate opened for Modingwana and Mabulala. Colonel Teufel emerged from the rondavel-shaped building, making his way briskly towards the helicopter. Judas Madi, holding a briefcase, stepped out as the door opened. A nervous grin on his face, he embraced Colonel Teufel. Together, they walked down the path shaded by towering trees, obscuring the view of the farmhouse and outbuildings. They passed by the red, prison-like building where the askaris lived.

"Stand by this window and discreetly observe our guest this morning," the gate opener instructed, ushering Mabulala and Modingwana into a farmhouse.

From the window, they watched in disbelief as Madi, clutching a briefcase, followed Colonel Teufel like a loyal subordinate. Confusion and excitement momentarily overtook them.

"Isn't he supposed to be in exile?" Modingwana asked, his voice tinged with anticipation.

"This is exile, as you can see," the gate opener quipped, laden with sarcasm.

Comrade Judas Madi had long been a symbol of resistance, a name synonymous with bravery and the freedom struggle. However, his activist track record was paradoxically barren – zero achievements to validate his lofty rank within the organisation. The mystery surrounding his elevated status fuelled speculation and conjecture. Some whispered that Madi had gained fame, if not notoriety, for singing struggle songs during his student days. Yet the gravity of his position far exceeded what those credentials could justify. Even today, the mention of his name commanded

immense respect within the liberation struggle. Very few knew the dark and treacherous secret harboured by this revered figure of the liberation movement.

Madi had been conspiring with security agents for over a decade. More than any spy, he had orchestrated the demise of countless comrades, inflicting a toll greater than any pandemic could claim. He was the worst backstabber, adept at concealing his tracks, who had populated his department in exile with spies, sowing mayhem and chaos within the organisation.

Joining the underground structures in the early 1970s, Madi's activities remained shrouded in mystery from the time he joined until his reappearance in the 1980s. The circumstances propelling him to the upper echelons of organisational leadership remained undocumented. This was a puzzle in the complex tapestry of his enigmatic history.

"Take a seat, Comrade Madi," Colonel Teufel said, motioning to a chair in front of his desk. "We don't have much time. You mentioned a meeting in Lusaka this evening. Let's dive into business. Time is not on our side."

The use of the term 'comrade' grated on Madi's nerves. He expected such titles from those within his organisation, not from someone like Colonel Teufel. Technically an adversary, despite Madi's covert role as a spy for him. He settled into the proffered chair and flipped open his briefcase, extracting a stack of pages, each with a passport photo and a concise narrative about the individual represented.

"Are these all the potential infiltrators in the country?" Colonel Teufel enquired, his excitement evident as he leaned forward, scrutinising the contents.

"The majority will infiltrate soon. Some are already here. I provided their names during our phone conversation. Now I have their pictures and bios, along with their intended targets and potential bases," Madi replied, removing his spectacles and wiping his face as he carefully examined the photographs.

"Thank you. We'll deal with them. No terrorist will operate freely here," Colonel Teufel declared, rapidly flipping through

the pages. "Now, where's that terrorist girl? What's her name? I don't see her picture here. We missed her the last time she was in the country."

"You mean Libembe?"

"Yes, her," Colonel Teufel snapped, his frustration palpable. The mere mention of Libembe's name seemed to infuriate him. The authorities harboured a deep-rooted resentment for Libembe. Their awareness of her began during the 1976 upheavals, when she delivered a speech they deemed incendiary and provocative. Libembe had managed to evade capture by fleeing the country. Despite her elusive nature, they knew she re-entered the country for clandestine activities.

"As you know, I am not the one sending insurgents into the country. This list was passed to me by a spy comrade in that department. Rest assured, I will notify you as soon as she's deployed."

"Alright, please do. We stand a chance of quelling the revolution by removing all the radical 1976 youth. That girl is our primary target. We'll breathe easier once she's eliminated. But this list is invaluable. Let's not linger. I'd like to introduce you to some people before you leave."

Madi winced. Colonel Teufel realised his error. How could he have been so foolish, he pondered. He understood Madi's desire for discretion, whether among fellow spies or comrades. He wanted his involvement to remain completely secret.

"My apologies, I got carried away. No one should know we collaborate. Not even myself," Colonel Teufel said sardonically.

Madi smiled awkwardly.

"Allow me to escort you out, my brother. You are like a brother to me," he said, sneering condescendingly.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Colonel Teufel had a predatory alliance, a serpent-and-prey relationship, with his African colleagues. Just as a serpent infiltrates and exploits a bird's nest, Colonel Teufel cunningly took advantage of those he saw as vulnerable enemies for his own gain. He humorously

referred to all his black colleagues as 'frenemies' to his white associates. Conversely, the broken Africans believed they used Colonel Teufel for protection, even fighting those battling for their liberation.

The helicopter departed from the farm, taking Madi back to his comrades, who remained unaware of his meeting with their enemy, and continued to regard him as a genuine and radical revolutionary.

Colonel Teufel wasted no time. Immediately after seeing off Madi, he hurried to the farmhouse. Mabulala and Modingwana were sitting there, waiting patiently. He entered as if disregarding their presence. His sole objective was to extract the information he sought and promptly usher them out. He had no time for what he considered police scouts.

Mabulala and Modingwana stood and saluted Colonel Teufel.

"I thought it would be a good opportunity for a brief update, to gauge the current situation," Colonel Teufel lied. He had intended for them to witness Madi's interaction with him, to reinforce their belief that he had clandestine ties with high-ranking members of the opposing faction.

"How's your assignment with that woman, Modingwana? Any signs of her terrorist daughter's return or the woman revealing anything?" he enquired.

Modingwana welcomed the question, his apprehension about Colonel Teufel making the interaction uneasy. "If she had reappeared, you would have been informed. I'd have either taken care of her personally or brought her here in custody. Furthermore, her mother remains oblivious to her daughter's whereabouts. I would certainly know if she had any inkling. I have her under close surveillance."

"Understood. Continue your watch at her residence. On another note, do you reside there as a paramour or a tenant?" Colonel Teufel asked.

"I'm not entirely sure. She's rather stringent. I believe she sees me more as a healer than a partner. I sleep in the same room, but on the floor. It was a pretext I used during my initial visit, posing as a healer," Modingwana replied, perplexed.

Colonel Teufel chuckled, "You Africans. Always doing things differently. How can you share a room with someone who isn't your partner?"

Modingwana joined in the laughter, responding, "I must carry out my duty. Whether it adds to my hardships, I cannot say. Isn't that the truth, Colonel?"

Colonel Teufel turned his focus to Mabulala, now disregarding Modingwana's presence. "And you, Mabulala? Have you brought the list of suspected activists from your community?"

From his jacket pocket, Mabulala retrieved a handwritten list and handed it to Colonel Teufel.

"Thank you, excellent work, Mabulala," Teufel commended, placing a cigarette between his lips as he affectionately patted Mabulala on the head. "You consistently exceed expectations. This list will be immensely helpful. I need you to recruit young boys – troublesome ones, not politically driven. I'm interested in delinquents for the specific project I want you and them to undertake."

He passed over envelopes filled with money.

The right candidates were abundant in the township. "I've noticed those lads who loiter near the shops and the community hall. They would be a perfect fit for what I have in mind," Mabulala mused as he accepted the envelopes. "I already have a gang in mind. Interestingly, they're on the list I provided," he continued.

"Do they have affiliations with a political party?" Teufel asked, curious if they aligned with the profile of the gang he sought.

"They match your criteria precisely. In fact, I included them in the list," Mabulala replied eagerly.

"Perfect. That's precisely what I need. You're a skilled scout, and your efforts are exceptional. Maintain your excellent work," Teufel said patronisingly, perusing the list. Indeed, the gang's names were listed under 'gangsters'.

"I included them because they engage in criminal activities like car theft and marijuana use," Mabulala explained, attempting a smile, Modingwana nodding respectfully beside him.

"Excellent! Leave them for now. Their time will come when we need them. They might prove useful in the future. We have a colossal task ahead," Teufel declared, taking a deep drag of his cigarette and exhaling the smoke toward them.

"Now, go and fetch me more lists of activists. Leave those troublemakers for another time," he added brusquely, ushering them out the door. Mabulala and Modingwana saluted and departed from the farm.

Five

The Flowerpot Oracle

The flames of a burning tyre crackled and flickered, casting a dim glow over the boys' faces. The song of the boys rang through the lonely township streets, their voices blending with the eerie silence of the night.

At the west entrance of the community centre stood a giant flowerpot, a raised circular brick structure with a hollow surface filled with soil, probably meant for cultivating flowers. This flowerpot served as a gathering spot for local boys to hang out and relieve their boredom while singing. Their voices, accompanied by the night's whispers, filled the air with an unsettling melody.

Vumani, finishing his evening prayers on his reed mat, felt uneasy as he listened to the song. Rising from his prayer position, he approached the corroded window frame and peered outside. Against the backdrop of the flowerpot, the silhouettes of the boys swayed in the wind, like clothes on a washing line. The flames, now a mixture of red and yellow, danced to the rhythm of the song. The boys' voices, sharp and haunting, carried the weight of their anthem, known as the 'Anthem of the Doomed'.

Rainbows in our Tears

If there are tears
Flowing in ripples
From sunrise to set
Let me sweep like a wave

If there are fears
Sink me in darkness
Each moment of life
Let me walk in the light

Farewell, farewell
I bid you tearful farewell
Death has decided
I won't see the road
When tears fog my eyes
There's a rainbow in my tears

If I feel guilt
For the wrongs they commit
I will offer my cheek

Can you hear them
Drag their chains?
Help me ease their stabbing pain

Farewell, farewell
I bid you tearful farewell
Death is here watching
We won't see the road
When tears fog our eyes
But there are rainbows in our tears

When dark skies bring thunder
We will keep searching
We are children
Like withered flowers
We stand in waste shadows
Like a broken-winged bird
We perch without flying
Like a stream that is screaming
We keep running on
Every morning and evening

We run from the guns
Water falls over rivers
We run from the guns
Wiping rainbows from our tears.

Farewell, farewell
We bid you tearful farewell
Death is redemption
We feel heavy stings
When our eyes well
But there are rainbows in our tears

If there is hope
For a better tomorrow
Make us not faces
Without a name

The boys swayed as though possessed. Something drew Vumani. It was not the lyrics nor the rhythm, not the voices nor the dancing. He paced around the house, uncertain.

Inexplicably, he felt his legs carrying him out of the door and right up to the boys. He stood there, entranced by the lead singer's voice of honey. The boys carried on, unconcerned about Vumani. A marijuana *zol* was passed around as they sang. Vumani was unclear what to do with the stub when it reached him.

"Puff and pass, novice," a jeering voice yelled.

Vumani choked as he inhaled the smoke, and no one commented. The boys kept the joint in circulation. When it was Vumani's turn to smoke again, the tallest one showed him what to do to avoid choking. Vumani inhaled as instructed and still choked, coughed, and sputtered. They all laughed.

Vumani moved with the rhythm of the song until their voices faded into the night. Individually, the boys looked forlorn,

as if they would soon die. But they derived meaning from their dazed world. They lived in a doomed country. In their quest for stability and coherence, they took support from each other. Vumani saw the same bewildered eyes staring back at him when he looked in the mirror. These were the vacuous eyes of children who had nothing to look forward to, the eyes of the undiagnosed sick, the eyes of undead corpses who die before they live.

He nervously wondered what they thought of him. Most were familiar to him. Strike, the only one with a few hairs on his face, was a gifted amateur soccer player who boasted about his untreated sexually transmitted disease. Vuyo was sad to see others happy and utterly miserable seeing others distressed. There was melancholy, pimply-faced Stranger, rumoured to be a product of incest, which he disputed fervently, claiming his birth was merely fortuitous. Neo immediately took a liking to Vumani. He had the gift of expression without uttering a word.

Tholi believed the world was against him and turned himself against the world. He was recently released from prison after serving a year for 'inciting violence'. He was arrested with his sister for witchcraft. The police had found them at the river with knives and newspaper photographs of then-president Botha. Acting on the advice of the *sangoma* Motsamai, the traveller, they pierced the president's newspaper pictures in the eyes, believing this would result in his death. His sister disappeared, leaving Tholi to face the consequences alone. Tholi was untameable. He had been detained for political reasons, but was incarcerated with criminals, and thus acquired his skills in crime. The group considered him the official advisor of glorified prison life.

Beki was a restless, unpredictable character. At 25, he was the oldest member of the group. Adept at shooting, and the self-appointed leader of the group, he derived pleasure from his anger. Toro, nicknamed Pious, never missed church, no matter what. He was contemplative, with an intelligent face, yet good-humoured and bubbly. Mhlupheki lived under the omens of sorrow, stumbling from one adversity to another. This evil spell was considered contagious, and no one wanted to be close to him. The bullet scars on his body proved life had dealt this young

boy a harsh hand. Although he had cheated death several times, repeated setbacks pursued him.

They were 12. Vumani would be the 13th gang member. He later got to know the other three intimately, particularly Oupa, who claimed it was predicted at his birth that he would be a cruel and heartless person. He, too, was highly intelligent and a university drop-out, just like Lunga. Legend had it that he was expelled from the university after he stabbed his lecturer. Talking to Oupa was like talking to a mask. Sometimes he would just stare without responding or acknowledging that he was listening.

The others were Petros, the lead singer, and Mkhululi. Mkhululi was ordinary and talkative. He had just returned from the circumcision school after being kidnapped, tortured, and forcefully circumcised. He had become extremely violent. His presence in the group was sure to corrupt his already damaged friends.

Lunga had started the group after his cruel encounter with MmaDitaba. Vumani had not seen him since then. The group knew Lunga as the artist who liked to pontificate. He spent most of his time reading and exchanging books with Vumani. Lunga would have been an asset to the country, had he not been told that it was a crime to be intelligent. He was still out with Oupa when Vumani joined the group.

As is the norm in the township, they used only nicknames for each other. Vumani was initially referred to as Coffin, but at Lunga's insistence this insensitive name was dropped. He remained without a nickname. Beki was nicknamed Witch; Oupa, Devil; Strike, Pele; Vuyo, Mangas; Neo, Maestro; Stranger, Conquer; Toro, Pious; Mhlupheki, Chronic; Petros, TP; Tholi, Star; Lunga, Prof; and Mkhululi, Storm.

The common wretchedness of the lost generation drew the boys together. They were emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually connected. They met regularly at the flowerpot and slept in a nearby empty vault, which they referred to as 'The Oracle'. The vault was at the outside rear of the hall. It was the entrance to the trap room, which may have been used to access the stage from below or to store stage equipment.

"Welcome to our group, the Slaughterhouse of Lambs. We won't ask if you want to join the group. By stepping on these holy grounds, you are implicated. Do you know the saying, 'guilty by association'?" asked Beki, staring sternly at Vumani.

Vumani nodded. The fear of the midnight raids was constantly present. He needed somewhere to feel safer. The streets provided that outlet.

"Here is another lamb ready to be turned into a lion," shouted Strike in jubilation.

"Gents, this is just a boy," Neo grumbled. "He is still young. Even his bones are not yet strong. Let us not subject him to the ritual." Vumani was the youngest and, as neighbours, Neo and a few others had attended his twin brother's funeral. He did not relish Vumani going through a traumatic process that would open his wounds that were probably just starting to heal. But the group members were not convinced. They had gone through the ritual and wanted everyone to go through it, irrespective of age, state of mind, or hardships that the person may have endured.

"You are right. He is a mere boy. That is why he is referred to as a meek and timid lamb," retorted Strike. "You know, we have nothing to do with lambs here. We deal with lions. We must enable him to roar."

Stranger whispered something to Beki. He shook his head and commanded Tholi and Strike: "You know where to find stray animals. There are plenty here. Bring them now. Let us not waste time. We need to put Vumani through this rite of passage before dawn. We should transform him immediately. Tomorrow he should be a completely different person."

The two acolytes disappeared into the darkness, reappearing later with a stray cat and a street dog. The dog had been abandoned with its chain still around its neck. Vumani recognised the cat as a one-eyed, scraggy-looking, domestic-turned-feral cat that scavenged around his neighbourhood. It was rumoured that it was used for witchcraft. The cat hissed and struggled to get free from Tholi's vice grip of her front legs. Her fur had peeled, and she had wounds all over her body from

beatings by the township youth. Strike pulled the dog's chain, trying to restrain it from biting anyone that came too close. The dog was barking furiously. The boys who had been initiated to the group knew what it meant to be locked in a small space with these animals. They signalled Vumani to escape.

But Vumani was a boy who was afraid to be afraid. He became calmer as they walked towards the vault. The smell of damp walls hit him as he went in. The prospect of being locked in a dark, dingy vault with the two animals did not bother him. The vault was kept sacred and secret. The group performed their rituals in this vault and used it as a sanctuary in case of raids from the security branch. At first, they had called it "the pot" but changed the name after Neo objected that a 'pot' represented them as meat ready to be cooked.

The decaying vault that reeked of dampness reminded Vumani of the grave he was once lowered into. It triggered a replay of the traumatic events of that day in his mind. With apprehension and hostility, he could see the tension-filled eyes of the two animals menacing him. Both were preparing for war, and Vumani was to be the battleground. His hands and teeth would be his only weapons, but he could not match a dog in biting.

The animals circled him in the gloom. Then the cat bristled in fury and leaped at the dog. The dog snarled, biting as hard as it could, but it was no match for the wild and vicious cat, whose razor claws sliced into it. Vumani heard a whimper, followed by silence. He knew it was over for the dog. The cat would surely come for him now.

He strained to see where it was. A tremor of fear ran through him as he failed to locate the cat. He moved to a corner of the room; his back against the wall as he heard it hiss and sputter. He shivered; the cat was angry. He saw its gleaming eye as it moved towards him. He knew cats were rumoured to have nine lives, and wondered how many this one had left, if he was able to kill it.

He pressed his body against the wall. The cat sensed his apprehension. It hissed and arched its back. Suddenly, the cat reared on its hind legs and sprang at Vumani's face. As its eye levelled with his, he sensed his doom. The cat's breath at his ear

sounded congested, as if it had asthma. Vumani tried to scream, but his voice failed. He tried to cover his face to protect it from this monster. Too late. The creature was too fast. Snapping wildly, it bit into his neck as he fell and it pinned him to the ground. The creature was on top of Vumani with its barbed claws nailed into his face.

He wrestled with it, trying to grip its neck. He gasped for air and struggled to free himself. The creature lunged its claws at him again and again. His face covered in blood, Vumani struggled to move. He thought of the story he had learnt about in school, and surmised that he had reached his own private Waterloo. He prayed to the Creator to end his life immediately so that he would not go through more agony as the pain seared through his body. He could barely manage this gruelling torture. He was prepared to surrender himself to his death.

He did not know what happened next. When he regained consciousness, he was relieved to find bruises and bite marks all over his body and a large gash on his scalp that reassured him he was still alive. Then he saw the cat and the dog lying dead on the floor of the vault. He wondered what had happened to the cat, although his friends said he killed it. Vumani had proved himself and earned his position as a new member of the gang.

"First, we welcome you to our group," announced Beki. Then, gesturing to the vault, he continued, "Now we welcome you to the actual Oracle. You can call it the Wretched Oracle if you like. Kiss your childhood goodbye, Vumani. You are a man now. You have just gone through the rite of passage from boyhood to manhood. We welcome you to a man's world. Today you have been transformed from a lizard into a crocodile."

Lunga and Oupa arrived just then and interrupted Beki's address. Lunga came closer to Vumani and grasped him by the wrist as he inspected his injuries. "What do you want here?"

"There... there was a raid at home. I... think, I think... I am safer here than home," Vumani responded, shivering.

Stranger placed his index finger on his lips. Lunga knew it was a cue for him to leave it at that. He had a special liking for

Stranger because of the similarity of their birth stories. Lunga chewed on his lips. This was what he did when he was thinking. He cleared his throat and said with a low, sad voice, "Welcome to the group, Vumani."

Beki continued, "In this world, we do not have parents. Neither do we have gods nor deities here. We are on our own. We create our own gods, our own parents, and our own deities. We are all deities, gods, and parents here. This is not important for now. What you should know are the two creeds that govern our lives. The first is a creed of destruction." Beki enjoyed himself as he made this formal address to a new recruit.

Oupa weighed in: "The creed of destruction stipulates that what we see with our eyes we disrespect. What we touch with our hands we destroy. What we feel with our hearts we don't show, and what we hear with our ears we disbelieve. You must memorise this creed and know it by heart. All of us do."

Pacing back and forth, Oupa continued addressing Vumani. "The second and most important creed is the pact of lifelong allegiance to each other. We call it the covenant of salt here. We are friends forever." It was easy for Vumani to understand the second allegiance. He knew the reference of the covenant of salt from II Chronicles 13:15.

Oupa continued, "As you know, we are on our own. We do not have people other than ourselves. We have pledged to support each other to the bitter end, irrespective of the repercussions. Neither do we despair, nor do we believe in the future. The group members are primary. All else is secondary. That is why we drink from the same glass and smoke from the same *stompie*. It is a symbol of our inextricable connection."

Neo took over from Oupa and said to Vumani, "If one of us is in trouble, we fight to get him out of trouble. We don't care whether it is to our detriment or our advantage. Our mantra is: 'Bravely you heal, bravely you kill'. Repeat it always; it will save your life. Unfortunately, we don't entertain cowardice here."

At first light, the prominent leaders were still addressing Vumani and giving him their rules of engagement. Those who

did not speak gave Vumani a rousing applause. To be received in this way was a great honour for Vumani. The approval and warm welcome gave him a sense of belonging and protection. No one else wanted to be associated with him, as they feared to be friends with the 'brother of a terrorist'.

Late that evening, Lunga informed Bhaye and Maye that Vumani would be staying with him at his Dube home in Soweto. The Mzondekis were happy. They knew Vumani was safer when he was not at home. Moreover, they hoped Lunga would guide Vumani and help him achieve in his studies. Vumani would sneak into his parents' house to check on them when he was not occupied with his nefarious operations, as the gang slept much of the day and came out at night. Only if his parents understood what they were up to.

Vumani had spent his life feeling hunted, but now he felt like a hunter. The angst of his young life, the ordeal of an uncertain future, and his alienation were gone. Now he fitted in to the community that had initially pushed him away. He no longer needed protection from prying eyes and against police raids. However, the respite was temporary. His new world of promises of security and a better future was fictitious.

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In few months, Vumani morphed from a meek boy into a gangster. He was proud of himself after his nerve-wracking induction. He was now used to adrenalin rushes, driving stolen cars at high speed, evading bullets and police car chases. Toro had discretely warned him that at some stage, he would have to steal a car as they take turns for that. He could not believe he would do it with precision like Neo and Beki. Watching them at work, one would swear they were born to steal cars. When asked how he learned to master his art, Beki cited 'pluck' as the key to his success: "Be plucky. Never panic, and think very quickly," he would say.

Vumani dreaded this for more than a year, but then, one night, he had a feeling it would be his turn. He, Neo, Beki, and Toro had been scouting the city centre looking for a sedan. Neo located one. Lunga had avoided getting teamed with Vumani for obvious reasons.

"Vumani, we will drop you and Toro here. Toro will keep an eye out in case anyone spots you. You will open the car as we have taught you. Wait for Toro to get in before you drive away. You will find us in our secret hiding place," instructed Beki.

Vumani's training proved extremely useful. It took him only a few minutes to open the door of the car and disconnect the alarm. He quickly changed the number plates and was ready to drive to the secret rendezvous where they would strip down and burn the car after removing all the useful parts. They would use the parts for their own cars and sell the rest at the scrapyard. The sedan pulled away with a screech as soon as Toro occupied the passenger seat.

"Is it nervousness or what, Vumani? You are going to be in trouble with Witch. You know he doesn't like drama. This is not the way to get a car into motion," Toro warned, lighting up a *zol*.

"I don't get nervous," Vumani responded casually. "You know I cannot drive properly. I always struggle with the first gear."

"You mean you did not panic at all?"

Vumani nodded his head. "I know you will relate to this. I always remain calm no matter the situation, particularly after making a silent prayer."

"I didn't know you also pray."

"I do! Prayer and the Bible have sustained me for a long time. There is never a day I go to sleep or wake up without prayer. My family used to do that, and I know every member of my family prays wherever they are right now. My mother made me keep the Bible under my pillow, assuring me it would purge my terrible nightmares. My nights are much better since I started to do that."

Toro was enthused to hear his partner in crime say this. He jokingly said, "You pray to steal cars?"

Vumani was still thinking how to respond to his question when he looked at him and said, "Life is a mystery. Let us pray."

They both laughed.

Indeed, life was a mystery. Neither could tell how they had gotten through the police security check. Ever since the ANC president Oliver Tambo's 8 January 1984 announcement that the youth must make the country ungovernable, the police had sealed almost every township. While school-going youth boycotted education and intensified their struggle, Vumani and his gang also intensified their criminality in the name of repossession. They knew that the western access always had police security checks, so he had taken the eastern access, but there were police there anyway. By luck, they were allowed free pass without being stopped or searched.

Lunga, Neo, and Toro were relieved to see them arriving at the secret rendezvous. Without doubt, Vumani's debut car theft was a great success. He did not expect that, and felt good that, once again, he had proven himself. Stealing the car was a notable feat. His friends were astonished by his audacious exploits. He would have been taken for a weakling, a wimp in comparison with the others. It was his luck that the car he stole had guns and ammunition in the boot. This elevated his stature in his gang. Beki awarded him a rifle and a pistol. For the first time, Vumani owned lethal weapons. Beki taught him how to master them. Vumani soon became an expert in car theft. In a space of six months, Vumani and Neo boasted stealing the largest number of cars. Vumani and his gang continued with their criminal activities while Soweto and other townships burned. He wondered if his brother Bohloko would have approved his new, albeit illicit, trade. Unbeknown to him, someone had been secretly watching him from the time he had joined the group.

Six

Salt of the Earth

Vumani's relentless quest to uncover the truth about his beloved twin brother Vumile never faltered, even nine years after his passing. Now that he was armed and entrenched in the gangster world, he couldn't shake the thought of consulting Ngoho. He had heard that Ngoho was hesitant to discuss Vumile's death, but Vumani was determined to persuade her otherwise.

Ngoho, rumoured to hold scorching fire in her hands, was the most feared and respected *sangoma*. She was revered for revealing truths from the netherworld, and she was believed to see the unseen and to know the unknown and the unknowable. The question was how they would force her to speak. The group feared she already knew what they planned and would strike them before they reached her. But Vumani was unyielding. He was determined to find out the truth about his brother.

The tranquil, tidy, and big house stood on top of a hill in Orlando West. Here the *sangoma* lived mysteriously. Vumani and his friends stood heavily armed at the gate. They were still considering their next move when a young man about their age appeared and summoned them inside. "Ngoho has asked me to tell you to come inside and stop peeping through the gate," he said as he ushered them politely into the house.

The gang would never forget their meeting with Ngoho. They entered with guns concealed under their shirts. Ngoho sat waiting for them. She held no burning fire, nor appeared to be someone who saw the unseen. Vumani scrutinised her, searching for clues of talismanic or clairvoyant powers, but found none. Staring at her, confused, Vumani thought he had met the most obscure and ambiguous person. There was silence in the room for several minutes.

"Welcome, I am glad you are here. To what honour do I owe your visit?" Ngoho asked, focusing her attention at the

candles she was lighting. The gang was unsure whether she was addressing them or talking to the void. She gazed at them and smiled, looking as natural as soil. She took out snuff, sprinkled it on the floor, and picked up the Bible.

"There is no need for animosity between me and you. A crocodile is not hostile to a river because it is its safe harbour." Her voice was warm and friendly. She eyed Vumani and his friends thoughtfully and turned to face the wall. Once more, they were at a loss as to what she meant.

"I understand the language of the dead, the near-dead, and the living. Even now, I can tell who amongst you falls within the first, the second, and the third category. Put down those guns before you turn them against yourselves." She observed them one by one, sizing them up.

Shaking with fear, and wondering how she knew they had guns, Petros was the first to take out his weapon. Beki followed. The rest complied. Ngoho handed Vumani a Bible.

"Hold this Bible with both your hands and close your eyes. We are all going to pray for counsel and direction from the ancestors. After the prayer, you will open the Bible with your eyes still closed. Then you will open your eyes and read the section indicated by the thumb of your left hand. I will explain everything afterwards," continued Ngoho, unfazed by the mumbles of some group members.

Vumani reverently placed his fingers on the covers of the Bible. He remembered the first time he held a Bible, when his mother gave him one to ward off his nightmares. He thought of his mother and resolved to see her, even if only briefly. He thought of his brother Bohloko and wondered in which wild plateau, canyon, ravine, heath, or forest he was wandering. After the prayer, he leafed through the pages and opened the Bible. He fixed his gaze where his left thumb rested.

He cleared his throat and began to read: "*You are like the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, it cannot be salty again. It has become worthless, so it is thrown out, and people trample on it. You are like a light for the whole world. A city built on a hill cannot be*

hidden. No one lights a lamp and puts it under a bowl; instead, he puts it on the lampstand, where it gives light for everyone in the house. In the same way, your light must shine before people, so that they will see the good things you do."

Ngoho took out the snuff again. She followed their apprehensive eyes and poured the snuff onto her palms. They wished they had not come, utterly terrified by her fiery eyes, and their dread intensified when she threw a fistful of snuff at them. They could hardly endure her presence and wished to leave the house that felt like it was strangling them.

Anger and frustration took over from Tholi's fear after grains of sprinkled snuff fell on him. He wanted to say something, but Toro diffused the situation.

"Sorry, Ngoho, but we are not here for that. We are here to know the truth about Vumani's brother, Vumile. We would like to know what happened to him."

She looked at Toro with her piercing glance and proceeded as if he had not spoken.

"Salt of the earth! Light for the whole world!" She echoed the words. "This is sad, but true," she continued, becoming pensive. "It's a pity you don't know the depth of your mission. If you knew, you would be completely different from the way you are right now." She paused, watching them.

"The passage you have just opened, with your very own hands, not only reminds you of your earthly vocation, but it also warns you in case you abandon it. Yes, in this passage, we can surmise, and we now know, that you were born to be the light for the others. You are carrying the fate of the wretched on your shoulders. The future of this country is on your shoulders. Yours is to work as much as possible to improve the lives of the suffering people of this country."

The boys sat silently, unsure whether they understood what Ngoho meant. She continued: "Tragically, you are doing the opposite. Unfortunately, by all your crimes, you are doing an injustice to yourselves and your divinely assigned mission."

She stood still for a moment, then took her seat.

"As the verse clearly shows, this makes you unlit lights – or, rather, lights that emit darkness. Don't deceive yourselves. You will be crushed. Do not wait for the wrong time to do the right things or the right time to do the wrong things. Renounce your misdeeds, your actions, inactions, or reactions now. Take the right steps. You have taken wrong steps for long. This is not my opinion. It is the message from the Divine, which is explained in this verse. Work to leave your country in better shape when you die than it was when you were born. Do you hear me? Your obligation is to leave your country better rather than bitter when you die!"

She stood again, looking at them one by one.

"If I were you," she said, smiling, "I would first renounce crime and realign myself with my mission. Indeed, you need to connect with your calling. Do not waste your youth. Use your youthful energies to nurture the seeds of change. Perhaps you were made to think of yourselves as rubbish heaps. Even a rubbish heap does its best to fertilise the soil. Do your best! It is decay that gives us food. Channel your energy to the right course, then you will be lights that emit light. Otherwise, you will all end up in a garbage bin... Use what you have to get what you don't have. Be yourselves. Live as your Creator intended. Do not stray from your course."

She exhorted them: "Your light is much needed. Ignite your lamps! Your journey will be smooth. Walk in darkness. You will trample upon weeds and thorns and will wander the earth as demons if you die without doing what you were born to do. Spreading light will be an elixir for your spell. You have been placed in this country to light. Go out and shine! Yours is an easy path. With a million tongues speaking in your favour, you will surely surmount the insurmountable. Your ancestors will join forces with you. There is no need to fear. But you will amount to nothing if you stray from your course."

"But what happened to my brother?" enquired Vumani, nervously.

She shrugged. "Some things are better left unsaid. Besides, you are too young to know. For now, seek those things that you are supposed to do in this lifetime and dedicate your time to accomplishing them. I will tell you what happened to your brother when you are old enough. Go, navigate your path! The path is ready for you. Listen to the whispers of your ears; you will hear the call."

Then she continued with almost inaudible words, like an incantation: "They will glide like sailboats but will not sail. They will say the earth strikes forcefully even though it lacks physical hands. They may be abundant with talent but the wasteland will never utilise them. Mercy, mercy, mercy! We seek your mercy, our beloved deities."

She appeared to be in a trance.

"Awake! Arise from your deep slumber! This is a wakeup call. The voice of the earth commands me to tell you to rise. Yes, the voice echoing from the mountains, the ridges, and the plains informs me that you are chasing mirages. It instructs me to tell you to manifest light. Shine in the dark like stars. You know that your country is buried in darkness. Yes, the music of the earth instructs me to tell you to acquaint yourselves with the pulse of the nation."

She eyed them triumphantly. "Don't chase mirages. The heat mirages ripple every road. Don't be afraid of your sacred gift. Your destiny will never leave you. It will follow you like a shadow, wherever you may roam, always present and shaping your present and future. Learn to live with it like you live with your shadow. Once you try to close your door on it, you will be closing a door to yourself. Do not confuse the means with the end. Your destiny is your destiny. Look at yourselves with fresh eyes. Herein lies your liberation! Surely, you will walk on thorny paths when preparing for your liberation. But you will leave footprints on concrete floors if you do not falter."

She went towards Vumani and stared him in the face. "*Ke Nako*! Now is the time for you to play the part that providence has defined for you. Reflect the light you were born to transmit. Make the right choices and devote yourself to your purpose.

Go forth and shine, salt of the earth. Allow your flame to burn incessantly! Acquiesce to the call of serving this nation – *Vumani Bo!* Change the world before it changes you. May this day mark a new beginning for you! *Vumani... Vumani Bo!*"

With these words, she ushered them to the door and watched as they walked out of her house. She pitied them, knowing they would not make it in life. They seemed like disposable nappies, evoking a deep sense of nostalgia and melancholy to her. The young boys, fated to die young, did not care. They felt neither joy nor sorrow, love nor hate as they left Ngoho's house. Vumani got goosebumps all over his body as he closed the gate behind him and joined the road. The evening reminded him of what he called "the night of the bellows". Just like on that night, Vumani had an uncanny feeling that something bad would happen.

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Walking down the cold, desolate street, the boys trudged forward, their spirits crushed by the weight of their hopeless future. Night was descending, and workers rushed off buses and trains, hurrying home to prepare their evening meals. The stark silhouette of smoking chimneys and tin rooftops stood out against the pale, dusky sky. Vumani gazed upward, searching for some clue on the horizon, but he was pondering the meaning of Ngoho's cryptic words.

Arriving at the community hall, the boys were equally baffled. They made their way to the Oracle, sitting in darkness like shadows as they puzzled over Ngoho's advice. The ominous dusk seemed to hold some deep secret about their lives, but they were too consumed by their own thoughts to hear it.

Silence enveloped them for nearly two hours. Without words to express themselves, they relied on marijuana and booze to convey everything they wanted to say. Lost in their own musings, they smoked and drank. Petros's raucous laughter echoed through the Oracle and broke the tension. The others joined in, laughing without knowing why, but the relief was palpable.

"Will we ever make it?" Mhlupheki asked with a slight smirk on his face, although his voice was desolate. Vumani

watched him roll another *zol*. Vumani thought Mhlupheki looked like a sinking ship.

"Will we ever make it? According to the prophet, we are heading towards self-destruction. Will... we... ever... make it?" he murmured.

"That much we cannot predict," Oupa said resentfully. He continued: "Well, with your track record, I doubt if you will make it in life, but that does not mean we also will not make it. You have your life. We also have ours."

Petros laughed dolefully. He was obviously high. "I feel like fish in a dry river," said Petros, not making any sense.

Stranger ignored Petros and joined the discussion. "There is no need to be harsh to Mhlupheki, Oupa. You don't understand. Mhlupheki is asking a valid question. Do we follow what the *sangoma* said, or do we continue with our lives as usual?"

"You are crazy. How do we serve a country that does not affirm or recognise us?" Oupa exploded with fury. He would have punched Stranger had he not restrained himself.

"You are correct, Oupa," interrupted Tholi. "Nothing in me makes me feel as if I belong to this country. I wonder how children in other countries live. I don't think they face the same burdens as us. Here we are endangered species. In fact, it is just a formality that we are alive. What do we stand to lose by listening to that woman's advice?"

Toro replied tersely, "You are both right. In another country, or perhaps in this country in another time, we would enjoy being children, irrespective of our colour. But now our country discriminates against us because we are black, regardless of our age and our gender. As Stranger says, our mission is to fight the repressive forces of this country and ensure that this inhuman system is destroyed. This is a sacrifice we must make. That is what the *sangoma* said. We are born here and now. We can work to be what we want to be here and now. Otherwise, we will continue singing this chorus of rage and frustration, getting nowhere. Maybe the right question is what we stand to gain by following the *sangoma*'s guidance and what we stand to lose if we don't."

Petros gazed about and rolled his eyes, clearly stoned. Was he contributing to the conversation or having a dialogue with himself? "Be a thinker, not a thought. Are you not aware that adversity favours you? Don't let your light blind you... That's what Ngoho said. What did she mean when she said this? Tell me what did she mean when she said, do not become ecological wastes? You are wretched and you carry a wretched curse within you."

They all erupted into laughter. Vumani did not join in their laughter. He was too engrossed with his schoolwork to follow their conversation. Lunga had allowed Vumani to join the group on condition that he dedicated at least two hours to his schoolwork each day.

Lunga had also been quiet throughout the conversation because he was reading a book, then abruptly chipped into the discussion, disrupting their laughter. "The wise say the butcher's knife is only as good as the butcher who sharpens it. In essence, Ngoho said our actions or inactions map our future. This means that what we will become will be the sum of what we do or do not do. Nothing more, nothing less! And in the end, according to her, we will be judged by our actions or inactions. I don't believe her. In fact, it's just the opposite! You know what they say – *que sera, sera*. I am not sure if I am ready to serve any master. I am fine where I am."

"Lunga, but why do you find it difficult to be simple?" Lunga's lofty style of speaking irritated Oupa.

"What a frivolous statement," Lunga responded, unnecessarily hostile to Oupa.

"There is no use responding foolishly, Lunga. Why do you always think you are smart? If I were you, I would keep quiet rather than regurgitate the information I read from university books. Just because you are a university dropout does not make you smarter. We may have failed matric several times because of the system, but that does not make us foolish. Some of us are smarter than you think." Oupa was being modest. He had passed all his matric subjects with distinction, although he self-studied because of school boycotts in Soweto, the Vaal Triangle, and the East Rand at the time. As a result, he was awarded a bursary to

study medicine, which was rescinded when he was expelled from the university for allegedly stabbing his professor.

"I will excuse your naivety, Oupa. There's no need to blow your own trumpet. We know you can outsmart us all here with your intelligence," Lunga said sarcastically.

Lunga's response provoked Oupa's anger. He assumed a fighting posture but then restrained himself again.

"But what does '*que sera, sera*' mean, Lunga?" Vuyo asked.

"That's exactly what I simply wanted to know. Now Lunga tells me stories," Oupa interrupted, ready to lash out at Lunga.

"Please Oupa, let Lunga explain. We want to know," Vuyo pleaded with Oupa.

"'*Que sera, sera*' means 'Whatever will be will be'. In simple terms, this means everything is predetermined. Therefore, we should not worry because everything is out of our control anyway."

Vuyo shook his head in agreement and said, "In line with what you have explained, Ngoho is therefore correct. It means she read our stars and knows exactly our scripts..."

"We are ephemeral and transient. We were born prematurely. We will die prematurely. Inevitably and inexorably, death beckons. The end is upon us," said Mhlupheki, who seemed to be blathering in his sleep, interrupting the conversation.

They did not laugh but pondered his words. Indeed, death – with her mantle on their shoulders – seemed to be waving at them. They stayed in darkness and in silence, perhaps feeling the energy of the Angel of Death wandering around the vault. Petros thought he would interrupt the silence. He started a song, but no one joined. They were all worn out, ill at ease, and stoned.

There was a long silence. Oupa took out his pistol and cleaned it. Someone was snoring, but Oupa paid no attention to him. He was seething with anger and, strangely, Mhlupheki's comments aggravated him. Outside the Oracle, Vumani heard the barks and howls of dogs. He wondered why dogs usually bark

around that time of the night. He observed Lunga, who slept beside him and Mhlupheki, and grabbed a book titled *The Mission to Live* by Nomabhunu Nhlapo Lekholokoe that Lunga had been reading. He read a bookmarked page:

> *"We must consider a fraction of a second spent without fulfilling our mission as wasted. But when do we know full well that this life owes us nothing but death? From the womb to the tomb, we shall vow to make sacred choices, though those choices take us to the tomb. From the womb to the tomb, we will rejoice that we walked this path, even as prisoners. Where should we start if our lives owe us only death? What choices do we have? We walked this earth in our wombs as tombs. What choices do we have when this earth feeds upon us? What choices do we have when we walk in darkness? Do we open our eyes, or close them and continue walking in darkness? From the womb to the grave, where are those we shall shout to for help? Where are those who will heal us? Forward we will march to our graves. Headlong we will tramp on to our destiny... God take charge!"*

Vumani made no sense of what he read. He reread the section repeatedly. It still did not make sense. Maybe he was tired, he thought as he closed the book. He would ask Lunga to explain the section to him the following day. He looked around and noticed that he was the only one still awake. It was a full moon. Outside the vault, the moonlight cast a white glow on the sky. He looked at his watch. It was long past 2. Feeling drowsy, he put his diary and his pen underneath the heavy jacket which served as his pillow. He blew out the lantern and lay on the floor and slept. A few minutes later, a gunshot rang out in the room. It startled Vumani and his friends awake. They scuttled in all directions in darkness, each trying to rush for the door. Mhlupheki lay bleeding next to Oupa, who seemed undaunted. "Hey, help! Mhlupheki has been shot," Vuyo blurted out hysterically as pandemonium broke loose inside the Oracle.

"Somebody call Nurse Tshepiso!" Beki yelled, desperately trying to resuscitate Mhlupheki. "Please can someone call Nurse Tshepiso – Mhlupheki is dying!" He knelt, uttering a prayer.

Beside them, Toro intoned a Catholic prayer. Oupa stood there dispassionately, as if nothing had happened.

Vumani and Lunga hurried to the nearby house where nurse Tshepiso resided. They knocked on her window cautiously, ensuring that their presence was not detected. Like other residents accustomed to being awakened by the police at dawn, Nurse Tshepiso stirred from her sleep and accompanied the boys to their refuge.

The pungent smell of gunfire lingered in the air as Nurse Tshepiso stepped into the vault, and she immediately laid her eyes on Mhlupheki's lifeless body, his head bleeding profusely onto the floor. While she contemplated why the boys opted to stay in such a squalid space or who had pulled the trigger, her motherly instincts and nursing experience took precedence. She knelt beside Mhlupheki, examining his half-open eyes, the pupils barely visible, and his mouth agape, and prepared for the worst.

Without delay, she ripped up Mhlupheki's sleeve and pressed her hand tightly against his left wrist, searching for a pulse. Oupa stood motionless beside Mhlupheki, unsure of what to do, while the other boys huddled in a dark corner, watching the nurse with bated breath, hoping for a miracle.

"Poor Mhlupheki," she murmured to herself, realising there was no sign of life in him. She cradled his face, then his feet, confirming her suspicions as she felt the coldness of his feet. She closed his eyes and mouth and turned her gaze to the boys, hoping they could read her expression, but they were too much in denial to accept that he was dead. She glanced at her watch. It was almost 3 am.

She seemed to be deep in thought when her distressed voice broke out, "My children, there is nothing I can do. I... I... I am sorry to inform you that your friend is no more."

The boys stared at her blankly, in disbelief.

"Unfortunately, you need to decide – and decide quickly, before the sun rises – how you are going to deal with his body." Her eyes darted around in thought and she added, "In case you do not know, the authorities demand you notify them should

someone die from a gunshot. The police are supposed to declare the person dead and take him to the government mortuary. The problem is that you will all be arrested if you go to the police. They will want to know who shot the boy. By the way, who did shoot him?"

They had not had time to consider this question, or even think that he might die. They had been preoccupied with saving their friend's life.

"Don't trouble to answer. We don't have to worry about this now. Time is against us. Another option is to take him to the hospital and pretend that you think he is still alive, and they will declare him dead on arrival. Unfortunately, this is also not a good option. Hospitals are forced to take the name of a person who brings any person with a gun wound. It is worse if that person dies from those wounds. The police need this information so that they can follow up and arrest the person who fired the gun."

She was edgy and unsettled. She thought for a while and said, "Ethically, as a nurse, I am not supposed to make this suggestion. I do this because I take you all as my children and I must protect you. The only other option you have is to dump Mhlupheki's corpse in a place where he can be discovered easily. The person who discovers him will hopefully report to the police, who will take him to the government mortuary. You will pretend to be looking for him at the mortuary. I am more than certain that you will find him there. In this way, you will be free from prosecution. I know for a fact that his body will be disposed of at the government mortuary behind Baragwanath. You won't encounter difficulties locating it there. The only issue is for you to find his body quickly. They give a pauper's burial if bodies are not collected within a few weeks," she said in a sympathetic tone, leaving them with Mhlupheki's body. It was the second time Vumani experienced a person dying next to him, although it was the first with a friend. He wondered what he had done to deserve encounters with death in his short lifespan.

They took Nurse Tshepiso's advice and wrapped Mhlupheki's corpse in a blanket. In the darkness, the boys dragged Mhlupheki's body to an overgrown field near the railway

line between the river and the train station, not far from the police station, and left it there.

In the morning, Stranger volunteered to go alone and check if the body was still there. He arrived just when the police loaded the corpse into the van. Although he was afraid to identify himself to the police, he was relieved to know that Mhlupheki's body would be sent to the government mortuary. When he reported to his friends, they thought it would be easier to identify his body at the morgue. They planned how they were going to inform his family about his demise.

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The following morning, Vumani, Lunga, and Toro were assigned the duty of searching the government hospitals. The rest were to go to funeral undertakers and search there. Fortunately, it did not take Vumani and his two friends long to find a dilapidated red building perched outside Baragwanath Hospital, which was home to hundreds of unclaimed bodies. Unfortunately for them, they did not know what lay ahead.

As he stood at the door, Vumani heard the muted clamour of the anguished crowd that had come to identify the bodies of their loved ones. He wobbled inside. The room was suffocating, blood-clotted, and abuzz with flies. He tried to find his way around a maze overflowing with corpses juxtaposed with the living crowd. The swelteringly hot air was bloated and thick with death. The stench of rotting flesh was unbearable and left a bitter taste in Vumani's mouth. He crammed himself tightly in a corner and scanned the room. His eyes blurred from the flickering lights, and he cringed at being confronted with lifelessness.

To be face to face with death unsettled Vumani. At least he felt he could cope with Toro and Lunga in his company. But to his amazement and disappointment, he discovered they had not come inside this eerie room full of corpses. A woman who wore a black shawl confronted him: "My son, what are you doing here? Who are you looking for? What is inside here is too gory to be handled by a boy your age. Even strong men struggle to cope here. Rather go back home and call older people to come and assist you."

Vumani evaded the woman, picking his way along the room, avoiding treading on some corpses that had been dumped on the floor. He staggered towards the crowd and started going through the lines of uncovered bodies lying on the ground. He walked slowly from the front door to the rear of the room, scrutinising all the bodies. With corpses strewn all over, he was determined to find the body of his beloved friend. He braced himself and took a closer look. Some corpses were twisted and out of shape. Nothing suggested that they were human beings, as most looked like silicone dolls. Others were bruised and layered in blood. He peeked at the corpses of young and old alike. Some were dismembered. Others were battered and mangled. He checked the corpses piled on the floors and those dumped on zinc stretchers. He reached for those in the fridges and the hallways, with no luck. Feeling grim, nauseous, and suffocated, he was about to leave the morgue when a police van delivered more corpses. The smell of rotting bodies from the newly arrived corpses was pungent. Trembling and desperate, he scoured through the bodies that had just been dumped and fixed his gaze on one with its skull split open.

He stood numb, in disbelief, as if he was expecting a different corpse. He blinked and stared at the body that looked like Mhlupheki's. He adjusted his eyes and nearly fell at the sight of the horrific corpse of his friend. It was unbelievable how it had decomposed in less than 12 hours. He examined the puffed face and the eyes that stared accusingly at him. Who had opened them? He was certain that Nurse Tshepiso had closed them before announcing that Mhlupheki was no more. Devastated, he wanted to give his friend one last hug. He touched the bloated, discoloured body, but quickly removed his hand. It was the first time he had touched a corpse, and the cold, dry, and stiff leathery skin texture made things difficult for him. He stood there in a stupor, watching the lifeless body of his friend. After a while he dashed outside, happy to be out of the fetid air of the room. His task was to announce to his friends that he had found Mhlupheki. He thought the worst was over. He would soon learn that someone had other plans for him that would change the course of his life forever.

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She emerged out of nowhere. The young lady who had been watching Vumani all along thought it was a favourable time to fulfil her mission. She observed him as he stepped out of the morgue looking drained, and waved at him, signalling him to follow her. Vumani followed hesitantly. She whispered as soon as Vumani was near enough, "You are in deep trouble, my friend. Frankly, you are a free prisoner, although it is just temporary."

Vumani lurched, wondering what the stranger was saying to him. Her face was familiar, although Vumani struggled to remember where he knew her from. She exuded wit and boldness. The scarf on her head and the long dress she wore made her appear motherly, although he could easily tell that she was young. He instantly felt he could trust her.

"The police are on your tail. They know what you've been up to: stealing cars, killing your friend and dumping his body, and many other criminal activities you've been involved in. They are now looking for you. One of your friends was arrested. He told them everything about you and the others. You could be arrested and thrown into prison for many years. I don't want to talk long as I don't want to be seen with you."

Vumani remembered the stories he had heard about prison that Tholi narrated after serving his sentence. The prospect of spending his entire life in prison was utterly disturbing. He knew he would be hanged if convicted for Mhlupheki's murder, although he was not the murderer. Worse still, the unlicensed guns he owned and other crimes he had committed would put him in prison 'until the collapse of the prison walls', as a life sentence was described at the time.

"Pretend that you are not with me, but keep following me. We will catch a taxi. Even inside the taxi, don't sit next to me, let alone speak with me," instructed the young lady watching Vumani thinking deeply about his plight.

She furtively slipped him a R10 note and said, "Take this, it's your taxi fare. Don't go back to your friends and don't even try to go home. A trap has already been set for you there. We need to go now. I will tell you where we are going later. We cannot

waste time any longer, lest they find us here," she ordered again, walking briskly away from the crowd.

Vumani nodded respectfully, avoiding the lady's eyes. He could tell she was in a hurry. He followed obediently. He would rather face the perils of the unknown than jail. She guided him toward the taxi and Vumani squeezed himself between two women. The taxi travelled for about 15 kilometres and dropped them at a house in Zola, Soweto. Not long after they arrived, a car with three occupants hooted outside.

"Let's go. We are leaving now. Don't ask me any questions. Please don't even try to ask the passengers either. They too are like you. They don't know anything. Everything will be explained to you in due course," the young lady said sternly, summoning Vumani to the car. He pondered how she appeared humble and unassuming, yet sounded so imperious. Following her instructions, he set off without passing by his place first to take a change of clothes, unsure if he would return to retrieve whatever he was leaving behind. Walking away from his troubles brought him a sense of happiness, as he embraced the unknown path that lay before him. Though uncertain if the lady leading him was guiding him away from one bad situation into another one, he found solace in the belief that nothing could be worse than what he had endured thus far. With determination, he ventured into the wilderness, ready for a fresh start.

The lady had deliberately not introduced Vumani to the other passengers or the driver of the car. She had not even introduced herself to him. The driver was a middle-aged, chain-smoking man. There was a tense, nervous young man about Vumani's age and a calm young lady. The third person was a short, stout man who sweated profusely in the blazing heat. There was a tense silence in the car. The lady broke the silence as the car left Soweto, going east. "In case we come across a roadblock, you must say that we are going to a church funeral in the next town. For example, if we find a roadblock here, you must say we are going to Boksburg, and you say we are going to Benoni if we find a roadblock in Boksburg, etc. Remember this. It is very easy. Do not forget."

She gave each of her fellow passengers a Bible and said sternly, "The Bibles I have given you have names and surnames on them. These are the names you will use at a roadblock. Remember the story: you are members of the Methodist Church's Wesley Guild. You are going to a funeral of your fellow member in the next town. Period. Please check the signposts so that you know exactly the name of the next town. You will be on your own should you say something to the contrary."

The lady's tone and what she said dumbfounded Vumani. He initially thought they were going somewhere nearby, but the journey became long and arduous. Being the first time he had travelled out of Johannesburg, he had no clue where they were headed. They drove all day through small towns as the trip seemed endless. The lady kept giving further instructions in case they came across a roadblock. They stopped only once to refill the car with petrol and buy food. The driver also appeared to be in a hurry.

As the car passed through unfamiliar places, Vumani thought over his decision to leave. It aroused strong feelings of sadness and regret. He wondered where he was going and thought of how many kilometres he had to travel before he reached his destination – if ever there was a destination. He thought of Maye and wondered if he would ever see her again as he saw those faraway mountains coming closer.

As always, when faced with the unknown, he made a silent prayer, entreating God and the deities that he not come across unknown perils on the road. Thereafter, he occupied himself with reading Ecclesiastes, his favourite book in the Bible. Fatigued by the long distance he travelled and not knowing his destination, Vumani fell asleep. Soon after, he heard the lady say something to the driver. The car stopped beside a pasture with cows grazing nonchalantly as the lady checked her watch. It was 6:33 pm. She quickly jumped out of the car, darted around, then disappeared into a thicket. Soon she came back and ordered all the passengers, including Vumani, to leave the car. Vumani looked at the car wistfully as it drove back in the direction they had come from, now wishing to go back home with the driver.

The four of them walked briskly through the fields, the cows chewing their cuds as they passed. The lady was leading them, with Vumani at her heels. She checked her watch again: it was 6:53 pm. They had less that ten minutes to be at the crossing point. She increased her pace. The stout man trotted behind them, panting with exhaustion. Clearly, he was struggling to keep up.

The sun was setting slowly behind the treetops. It would soon be dark. It seemed the lady's plan to be at a crossing point at 7 pm worked. Seven was the time the security changed shifts, leaving the point temporarily unguarded. Vumani's group had to be fast, following their guide through a forested area until she reached the crossing point at a border fence. They watched, startled, as the lady climbed with lightning speed over the 1.8-metre-high fence. They nervously followed suit and made it safely to the other side of the fence. They were now in Swaziland, although Vumani did not know this. He had no knowledge of a world outside his own country. Perhaps the other two also did not know that they were in another country.

It was dark now. There were no lights. They passed *dongas* – deep, dry gouges in the earth caused by water erosion – and walked briskly down a long, gravel road. The stout man struggled to keep up with the group. He ran out of breath and unfastened his shoes.

"Can... can we... rest for a while? I can't... go any... further," he sputtered, wiping perspiration from his forehead.

"Come, *baba*, or we will leave you here. There is no time to rest," said the lady as she continued walking. He hobbled behind, walking as fast as he could, and lost one shoe trying to catch up with them. He put the other shoe under his armpit.

From a distance, they saw chimney smoke and houses, and passed through a homestead. They walked a long stretch and passed another homestead. A woman who sat with others around a cooking fire stopped the lady and chatted with her. She left the people she sat with and accompanied Vumani and the others to a bus stop next to a school. Fortunately, they were in time for the last bus to a small town about 50 kilometres on from where they

were. The road snaked its way to a village called Luve perched in a valley.

It was late and dark when they arrived in Luve. Disembarking from the bus, they made their way towards a car with flickering lights. Vumani strained to see in the pitch-black surroundings, struggling to even make out his own hand in front of him. As he thought he was steadily approaching the car alongside the three others, it suddenly accelerated, leaving a cloud of dust in its wake. He couldn't believe it. "Sister, sister!" Vumani called out into the darkness, hoping for a response from the lady or his companions. Silence greeted him, marking the abrupt end of his journey. He had no idea of his whereabouts. Without the lady he had relied upon entirely, he was at a loss. He didn't even know her name. Fear gripped him as he pondered his next move. He heard faint music coming from a nearby establishment. Intrigued, he followed the sound and faint light, and came upon a tavern. He thought to seek solace inside, drowning his troubles until the following day when he would attempt to find his way home. But he had not a coin in his pocket.

Far from home, in a mountainous country he had never known existed, Vumani sat in the shadows outside the tavern, waiting for a miracle. It was impossible to go home, and equally impossible to continue. He watched every patron who entered or left the tavern, hoping to see the lady or the others he had travelled with. Shivering with cold, he saw a man coming towards him holding a plastic bag. "Take *malunde*, hobo," the man said as he threw the packet of food at Vumani.

"Thank you, please..."

The man ignored Vumani and disappeared without a word.

After two hours elapsed, Vumani burst into tears, overwhelmed with fear and self-pity. Eventually, he slept, wondering how to survive in this foreign place, where they spoke siSwati. It was quite similar to isiZulu, though still sounded foreign to Vumani. He woke up around 4 am to the birds announcing dawn, thinking to find his way home. He thought he saw someone peeping at him from the tavern door, which was

ajar. A wobbly figure came towards him. It was the same man who had given him food the previous evening.

"Vumani, wake up. Let's go," the man whispered gently.

I must be dreaming, thought Vumani. *How is it possible that someone knows me in this strange land, where I barely even understand the language?*

"Vumani, I am tired. I need to go to sleep. Let's go, my friend. You are not supposed to sleep here like a hobo when I am around," the man said.

Vumani shook himself to assure himself that he was not in a middle of a long dream. He thought of how he had trusted the lady, only to be dumped in the middle of nowhere. He wondered if he could trust this man, who now introduced himself as Nelson. He did not trust Nelson, even though he was uncannily friendly. Still, he remembered that his options were limited. *Better to follow a drunk who seems to know me than to remain stranded in the wilderness*, he thought. Vumani stood up and followed Nelson, not knowing what lay in store for him.

In a remote village about 12 kilometres away, someone was waiting anxiously for Vumani. Regretting his decision to leave home with a stranger who discarded him in a foreign country, he prayed for a miracle or a good Samaritan who would help him back home. Nelson did not look or act like a good Samaritan, although he sounded like one. After walking for about four hours, they reached a modest house surrounded by three square, thatched huts. They entered the house.

By then, Nelson had sobered up. "Sit here, young man. I will be with you shortly," he said, and offered Vumani a seat as he went into one of the other rooms. Vumani noticed that the man had changed from speaking siSwati to speaking fluent isiZulu.

Vumani sat in the house, feeling the warmth of the fire, anxious as to what would happen next. He felt at home in this tidy hut that smelled of freshly made breakfast. The warmth and simplicity of the hut gave him peace, though he was utterly exhausted and hungry. For a while, he forgot the misfortunes that had led him to this foreign land.

Shortly after Nelson had left him there, he heard the voice of a man coming toward him, singing. Vumani observed someone who resembled himself, coming towards him. He blinked and stared at this tall, athletic, and goateed man, who walked with monastic grace, fighting back tears as he approached. Vumani blinked again. His eyes shone with joy as he smiled wanly and wistfully. He was dumbfounded. He could not believe he was seeing Bohloko, who had been lost to him for nine years. He stood in awkward silence and looked at him again, now petrified.

It can't be my brother Bohloko! Is Bohloko still alive? Am I seeing his ghost? Am I dead, meeting my brother in the land of the dead? Vumani walked towards Bohloko. The brothers stood frozen, gazing at each other. Then they held each other for a long time, tears streaming from their eyes. The emotions of seeing each other after so many years were overwhelming. Vumani collapsed from fatigue and disbelief.

They caught up and reminisced for two weeks, with Bohloko discreetly assessing Vumani, satisfying himself that he would be appropriate for a secret assignment. As his older brother, he never wished to involve his younger brothers in the struggle. But he had a delicate mission to accomplish, and he wanted someone he could trust, someone he knew would never betray him. Vumani was the only person he thought could assist him.

At the time, Susan was involved in other covert operations in the country. In addition to her own mission, she had been assigned to watch Vumani constantly to determine if he was suitable for Bohloko's mission. Her assessment lasted three to four months, then she endorsed Vumani as the best candidate for what Bohloko wanted, without knowing the exact nature of the operation. Bohloko was happy that his younger brother was approved for the assignment. Now he had to return to his normal routine. All he wanted before he parted from his little brother was to transform his simple, crime-ridden, and apolitical world. One hot day after lunch, Bohloko teased Vumani: "Why are you unkind to your lungs?"

Vumani rubbed his head and blinked embarrassingly. He smoked secretly, and thought his brother was unaware of it. But his brother knew a lot about him.

"So, my brother, it is good to see how you have grown. You now even kill cats. You are very cruel. Why do you kill poor animals? Animals will not hurt you. You also drink and smoke weed. You are an anarchist. Why do you burgle homes in the suburbs and steal cars? Perhaps you feel that these things give you life. Believe me, what gives life will never kill you," he said mockingly, laughing excitedly.

Vumani was surprised. How did Bohloko know about his life, if he had been away all this time? What else did he know about him? Vumani felt like burying his head in shame.

"How do you know all these things about me?"

"I know all about you at home and I know your life outside of home because I've been interested in you. Little brother, you would be surprised. I know about the guns you own and the people you have threatened. What a pity, when we waste time running in the wrong direction. Perhaps we should invest our time doing things that are valuable to us," he smiled blithely.

"Do you know Susan?" Bohloko abruptly and deliberately changed the subject.

Vumani frowned blankly. He did not know that Susan was the lady who had whisked him out of the country and dumped him in Swaziland. He did not even know that she had interesting things to say about him to his brother.

Bohloko continued from where he had left off: "You are a diamond, my brother. And, like a diamond, you sparkle even in dust. You just needed to get out of the rut you put yourself into."

"That was my wish as well," Vumani replied remorsefully. "I also wanted to live a clean life. I am not cut out for the things I do, but there is nothing to do back home. That is the only life we know. Perhaps you will help me change." He looked at Bohloko and smiled ruefully.

"I don't blame you. South Africa is an abnormal country. There is no way you can be normal there. You are only normal when you are abnormal. It is a challenge to make something of yourself when the system turns you into nothing." He paused and regarded Vumani with doleful eyes and continued, "Well, maybe that is why you are here. Maybe you are here for me to help you – or the other way around!"

Vumani looked at him and smiled internally. He knew he was off course and was optimistic his brother had a compass to guide his life back on course. But his brother's sudden change of mood puzzled him.

"One thing I prayed about when I joined the revolution was for none of you to be involved in the struggle. Unfortunately, reality dictated otherwise. I don't want to destroy your future. But I want you to help me. I will not tell you the details right now, but it is a serious business. At best, you may be imprisoned. At worst, you may be killed. As you know, there are consequences for everything, good or bad. I expect the same concerning what I want you to assist me with. I cannot guarantee your survival once you are involved, nor can I guarantee my own. Anyway, you live a dangerous life."

The earnestness and conviction of his brother's words moved Vumani. He pondered over them. Their power and urgency made him realise that he had to do something to make his brother come back home. If whatever he wanted would bring him back, so be it. He was prepared to do anything to make that a reality.

"You are correct, brother. In our country, we live in the face of death. We need a thorn to take out a thorn, as the wise say. Maybe the only way for us to survive will be to face death. Moreover, I have no choice. I am prepared to do anything that will accelerate your return home," he said.

Bohloko observed him and felt pity for himself, if not for Vumani. Vumani's maturity filled him with wonder. He kept quiet and watched Vumani for a while, thinking that he could have been a better young man if he had grown up in another country, in different circumstances.

Vumani continued: "I don't have a future without you. I must do everything to see you back home. And I will do all that is in my power to see that you are back and living there, in a free country, if that is what you want me to do. I am prepared to do anything for you, brother," Vumani responded with anguish in his voice.

Bohloko analysed Vumani's response. It caused a lump in his throat. He observed his brother's childlike eyes, innocently staring at him. He remembered how he had also left his country, at just 15 years old. Even though Vumani's words made him optimistic and believe in the success of his mission, he could not deal with the great sympathy he felt for Vumani. He prayed that the path he was leading his little brother along would not scar him for life.

"Very true, my beloved younger brother. We are shaped by the time we live in. And we can also influence and shape that time. Have faith that life will be better one day. If not for us, definitely for the others. We should take active steps to make that practical. The wheel of fortune keeps turning."

Bohloko pause before resuming. "Tomorrow," he continued, "you will go with Nelson. He will give you strict instructions that you must follow. Maybe we will meet somewhere with you. Maybe not. You must not worry; you will survive wherever you go as long as there are people there."

With these words, Bohloko sealed Vumani's fate. Vumani nodded in agreement, regardless of how vague his brother was to him. He acquiesced, unaware of what his next hair-raising episode would involve. The prospect of opening a new chapter in his life unnerved Vumani. Would he be up to the task his brother wanted? He was prepared to do whatever he could for his sake. He would not look back. He had gone too far to turn back now. This new beginning was ominous, but he did not mind. The question was: Would he survive?

Part Two

The People's Army

1985 – 1995

Seven

Training for Guerrilla Warfare

At first light the ensuing day, Vumani and Nelson boarded an early bus to Manzini. They walked to a house a few kilometres away and found two men loading sacks of mealies into a truck. Vumani and Nelson were instructed to get into the back of the truck after the loading as the two men occupied the driver's and the passenger seats. They were driven the entire day through the mountainous terrain. The heat beat down on the truck, causing rivulets of sweat to run silently and constantly down their necks. Vumani watched as the landscape gradually changed from lush greenery to the vast open expanses of wildland beyond, where rolling hills and natural forests stretched as far as the eye could see. The truck driver pulled over a few kilometre from the border and instructed Nelson and Vumani to hide, covering their bodies with some mielie sacks. It travelled a short distance and stopped. Vumani was clearly oblivious that they were at the border. The truck driver and the passenger dismounted the truck and went through immigration, leaving Vumani and Nelson hidden at the back of the truck. They came back, chatted with the border police, and gave them some cash in secret. He was allowed to proceed without having his truck thoroughly searched. Finally, they reached their destination. He would later learn that they had clandestinely crossed the border into Mozambique. Vumani spent five days there in a safe house in Maputo, Liberdade. From the outside, the house looked ordinary. Inside, it was an armoury. A large quantity of ammunition, weapons, and other military equipment was stored there. Vumani was left alone there during the day and immersed himself in *Das Kapital.* On the fifth day, Nelson gave Vumani some travel documents. Four strangers, almost Vumani's age, joined them as they flew (for the first time in Vumani's case) to yet another country, which he later learnt was Angola.

Now in Angola – in a transit camp in Vienna, a few kilometres from Luanda – Vumani sat, feeling regret and

confusion. He was uncomfortable having to live in tents. The uncertainty also frustrated him. Although he had committed himself to helping his beloved brother, Bohloko, he did not know what he had accepted. For good reason, Bohloko had not informed him where he would go with Nelson.

On arrival, when he saw army trucks, khaki tents, and soldiers with rifles, he realised that he was at a military camp. He did not know what his role would be in the camp. He hoped that someone would explain it to him. No one did. It appeared as if he was the only one confused. Here in this transit camp, he found himself with approximately 40 young, radical women and men who seemed much more at home in the camp than he was – even the quietest one, Fana J. It is here that Vumani was given a new name, Philemon Khumbula Mshumbi. And it is here that he was assigned to a section and a platoon.

Unfortunately, there was no one he could ask about what he was doing there. The first rule he learned as soon as he stepped onto the premises was never to ask questions. He knew the camp's dictum: 'Ask no questions and hear no lies'. For a few days, Vumani stayed in the camp ignorant, because information was given on a need-to-know basis. Still, he got acquainted to the military routine, and always wrote his biographical profile, a task the camp administration required all of them to complete. He did not mind the assignment because he loved writing.

Vumani hated the military routine, which they were assimilated into at the camp. He learned basic things, such as how to fasten his boots and polish them, how to make his bed and clean in accordance with the army standards, and the march and drill. It was a culture shock. He missed his free-spirited civilian lifestyle. The transit camp was a prison for him. He had lots of prohibitions, which he never had back at home. Most of all, he hated being forbidden to ask questions. He knew when he had arrived at the camp, but did not know when he would leave. He dreaded to think what Maye would think, with him away from home for so long. But Vumani had no option. He reluctantly stayed in the transit camp and participated in the camp activities, even though nothing made sense to him. The only activity he enjoyed

was the political education they were bombarded with and writing his biographical profile. He would learn much later during his training the rationale behind writing biographical profiles.

On the third day, Vumani entertained a strange idea that he would be told that someone would take him back home. The day passed. No one said anything to him. "I will not spend yet another night here," he said to himself at dusk. He was frustrated; yet another day had gone by without him knowing what would happen next. He was sick and tired of the days he spent in suspense. Since his arrival at the camp, no one told him how long he would stay there or what he was expected to do the next day. The programme was announced right on the spot. There was no other major activity except for writing biographical profiles and attending political education classes. The uncertainty was just too unsettling. Feeling idle, irritated, and bored, Vumani went to the administration block. There he met Comrade Wandile, a friendly recording officer, who seemed to like him.

"Comrade Wandile, do you by any chance know how long I am going to be here?"

Wandile was livid. He could have slapped Vumani hard on his face, had it not been for the fact that he liked him.

"Don't be silly, Phil. You know the protocol. We told you never to ask questions, Comrade. You will find out soon." Wandile's harsh response and his dreary gaze unnerved Vumani. Just then, the feeling of uncertainty and boredom gave way to fear.

He went back to his tent deflated, and resolved there and then that for him to survive here he needed to comply even to the detriment of his spirit. He tried to remain strong and positive, hoping that he would ultimately go back home. So, Vumani stayed at the camp waiting, even though he did not know what he was waiting for. He trusted that his brother would not lead him into the wilds. For his sanity, Vumani dedicated most of his time to reading books in the camp library. There he became acquainted with Comrade Bathong, who was in his platoon.

On the morning of the fifth day in the transit camp, a 20-year-old boy who strapped an AK-47 on his shoulders

commanded Vumani's platoon after assembly: "Climb up, quickly! Climb up!" he shouted for no apparent reason.

Vumani was not sure whether he was in midst of a vivid dream or daydreaming when his platoon was instructed to climb aboard a big, odd-looking truck, referred to as a Kraz. The trucks looked like the trucks he saw in films back at home. It reminded him of his favourite movie, *The Hornet's Nest,* which was banned after the 1976 upheavals. It was a film produced in 1970 and set during World War II, about an army captain leading a small unit of young soldiers on a mission to rescue Italian villagers from German occupation. Vumani later learned that the Kraz was a war-ready combat truck with more ground clearance. It was the same truck on which the 42 grad-Pe tubes were assembled to build a Katyusha rocket launcher, also known as the Stalin Organ.

"Climb up, soldier!" The tone was harsh.

He was still quite confused when he mounted the truck, which was far too high for him to climb onto. The other two platoons climbed two similar trucks. Was he watching a movie in which he was a participant? To his horror, they were told to speak softly because they would travel on a perilous road, which was frequented by rebels of UNITA, the Angolan liberation movement. To further complicate his disorientation, the three trucks that transported them were draped with a canvas canopy at the back to prevent them from seeing their way to their destination. *Where are we going?* he thought. He dared not ask. He knew the consequences of asking.

Meanwhile, in South Africa, Heke stood a block away from Vumani's parents' home, watching for any sign of human activity. He carried a Bible in a grocery shop plastic bag. Ever since he had discovered that he was on a security branch list, he had tried to remain as inconspicuous as possible. He was desperate to see Maye. Apart from missing her, he mostly wanted to assure her that Vumani was fine. He would make a story that Vumani was with his relatives in the Eastern Cape, preparing for his matric exams without disturbances since there was no schooling in Soweto at the time. It was while he was contemplating his move that he saw a figure going towards Vumani's home. *Let me quickly*

approach that person, Heke thought. There was a reasonable chance that it would be someone he knew. That would make his life easier. Heke moved stealthily in the dark street towards Vumani's home. Indeed, to his fortune, he recognised Lunga when he got to the gate.

"My brother, Lunga! I am glad that we meet after such a long time. How have you been?" he asked, shaking Lunga's hand.

"I am fantastic, brother Heke. And how are you? You have also been very scarce," Lunga responded as he fiddled with the gate, trying to open it.

Heke prevented Lunga from entering the yard. "Please don't go into the yard. Let's go somewhere. I need to talk to you. You can always see your aunt and uncle after our talk."

Just then, Bhaye came out of the house. He saw the two figures in the dark, but could not tell who they were. "Who's there?" he asked.

"It is me, Bhaye. I'm coming back right now. I need to sort out something," Lunga responded. He followed Heke, who had slipped out of the gate towards the trees around the community hall.

"Okay, my boy. See you soon?" Bhaye called as he stepped back into the house.

Under the trees, Heke told Lunga that he had taken Vumani to the Eastern Cape to prepare for his matric exams, given that there were lots of class boycotts in Soweto. "Now, I don't want Bhaye and Maye to panic, because it is almost a month since Vumani left. He is very fine in the Eastern Cape. All I want you to do is to inform Bhaye and Maye that you went to visit Vumani, and that all is well with him. Unfortunately, I cannot risk going into the yard because I am also wanted. You know that with the state of emergency, the security branch keeps a hawk's eye on the Mzondeki house," Heke said, reaching for a packet of sweets in the plastic bag. He gave the packet and the Bible to Lunga.

"Okay, thanks. That's helpful. The reason I came today was to find out where Vumani was. He disappeared on the day that

he was supposed to identify Mhlupheki. He didn't even attend Mhlupheki's funeral," said Lunga, taking the sweets and the Bible from Heke. He knew Heke was a born-again Christian who often read the Bible with Maye, but he became confused as to why Heke was giving him these things now.

"Yes, I know," Heke said, nodding. He stepped back and paced slowly in front of Lunga. It was obvious that he wanted to leave. "Please give the packet of sweets and the Bible to Maye and tell her I pass my regards. Vumani is fine. We want him to be as intelligent and as learned as you. *Heke,* we want him to learn. I will see you, my brother." He extended his hand.

Lunga smiled and shook Heke's hand. Heke was still holding Lunga's hand when he said, "By the way, why did you drop out from Wits?"

Lunga became pensive. He looked at Heke with teary eyes. He was about to respond when Heke interrupted him. "Okay, never mind. It's a discussion for another day." He left him there.

Back in Angola, Vumani regained his senses as the convoy of trucks that squawked like geese headed north. Vumani could tell that the road was bad as the truck slithered around sharp zigzags, then narrow winding tracks over rugged hills. The road descended in sharp switchbacks. Finally, it came to a halt at a clearing in the bush. At last, they had reached their destination. Vumani breathed a sigh of relief. He had doubted that they would make it there alive. It was not so much the fear of being attacked that bothered him. With the heavily armed escort, he was certain they were covered on that score. The Russian truck in which they travelled gave him a sense of foreboding. He did not trust that the Kraz would survive the bumpy and precarious path, but did not realise the Kraz was built for such bumpy and precarious terrain.

They were now at Pango Camp. It was around 4 pm. Pango was in the hinterland, tucked away in a clearing in dense, mountainous jungle. A single gravel road led to the clearing. The driver dismounted and shouldered his AK-47. Two soldiers who had been in the passenger seats unfolded the canvas. The new recruits dismounted, joining others who had arrived at the camp the day before. It was a hive of activity.

The bush was not like anything he'd ever seen. All around them was a jungle. Fields of baobab trees and other unusual trees stretched over great distances. Trenches and dugouts surrounded the camp. The moment he stepped on the campgrounds, he expected never to return home, or if he did, it would be as a corpse. It was the first time he saw monkeys in the wild, jumping from tree to tree.

As it happened, this was the training camp that would conceal them during military training. Vumani gazed across the landscape of the dense bush, inhabited by chirping birds and other wild animals, where gigantic baobabs towered between ravines and canyons. He drew a deep breath, feeling nervous that he had stepped into this dangerous terrain.

Yet, something about the place made him feel at ease. Maybe it was the friendly soldiers wearing camouflage with AK-47 rifles openly slung on their shoulders, or the other recruits. It was his first time in the bush, though the sweet organic smell of the tropical forest resonated with him. He would have to develop a strong relationship with the bush to remain alive in this inhospitable land.

So Vumani and the other *kursants* – as they were now called – were handed khaki uniforms with hats and boots which made them look more like boy scouts than soldiers. They were summoned to the assembly point for a briefing. They stood in the baking heat, in columns of four according to their platoons. The camp commander – Samson Mavovo, or SM as he was dubbed – packed a Makarov pistol, while the other soldiers carried AK-47s. About 20 camp personnel were also there.

Vumani trusted and felt he could depend on these people. Every soldier seemed to exude grace and composure, which he had never encountered in any soldiers he'd met before.

All eyes were fixed on SM, a gentle, even-tempered, affable man in his 30s. His calm, composed manner reminded Vumani of Bohloko.

His new recruits gazed at him in awe. He addressed them in a simple, open, honest manner. First, he introduced his personnel,

including the camp commissar, the chief of staff, the company commander, the heads of ordnance and logistics, the recording officer, the instructors, and the kitchen staff. Vumani recognised Libembe as the chief of staff. Mavovo commended the *kursants* for their courage and commitment in joining the people's army. He gave them the camp rules and regulations, impressing upon them the need to comply. He thanked them for answering the call of liberation and informed them that, as soldiers, they should only use one word to address each other: comrade.

"Here there is no old, no young, no woman, no man. We are all the same. We are fighting oppression here. So, we will not entertain any form of oppression."

He reminded them of the high possibility of being killed or jailed, since they were fighting a mighty force. But he encouraged them to follow the path of those who came before them.

"You are bringers of the new dawn. You bear the banner of liberation. That is why you walk on this consecrated ground where all our heroines and heroes walked. Here Mabhidla walked. Mini walked here, Barhuza treaded this holy ground, Bululu, Mfene, Delani, Nomoya, Leqhala, and Tobatse, to name but a few of the fine cadre of people who walked here, left their footprints here and I am certain you will rise to the heights of these great giants of our struggle. Yes, you walk in the footsteps of those who made a difference." He looked proudly at the platoons and continued.

"Bambatha, Xhakaza, Nhlapo, Nkadimeng, Msimang, Mathapelo answered the call. Georgina and Mariama accepted. Yes, they all accepted to carry arms. You too have accepted to bear arms."

Comrade Mavovo closed his eyes and continued, "Listen to the mutterings of change... Look at the new dawn that you are bringing in. Is it not visible, hanging in the sky like a rainbow? Yes, you are the contingent that will bring victory. Accelerate the pace to victory so that we march steadfastly to a new country."

There was no doubt that SM's speech captivated Vumani and his comrades. Rapturous applause, whistles, and ululations

filled the assembly point. At that moment a sweet soprano voice rose to a crescendo as they all joined singing and dancing.

Siyavuma
This call we heard
Crying out for our minds
Took us to trenches in foreign lands
Pricking thorns, blaring horns
The banner of liberation flies
Death or prison,
We shall overcome!
Siyavuma! Siyavuma!

This fall of our martyrs we feared
Took us to paths
Withered with dead bodies
They whispered odes
We could not ignore
With mournful songs
Forward we stride
Death or prison,
We shall overcome!
Siyavuma! Siyavuma!

We heard the call for freedom
Creeping deeply
In the twilight dusk
We dare not dream,
We, seeds of liberation,
Dare not scream
Bringing in freedom
Following footprints of our forebears
Death or prison,

We shall overcome!
Siyavuma! Siyavuma!

All the recruits knew the song except Vumani, who only knew church and prison songs. But his natural disposition for music made it easy to learn liberation songs quickly. There was joy in the camp as the bush thundered with their songs, dancing, and ululations. Vumani felt the spirits of the martyrs who had passed there. Nightfall descended. In the darkness, Vumani thought he heard the guttural sounds of dangerous nocturnal animals prowling their hunting grounds.

Vumani used most of his time to acquaint himself with his comrades, especially those in his section. He took the nickname Lefty, being left-handed. They all had camp names, making it hard to trace their backgrounds. There was Fana J, nicknamed Hark-My-Soul, a quiet, soft-spoken comrade who kept to himself. He eventually became very close to Vumani. Then there was Whoa, who earned his name by trying to stop a charging bull. The bull would have gored him to pieces had it not been shot. There were four other section comrades: Slevu (nicknamed Tshela Thupa), a comrade called Never Again or Nunca Mais, and Ngovolo, who had greatly enlarged and stuck out front teeth that resembled the dog's canines. He was said to have bitten a police dog that chased him when they skipped the border. Finally, there was Preto, who was dark as coal.

It took time before Fana J told Vumani his story. Like Vumani, Fana J was apolitical before he joined the people's army. He was a born-again Christian whose mission in life was proselytising. One afternoon, asleep at his parents' home, he was jolted awake by a slap on his face. A young soldier almost his age grabbed him.

"You think you are clever, pretending to be asleep when you were running around outside, throwing stones at us." The soldier knew this was not the boy they were after. "*Ek het hom*," he said in Afrikaans, calling others. "I have found the culprit."

The soldiers did not ask questions, but stormed the house and punched and kicked Fana J repeatedly, leaving him

unconscious in a pool of blood. Vumani grasped the melancholy in Fana J's eyes. Almost everyone had sad tales of why they joined the struggle. But Vumani did not want them to know that his brother had recruited him.

Vumani got to know his platoon comrades better. They were a congenial group. Mphikeleli was the most tenacious. He deservedly earned himself the nickname Rambo. He was displayed spectacular skills on the obstacle course. Then there was the astute Bathong. There were also Dijo, Fede Fede, Refilwe, Chris G, Mshefane (who stammered), and Sparks, who was acrobatic and pretended to be deaf until one fateful day... All these comrades became close to Vumani. The camp consisted of diverse groups, all ardent disciples of the liberation, save for those who served a different cause, and secretly embarked on a foolish course of action.

Within a week, Vumani got used to the rhythm of the camp. In the bush, life begins at the crack of dawn with a clanging bell and ends at 9 pm, when the bell announces curfew. At dawn, he dressed swiftly, cleared his clothes and foam mattress, packed everything neatly, readying his tent for inspection before he and his six section comrades joined their platoon for calisthenic physical training.

After bathing, he dashed to the assembly point for roll call, followed by lining up in the kitchen for a scoop of whatever food they could get. After breakfast, each platoon was deployed to their daily internal duties. These ranged from physical training to rotational sentry duties, digging trenches, cleaning the camp, fetching water, collecting wood, attending classes, and cooking.

At 7 am, lessons started, focusing on military training, political instruction, obstacle courses, marches, and drills. Physical training was his only menace. He was not the only one, though. Most of his platoon comrades hated physical training. Spuit Machatha, hard and lean as a biltong strip, was the instructor. He was fierce, unpredictable, and annoying. He had short strong legs, like a frog. His voice was deep and croaked. He looked like a soldier who had fought many battles. Spuit came screaming on the very first day of training, "Civilians, I know you

call me 'frog' behind my back. Continue calling me that name. I like it very much. But pray that you do not turn yourselves into insects and grasshoppers during training. You will regret that day. Do you hear me, civilians?" Spuit said sarcastically, staring with his bulging eyes.

Spuit unleashed his baptism of fire on Platoon 1, Vumani's platoon, just two days into their arrival at the camp. Flanked by the three instructors, he took Platoon 1 on a gruelling physical training. At 7 in the morning, they left in full military kit: *bondolinos* strapped over their shoulders, carrying their rucksacks, field spades, and field saws. As the platoon made its way to a gravel pathway through the main gate, Spuit commanded them, "Sing!"

They sang while performing calisthenics. It was straightforward and manageable. Spuit ran towards a dense thicket, the platoon following behind. Almost 500 metres into the bush, Spuit instructed them to jog. They ran for almost three hours, non-stop. The physical instructors ran on the sides of the platoon. Spuit instructed them to *toyi-toyi*. Gradually, he introduced difficult exercises, making them do frog jumps as he had demonstrated. Then squats. Then crawls. Then run three steps, up, down, frog jump, sprint, singing and slogans, sprint again, squats, frog jumps, push-ups, uphill and downhill. By the time they realised that they were deep in the bowels of the bush, they discovered that they had covered approximately 30 kilometres. Some were vomiting from the heat, which reached 35 degrees Celsius.

"Can I go to the loo?" pleaded Preto. He tried to make an excuse to take a rest. Spuit was used to these antics.

"You want to sell out now," he said, gazing at him. "You planned with the enemy to meet them here and tell the enemy what we are doing here. Relieve yourself here, where you are, while the women comrades are watching you. The battlefield is not a picnic. You think there will be toilets in combat?"

He addressed his fellow instructors: "Look at this civilian. He thinks he can trick us here." He addressed Vumani's platoon again. "Today I want to teach you that a body is nothing but a

machine. It can do anything. You fail because you fear to stretch it to the limits. Never listen to your fears. Listen only to us, your superiors. Today you are going to kill your fears." Then he shouted at top of his voice, "*Hay masoja*, *masoja oMkhonto.*"

They chorused a response, "*Hayi! Hayi!*" They chanted, expressing enthusiastic approval of themselves as soldiers.

Everybody was grey from sweat. Spuit took the platoon through the stream. They waded across with relief. At last, they would quench their thirst. "Rest," he commanded when they reached the other side. A few were bent to drink some water. Spuit roared.

"Hey, hey, don't drink that water! It is contaminated. The enemy put poison there. You will die if you drink it." Vumani suspected that the water was not poisoned. He concluded that Spuit was just being his stern self. They had rested for about thirty minutes when Spuit abruptly gave the order to resume the activities. He continued working them and could barely hold back, even when he saw them collapsing one by one from hunger, thirst, and exhaustion.

Others complained. "We are hungry. We have not eaten since this morning."

He reminded them, "This is a survival course. You don't know that. You civilians, you think you will survive in combat? There won't be time to eat in war. There will only be time to kill or be killed. You won't even have time to think about food. This is a rehearsal for war. You will only eat or drink water when you get back to the camp." He knelt next to the stream and filled his bottle with water, as he admonished them.

At about 6:30 pm, the platoon plodded wearily past the valley leading to the camp. They climbed the last steep hill, all aches, stiff muscles, and burnt feet. Vumani was happy that they would receive their well-earned rest after their mental and physical toil. They were so excited at the prospect of calling it a day that they sprinted as fast as they could. Sparks was straining under the heavy weight of Ngovolo, whose red tongue darted out

like a tired dog. Preto tried to haul himself along the steep hill and collapsed from exhaustion.

"Pick him up, put him on your back," barked Spuit.

Mphikeleli lifted Preto and put him on his back effortlessly. He was the only *kursant* who showed no sign of lethargy. Halfway up the hill, Hark-My-Soul and Vumani dragged their wobbly feet, looked at each other, bent down and crawled on their knees.

Spuit lost his temper and yelled at them, "And you two civilians, what's your problems? You think this is a beauty contest. On your feet!"

Vumani and Hark-My-Soul followed the platoon that trotted just ahead of them, enduring the short distance that was left for them to reach the camp. Spuit angrily remonstrated them, coercing them to continue with the exercises he was calling out by numbers at the time. It wasn't clear what Vumani and Hark-My-Soul had said or done that aggravated Spuit's ire. They were about to pass what was once a stream when he looked at them and said, "You two civilians, why are you trying to play truant with me. I told you this is not a beauty contest. Let me baptise you in the name of the Holy Revolution."

He chuckled, observing his co-instructors, and ordered Vumani and Hark-My-Soul into the swamp.

"*Shona khona*, get back to work. Jump or dive into the stream, whatever you deem easy for you," he exhorted.

The two reluctantly complied, unaware of the putrid water of the marsh. They had never been in a swamp before, and assumed it would be an easy task to navigate. Vumani jumped first, and Hark-My-Soul followed. The two tried to move cautiously inside the swamp, trying to avoid the murky water and thick mud that covered the ground. With each step they took, they could feel their boots sinking deeper and deeper, making it difficult for them to move forward. The stench of the fetid water filled their nostrils, making it hard to breathe. Mosquitoes buzzed around their heads, and they could hear the croaking of frogs and the rustling of the dense foliage.

As they struggled to move forward, Vumani suddenly sank waist-deep into the swamp. He could feel the thick mud pulling him down, making it hard for him to breathe. He frantically grabbed onto nearby branches and trees, using them to pull himself along slowly. Hark-My-Soul followed closely behind, struggling to keep his footing in the slippery mud.

After what felt like an eternity, they finally emerged from the swamp, their bodies covered in dark green mud and their boots dripping with thick, liquid muck. Exhausted and dishevelled, they reached the base.

"No washing tonight," instructed Spuit.

The two babbled something incoherently.

"I said, you must sleep without washing tonight. Do you understand, civilians?"

To the platoon's relief, Spuit called it a day after more than ten hours of intense physical training. The rest of the platoon was happy that he had not put them into a swamp that day, although he did many other days. At 5 am the next morning, the *kursants* were forced awake and continued from where they left off. Their joints and muscles ached and their stiff legs almost failed to carry them to the next activity. They had no option but to comply. This made Vumani understand that there came a time in life when the body could function without restraint. The words of his instructor proved true: "The body can do anything. Scale the peaks of your bodies, until you pass the human threshold of pain."

If the initial physical training was meant to toughen and numb their bodies into submission, it would enable them to survive any eventuality. The tactics course was designed to turn the *kursants* into machines. They learned the techniques of approaching their targets and overcoming obstacles. This included crawling like a snake – with a rucksack stuffed with stones, sand, and water – under barbed wire and on uneven surfaces. Mphikeleli made the obstacle courses look like a picnic, climbing, crossing, and crawling under suspended ropes with ease and great delight. He was a natural-born soldier and a specimen guerrilla.

Vumani sometimes contemplated quitting the training, but felt obliged to keep his promise to his brother. He was now limited by his moral, political, and perhaps spiritual commitment to his brother. Even so, he would not have withdrawn from the training now that he had committed himself to the revolutionary cause.

Vumani did not yet understand the relevance of physical training, including the marches and drills, which were meant to foster military discipline and obedience to orders. He surely did not want all that. He rather wanted to learn to fire an AK-47 and then go back to his brother, who would then tell him exactly what he wanted him to do. At the rate the training was going, he doubted that they would ever learn to shoot with an AK-47.

Day after day, there were incidents in the bush that made him realise that his life hung by a thread. This made him anxious, but he regained confidence by reminding himself that he was a trainee soldier, and should prepare himself for any eventuality.

However, two incidents during training lowered Vumani's morale. First, a comrade named Shadrack, a brilliant guitarist from Platoon 2, Section 3, succumbed to malaria, an illness Vumani had never known existed. He realised that just living at the camp could be fatal, and once again he thought he might die there. Sparks, whom he thought was profoundly deaf, turned out not to be not deaf at all, but was feigning deafness to get information from others. Mphikeleli was suspected of being in collaboration with Sparks. Another suspected spy was Dijo. They were discovered due to their inconsistent biographical profiles. The camp security took them for questioning. No one knew what became of them.

Shortly thereafter, a comrade named Sipho, who was also close to Vumani, accidentally shot himself while on a guarding post. He survived, but the ordeal made Vumani intensely aware that anything was possible there.

As time passed, the intensity of his fears diminished, and Vumani forgot about the things that dampened his spirits. He began to recognise the value of being there. His body adjusted to the physical activities and his mind settled. His eyes became accustomed to the pitch-dark forest nights. His could distinguish

various animals from their sounds. Eventually, he felt at home and that he was also a forest animal. He came to terms with living a dateless life, accustomed to his stay in the bush being timeless, relying on the position of the sun to determine the time of day.

Life in the camp touched Vumani in ways he could not believe. He was mutating into a guerrilla, a people's soldier. His intellect was improving. Back home, he had hated studying, but here he enjoyed every second of studying in the forest, while at home he studied in makeshift classrooms. Theoretical subjects like political education, which included history and philosophy, military combat works (MCW), military tactics, and military topography empowered him greatly. Libembe was his political education instructor, and she treated Vumani extremely well. The entire training made him a scientific thinker and a battle-ready soldier of the people. Moreover, the political education gave Vumani the political will to face the powerful enemy. Now, he would no longer be fighting just to bring his brother, Bohloko back home. He would be fighting to liberate his country from oppression.

Vumani considered MCW a major part of his training. MCW and military topography were his favourite subjects. While MCW emphasised intelligence and counterintelligence, military topography put emphasis on understanding the detailed description of the physical features of the milieu of operation. He knew that MCW would come in handy in covert operations and when building underground structures back home, if ever he would be deployed there. Similarly, he had a vague notion that military topography would come in handy in the future when he would be required to draw sketches of exact locations where armaments were hidden. He chuckled to himself, thinking about the other value of topography. He had seen how easy it was for Susan, the lady who recruited him, to navigate the bush at night. It meant that she was a trained operative, he reasoned. He also liked military tactics, which took place in the giant grassland, with tall, dry reeds.

In the same platoon, in Section 2, there was a female comrade whose name was Lerato. Her positive spirit endeared

her to everyone in the camp. She was nicknamed Blues because of her mellifluous voice. It was the same young lady who had winked at Vumani during his swamp punishment, not to mock but to empathise with him. It was the same woman who captivated the comrades in the camp with her beautiful voice and a poem she wrote entitled, 'Hewn by The Fires of Revolution', which she recited on special occasions. But Vumani did not trust her at all. He only trusted Hark-My-Soul. It was difficult for him to trust anyone after the Mphikeleli, Sparks, and Dijo saga.

One day after a cultural evening, Lerato approached Vumani.

"You are the only person I have never spoken to in this camp," Lerato said, smiling shyly, blinking her twinkling eyes.

Vumani observed her. He was momentarily lost for words. Her interest in him would have made him suspicious, but her ineffable beauty disarmed him. His silence did not prevent her from speaking.

"If I may, please, I would like to talk to you on Sunday. There is something I want us to discuss. Don't worry, your safety is guaranteed. You can come with Hark-My-Soul, if you like."

Her cute, infectious smile came so naturally, with tiny dimples appearing in her cheeks. Vumani stared at her in amazement, and smiled back. At first, he had not seen her in a romantic light, but was smitten to the hilt by her natural beauty. Instantly, he forgot about his paranoia and apprehension about potential spies in the camp.

There was going to be a soccer tournament at the camp on the Sunday in question, but Vumani did not mind missing it. In truth, he and Hark-My-Soul always spent their free time on weekends at the camp library. They preferred books to soccer, although they both played soccer back at home.

"Oh, okay... Okay," Vumani stammered his acceptance of Lerato's invitation. After a moment he said, "What time and where should we meet?"

She told him their rendezvous, smiled her endearing smile, and left. He struggled to sleep that night. Late, long after

their lanterns were turned off, Vumani lay on his bed with many thoughts racing through his mind.

He felt nostalgic. His mind flew back to his childhood, when he used to play with his twin brother, Vumile. He saw the dusty streets in his mind, and longed for the smoke that used to choke him when he made a fire at his parents' home. He craved the winter days when Maye would cook hot soup for them and prepare warm blankets she had specially knitted for them. He yearned for Maye's sweet, expressive song that she crooned when they were ill or sad. He yearned for the days he used to go to the stadium, shining the shoes of spectators who queued at the gates before they entered. He thought of all his friends back at home and wondered what they were up to. He contemplated his future, and felt sad at having none. He thought about his death and imagined what it would be like, remembering Vumile's funeral. He mused about Vumile, whom he had initially thought would be in Heaven, but now Vumani was doubtful. His training in the camp had made him a cynical agnostic. He thought of Lerato and the future. This triggered more confusion about his fate, and questions swirled in his mind, leaving him melancholic. Once more self-pity took over. He cried silently, careful that his comrades would not hear him.

That Sunday, Lerato emerged from the bushes into the serene dusk, wearing civilian clothes. There was no moon, just the canopy of stars which glistened till the horizon. The deep, prolonged cries of nocturnal animals could be heard in the distance. They sat in the darkness, listening to the sounds of crickets. It suddenly occurred to Vumani that there was nothing Lerato wanted to share with him. She only wanted his company. He sat watching her, entranced by her face, which exuded poetry. There was silence for a long time.

He broke the ice. "So, you carefully chose this place as your site of affection," he said, smiling.

"Certainly," she giggled. "This terrain is conducive to unravel the mystery that is you."

"Wow, Comrade, I..." He laughed, amused by Lerato's choice of words. He hadn't thought that she would describe him

in that manner. He knew she was an excellent poet, but this was beyond his expectation.

"Eh, Comrade..." she said.

Vumani interrupted her. "That's very unromantic. 'Comrade' is not in harmony with the spirit that nature accords us right now," he remonstrated playfully.

"But what makes you trust me this much?" Lerato said as she moved closer to Vumani. "You know, I was scared that you would think I was a spy, but I could not help myself. Something in me said I should be the talisman that protects you."

The deep affection Vumani felt for Lerato, which he could hardly describe, swiftly flared up into full-blown love. It made him feel awkward, having to pretend that he felt nothing for her. All he wanted was to melt into her, which he had never felt before.

There was deep silence. They both watched a moth fluttering around, and looked at each other. Somehow, the silence felt like an intruder. Vumani thoughtlessly said, "Having an affair with you is not a private but a political matter. In any case, I am prepared to take that risk."

With a gracious, even self-effacing demeanour, she said, "Much as we bow to the liberation imperatives, we should also be true to our romantic imperatives. I love you, Phil." She clasped Vumani's hands.

"I agree, we must be loyal to our passion. I love you too, Lerato," he responded with a whisper, his heart palpitating.

She thought for a while and her eyes filled with tears. She released her clasp and stared at him. "I can do nothing for you beyond giving you my love, Phil. I have no country. I have no family. Like a stray bird, my heart seems to nestle happily inside yours. I have never felt like this before. Not even for my family, before they were all exterminated. But that is a subject for another day."

It was the first time she had expressed her love to someone. It was also the first time Vumani had heard a woman declare her

love to him. He felt both sorrow and joy overwhelm him. He looked at her. Her ethereal beauty stupefied him.

"I know I belong to you just as the clouds belong to the sky," he said. "Let us be together in the cause of love."

"Be simple, Phil. Simplicity has its own beauty," she quipped.

He stood and spread his arms, inviting her in. She came close to him. "In my heart and in my mind, I know I should be yours. I love you very much, Phil," she blurted, and stood on tiptoe to kiss him.

As their lips met, large rain clouds gathered suddenly, making the sky a mass of dark clouds. Lightning flashed and thunder rumbled from the depths of the forest. And rain pounded. They continued kissing, oblivious to the unremitting rain that came down in torrents. After a while, they returned to the camp under the sound of rain pattering, drenched.

Early one morning, Vumani's platoon gathered on the shooting range – a crucial part of training that Vumani had eagerly anticipated. Surprising him, the instructor appeared alongside his assistants, presenting them with the AK-47s. Vumani's eyes widened as he beheld his brand-new AK-47, its appearance almost mystical. It filled him with awe, an enchanting grace enveloping his senses. He clasped the rifle tightly, as if he were holding a human being. The rifle responded as if it were alive and seemed to remember his hands, even though it was the first time he had held it. The smell of laminated wood and its oily metal parts gave him palpitations. He looked at the rifle again in disbelief. Beguiled by its portability and mesmerising beauty, Vumani became tempted to examine every facet of its anatomy. He poised his fingers just above the butt and felt its warmth. Then he stroked the grip, the safety, the selector switch, the charging handle, the magazine, the rear sight, the takedown lever, the wooden handguard, the barrel, and the front sight, utterly enchanted. He had finally touched his Holy Grail. He felt a tingle in his hand that went through the rest of his body. He knew that he was transformed. He imagined himself entering South Africa carrying a knapsack, an infantry spade, a water bottle, arms,

and ammunition, ready to face the enemy. He tried to press the trigger, but dropped his finger immediately when he thought he heard it clang.

He thought of his father, who always appeared as a fortress but who by then would be grinding away like a horse, laying rails to newly built train stations. He thought of his mother, who would by then be running around in suburban households, trying to make ends meet. He thought of his siblings, whom he might never see again. He thought of the toiling masses of his country. Finally, he thought of his country and how doomed it was in its beauty.

He conjured an image of himself in a liberated country, with Lerato as his wife and Bohloko legally back, perhaps serving in a ministerial or related position. At that moment, he took a vow that he would work earnestly for the liberation of his country.

After that day, Vumani was exposed to more arms training. The engineering course taught his platoon to mine and defuse different types of explosives, including various grenades. He also learned about detonators, antipersonnel and antitank mines, blast mines, and bounding mines.

Vumani cultivated deep spiritual kinship with his AK-47, which made him pay little attention to the engineering course. Even though the explosives were more important than firearms, he had no keen desire to master them. He hated the noise they made when they exploded. Worse still, he thought the explosives were as unpredictable as animals. He preferred not to temper with stuff over which he had no control.

One day during their training, a man named Comrade Madi came into the camp. He was one of the organisation's top leaders. Vumani heard in hushed tones that Comrade Madi had come there personally to select his contingent for an important mission. Libembe was one of the comrades Madi selected. Vumani and some of his observant comrades would not forget Madi. As he looked at them, they could not determine what the look in his eyes meant. It would be years before Vumani understood Madi's expression.

Time flew, and the training ended. Vumani was grateful to now be equipped with the skills to set up underground structures, do intelligence work, and more. However, it augured times of uncertainty and danger for him. Like many other comrades he trained with, he was prepared to face everything, whatever the consequences. Serving his country was an arduous course that he faced with renewed hope and purpose.

A few days after the end of training, Vumani was instructed to report to Admin. He passed an idling Land Rover on his way there.

"You see that Land Rover, Comrade Phil? It is waiting for you. Quickly get all your belongings and board the vehicle. We are looking forward to seeing you next time." These words spelled the end of Vumani's bush days. He was not sure whether to be sad or happy as he saluted, made an about turn, and went back to his base. He gathered his belongings and looked for Lerato. He found her playing chess with a comrade named Cover. He waved. She stood, motioned to Cover that she would be back and walked towards Vumani excitedly.

"I am deployed, although I don't know where," he said, shame-facedly. He knew he was defying protocol, but trusted Lerato enough to inform her of his deployment.

The word 'deployed' weighed heavily on Lerato. She had, of course, contemplated the day when she or Phil would be deployed, but had not thought that it would be so soon. The news of his deployment threw her off balance. She churned his words around in her mind, without responding. The fact that he was leaving the bush, which was ironically their haven, muddled her thoughts. She stared at him, thinking that he was joking. But his welling eyes convinced her that he was serious. It was clear to her that he was overcome by strong emotions of sadness.

"I love you Phil, but I love South Africa more. Honour your duties. The struggle continues," she said, receiving the news with feigned political fervour.

"Indeed, it should. But nothing can stop the flames of love, Lerato," he responded. "Not even patriotism. I will look for you no matter where you will be..."

"I will also find you wherever you go, like a river finds the sea. We will continue where we had left off. And if we never meet again, we will still be grateful to fate for the time we have had." She thought deeply, wondering if she would ever see him again.

"Yes, I am optimistic that we will see each other in a free country," said Vumani. "We will marry and have our family there."

She gave a perfunctory nod. She had an uneasy feeling that she would never see him again.

"My real name is Vumani. Vumani Mzondeki," he said, breaking protocol for the second time. He trusted Lerato enough to tell her his real name.

Lerato observed him. What if he were killed? The thought assailed her once more. She came closer and held Vumani's hand. "My real name is Sindi Moloi. I lived with *Rakgadi*, my aunt, at 50 Sihoko street, in Daveyton, before I came here to train. Hopefully..."

She tried to say something, but held back. She knew theirs was an uncertain future. The administration personnel observed Vumani and looked away. Tears welled up in his eyes. He grabbed his bag and turned away before jumping into the backseat of the idling Land Rover. As the car pulled away, he cast a wistful glance at Sindi. She gave a little wave and walked towards the bush, thinking that it may be the last time she would see him.

Vumani felt sad leaving the camp. If he had had a crystal ball, he would have forecast his future with Sindi. But life was complex. How could he predict his future with Sindi when he could hardly predict his own? He was being deployed, but did not know where. He knew what this deployment meant. He was now in a different world. From the day he accepted to train as a soldier, he had lost control over his life. The organisation would watch his every move. He wished he would be sent back home.

To his consternation, Vumani found himself back in Mozambique, this time on a huge farm. Nelson, and an old man who preferred to be called *Madala,* came to meet Vumani. The two comrades took Vumani through specialised ordnance training for about two weeks. Vumani learnt how to conceal arms, how to create dead letter boxes (DLBs), and how to put arms and ammunition into civilian use containers. During his special ordnance training, he was informed that his major responsibility would be to smuggle large quantities of weapons and related equipment into the country. These would be used in armed operations. He would do this using a vehicle equipped with hidden compartments.

Vumani was given his last briefing before being driven out of the farm into a flat in Alto Maé, in Maputo. Bohloko came that evening to give him the final briefing before Vumani went back to South Africa. He was excited that his younger brother had completed his training and was ready to execute his mission. It was at the dinner table that Bohloko spoke to Vumani.

"I am glad that everything is over now. As you know, you will specialise in infiltrating arms into the country. You are now equipped to execute your tasks proficiently. You also have the political will to fight the enemy. I did not want any of my family to be involved in the struggle. But I had no choice. The tasks we need to embark on require someone I can trust. You may have been told about the possibility of arrest. You may also have been told never to say you are an ANC/MK member, should that happen. Your legend is that you are a gun smuggler. The ANC will secretly take care of you in case you get arrested."

He gave Vumani money and a passport with his new name, Philemon Khumbula Mshumbi, and informed him that he would leave the next day. Since it was his first time in this activity, Bohloko told him that he would drive with Nelson. Although he addressed Vumani not as a younger brother but as a trained underground operative, he was concerned that Vumani was perhaps not up to the task. But Vumani showed no signs of fear. He took his assignment as an easy task. The false car panels they had built into the car during his ordnance training gave him enough

comfort. He knew that a trained eye was required to uncover the arms in the car and that possibility was almost nil.

"One thing I would like to emphasise: please isolate yourself from social activities. Disengage from your gang, including Lunga. I know it will be difficult because Lunga is our cousin, but please try. This task requires you not to be a creature of habit. Be known by what you are not. Refrain from any political activity back at home. You should be known as an apolitical church person. Proceed with caution in everything you do," Bohloko continued, feeling emotional. Vumani listened attentively, assuring himself that his brother would be proud of him, confident that he would execute his mission effectively.

"Unfortunately," Bohloko continued. "I won't stay to bid you farewell. A goodbye may herald our permanent parting." With these words, Bohloko stood and left the room. While Vumani pondered Bohloko's words and contemplated his trip the following day, his gangster friends – now under the command of Mabulala and Modingwana – were carrying out a reign of terror on schoolchildren in Soweto.

Eight

Smuggling Arms

To be whisked out of the country and undergo military training was one thing. To smuggle a car filled with arms into the country would be quite another. But Vumani was not so worried about that as he sat restlessly in the passenger seat of the red Honda Ballade sedan. Rather, he was growing increasingly worried about Nelson's driving, especially when Nelson weaved in and out of the lanes. Vumani's stomach churned as the car hurtled across a series of curves on Malagwane Hill. He wondered if he would make it to his destination alive. Since the day he had met Nelson, he had been aware of his erratic behaviour, but he had never imagined his driving to be as erratic as this. Malagwane Hill was notorious for its head-on accidents, which would have given Vumani more reason to panic if he knew about it. If at all, Nelson seemed to care less about the risks of driving recklessly on this road. He passed the cars in front of him on a double-yellow line as they descended steeply and windily from Manzini to Mbabane. Vumani tried to calm himself in his seat, but he felt helpless as he surrendered himself to his fate. He had made peace with the possibility of dying, but he would have preferred to die in battle rather than in a car accident.

"Do you know this road?" asked Nelson, his car veering into the opposite lane and into the oncoming traffic. Apart from recklessly slithering from lane to lane on this single-lane road, risking a fatal head-on collision, Nelson could not speak and drive at the same time. He could not control the car when he spoke. He looked at the person he spoke to in the eye and not on the road.

Vumani shrugged and craned his neck to the picturesque view of the landscape. Since he discovered that Nelson could not multitask, he resolved never to engage with him.

"This is Malagwane, the killer road! It can kill us instantly, like the lethal weapons we carry in this car." He paused and

observed Vumani, who pretended not to hear him. Nelson was a hilarious person, but his fearlessness, care-free attitude, and his driving made Vumani crazy. He was convinced that Nelson was trying to commit suicide and wondered why he had made him part of his suicide mission.

"It is a disgrace, if not an antithesis. This road, this very same road, is recognised in the Guinness Book of World Records for being the most dangerous road in the world. I suppose it continues to kill people because they never cleansed the spirit of those who died here."

No, it kills people because they are reckless, as you are, Vumani reasoned in his mind. He continued watching the beautiful scenery, silently praying that they would arrive safely in South Africa.

"This road is doubly dangerous for us," Nelson carried on. "The enemy ambushes us here on this road. But they won't do that to me. I will never die like a lamb. I will die fighting. Let them dare try."

He overtook yet another slow car. An oncoming car missed them by inches and the driver threw insulting gestures at them. Nelson sped on and paid no attention to the driver. A road sign that read 5 kilometres to the Ngwenya/Oshoek border caught Vumani's eye. Nelson hit the brakes after driving for approximately 4 kilometres and drove slowly.

"We are almost there. Say your last prayers, terrorist, and prepare yourself for the worst. You are approaching the mouth of prison now," he laughed.

Vumani inhaled deeply. He had never been through a formal border crossing and did not know what to expect, although he had been briefed on what to do and what not to do. He thrust his hand in his pocket for his travel document and skimmed through it. He observed his passport photo once more and chuckled at how the picture presented him as innocent. *Even the most hardened security officer would feel pity for me looking at this picture*, he thought. He observed for the first time the two transit stamps dated October 26, 1985. It showed that he had been out of South Africa for eight

days. How long had he really been away? He had lost count. In the forest one lost a sense of time and date. He estimated that it was approximately six months.

In no time, the car pulled up in front of the immigration offices. Nelson knew that the Oshoek border post was reputed for its robust security system and that most of the border security were stationed in there. Worst still, he also knew that some askaris – former liberation fighters who turned against the struggle and worked with the enemy – waited there to identify trained insurgents. Even so, he thought the overcrowding and congestion at Oshoek offered a perfect disguise compared with empty, smaller border posts where they would pay more attention to each traveller.

They cleared the emigration and customs hall at Ngwenya, on the Swaziland border side, without hassles and drove on to the Oshoek border post, the South African side of the border. Nelson parked the car outside the immigration office and they both went in. It was crowded inside. The signs 'Whites Only' and 'Non-Whites' that indicated where people should queue struck him inside. There were more than ten long queues for black people and two short queues for white people. Nelson joined one queue and discreetly indicated to Vumani to join the next queue. Vumani's queue moved slowly. He reached the counter after what appeared to be an eternity. Behind the counter sat the immigration officer with a long moustache. The glass partition separated Vumani and the immigration officer.

"Passport," he barked.

Vumani uneasily took out his passport from his pocket and handed it to him. He snatched the passport and flipped through it, scrutinising the photo to see if it matched Vumani's face. He gave Vumani a cold, hostile stare and continued flipping through the pages. He saw the two stamps in the passport and shook his head.

"Why did you go to Swaziland? Where were you in Swaziland? What did you do the eight days you were there? What are you bringing into the country?" He watched Vumani's behaviour as he fielded these questions to him.

Fortunately, Vumani had been taught to anticipate these questions. What would he say? His instructors had warned him during training about the possibility of being questioned and impressed on him that he should have a legend; a story he would tell to evade arrest. Here was the moment when theory turned into action. He thought briefly, remembered his legend, and responded in a warm and gentle voice, "I went to my aunt's grave whom I was unable to bury. She relocated with her husband to Swaziland five years ago. She died two months ago. Unfortunately, I could not attend her funeral because I was at school at the time and had no passport. It is custom to pay respect to the grave of a relative if a person missed his or her funeral. She stayed in Hhohho."

"You Africans are a crazy bunch. You talk to the graves. Do the dead flesh and bones hear you when you speak to them?" the official asked sarcastically. His snide response did not offend Vumani. He knew he was trying to give him a hard time. He quizzed Vumani, still gazing at him.

"What are you bringing to the country... And where do you attend school? Why are you not at school now?" He stared Vumani straight in the face.

Vumani remained calm and responded politely. "I have nothing except the *padkos*, the food that granny prepared for me to eat on my journey back home." He paused and remembered that he must answer the school question. "I go to Anchor Secondary State School," he told him the truth. "We are closed for October, ten days holiday," he continued, misinforming him this time. Even though there were school boycotts when he left, he knew other children were attending school.

The immigration officer paid no attention to his response. He turned to a file that was on his desk and scrolled through it. Obviously, the name Philemon Khumbula Mshumbi was not on the list of wanted South Africans. In the 80s, the immigration officers relied on that file to check for 'terrorists', who would be arrested before they crossed into the country. He cleared Vumani, stamped the passport, and shoved it back to him.

Nelson, who had been cleared earlier than Vumani, waited for him at the exit of the immigration office. He waved to Vumani

as soon as he saw him leaving the counter. They went to the car and braced themselves for the real thing, when their car would go through the border crossing checkpoint. Vumani did not panic. His intuition told him that they would pass the border inspection without trouble.

The stream of cars moving towards the checkpoint was also long. The line moved slowly forward. From the distance, they could see some cars being searched thoroughly, while others were signalled to pass. Nelson followed the cars in front of him slowly. It would be their turn in few minutes. Finally, they reached the search point. Vumani's stomach tensed. He steeled himself against whatever outcome the search may yield.

Nelson calmly stopped the car in front of a group of police officers. An officer merely peeped through the window of the car and waved Nelson to proceed. But two other police officers came up to the car as soon as Nelson tried to pull off. They opened the doors and the boot and searched the car. Five others congregated around the vehicle.

"Out," a policeman instructed them.

"What are you bringing into the country? Are you bringing dagga here? Do you smoke dagga?" asked the policeman who had commanded them to move out of the car.

Vumani shrugged. Nelson looked at them and smiled mischievously.

"You can tell this one is a priest. But I cannot say the same about other one," said the policeman, pointing at the pair. Vumani laughed inwardly at the assumption that he was a priest. While the one police officer searched the car and the other asked questions, a third came with a dog and ran a drug detection around it. They completed their search and motioned them to proceed.

As Nelson had guessed, the policemen who searched the car were untrained. Expert car searchers would have checked for false compartments in the car by knocking on the entire body or looking underneath. Unfortunately for the detection dog, it would have been impossible for it to sniff out the arms and ammunition hidden in the compartments of the car. Petrol had been sprinkled

around the false compartments to diffuse the smell of the hidden arms and ammunition.

Crossing the border had turned out to be easier than Vumani had imagined. They had travelled a few kilometres when Nelson brought the car to a screeching halt and then swerved onto the shoulder of the road.

"My journey ends here. Take the car and follow the signs to Johannesburg. It is a straight route. You won't get lost. I have other responsibilities to attend to. You have yours too. Sharpen your spear. You are going to face the real battle at home but don't worry, the gods will protect you. Good luck, and *bon voyage*," Nelson said as he got out of the car. Vumani looked at Nelson, nonplussed. At first, he thought Nelson was joking. But he realised the seriousness of his statement when Nelson walked briskly towards the valley and disappeared into the nearby village. What was Vumani supposed to do? Sink or swim? He had never driven from Swaziland before and was not familiar with the directions to Johannesburg. Why had they not forewarned him that he would at some stage drive to Johannesburg alone?

Nelson's abrupt actions reinforced the idea that the cloak of secrecy was necessary for the success of each mission. Theoretically, Vumani knew that the smaller parts that would lead to bigger things were to be placed at the right location for each mission to be successful, but did not know how this would manifest practically. Now he was experiencing it. He thought about what to do next, since he could not go back. His only option was to proceed. A long drive lay ahead of him. At least he was likely to reach home, unlike with Nelson's dangerous driving. He calculated the number of hours he would have to drive, factoring in getting lost, to be at a rendezvous point by 5:30 pm if he drove slowly. He counted eight hours. He had ample time, he thought.

Vumani drove slowly, alone in the car, listening to Aretha Franklin, who kept him company. The song 'God Will Take Care of You' gave him assurance that all would be well.

It was not long after he took the car from Nelson that he noticed a police car in the rear-view mirror, following him at a safe distance. After some time, they turned on their flashing lights

and pulled over Vumani's car. Until that time, Vumani had not thought about the possibility of arrest. His heartrate rose as he braked carefully and stopped the car on the side of the road. The police car stopped behind him, blue light still ablaze. Suddenly the doors of the car burst open, and three men came out, two in uniform and carrying guns. Vumani assumed his sheepish demeanour. He slowly came out of the car, his hands up, and faced them without flinching. He could not show them that he was nervous.

"Where do you come from? Open the boot!" One policeman instructed Vumani. Another looked at his sneakers. Vumani knew what the policeman who looked at his sneakers tried to determine. One of the skills they learned in their training as soldiers was to lace combat boots. So, many insurgents subconsciously lace their sneakers that way. He silently gave thanks to Nelson, who had reminded him on the eve of their departure that he must strive as much as possible to act as a civilian. This included his dress code, as well as his manner of walk and speech. In the bush, they walked fast, thanks to the marches and drills.

Vumani meekly opened the boot of the car, which had his bag of clothes and a few bags of pineapples and mangoes.

"I am coming from Swaziland," Vumani said in his submissive voice, and repeated the story he had told the immigration officer at the border.

The policeman listened to Vumani, and turned to the man with civilian clothes who was with them. It was obvious that he doubted that Vumani could be the person they were looking for.

"Is this the terrorist you were talking about?"

For a moment the man looked confused. "No, this is not the person. I thought the terrorist drove in this car out of the border. I know him quite well. He was the engineering instructor at Caculama Camp, in Malange at some stage. I saw him briefly when I was busy with Captain Rostol, but he lost me. Somehow, I thought he came out of the border driving this car. It's obvious that I erred. Sorry for that."

"Okay. Next time you must be sure and not send us on a wild goose chase," the policeman said as he logged the car's details and Vumani's passport details in his notebook. After a long pause, he signalled Vumani to proceed. Vumani took a deep breath and rejoined the road. It was the perfect rite of passage to his underground work. He suspected the man to be an askari who might have seen Nelson, but he wasn't certain which car he had travelled in. Vumani reasoned that Nelson might have seen the askari and silently decided to jump ship without informing Vumani, so as not to frighten him. He also speculated that Nelson's task could have been simply to assist him in crossing the border. It was difficult to determine for sure, as they conducted everything covertly.

For the next six hours, Vumani drove leisurely to the Transvaal while enjoying the scenic views and listening to Aretha. 'Amazing Grace' was playing as he reached Pollak Park in the East Rand. He stole a glance at his wristwatch. It was precisely 5:19 pm. He had eleven minutes to locate the Pollak Park Golf Course parking area, where a blue plastic bag would be supported by a brick, confirming his arrival at the correct spot.

Driving a few blocks, he found the golf course and discreetly surveyed the surroundings from his car window to identify the parking area. He knew he had arrived at the correct location when he spotted the rock with a blue plastic bag. He carefully braked, looked around, and then exited the car. Proceeding to the trunk, he retrieved the sports bag and left the mango and avocado bags, as instructed. The guidelines were clear: "Leave the car at exactly 5:30 pm and depart immediately. Do not take the key with you; leave it in the ignition. Remember, not a minute late. Call the next day at 6 am for further instructions."

He glanced at his watch again – it read exactly 5:30 pm. He looked around, feeling an urge to stay and ensure the car's safety, but knew it was a risk he couldn't take. He understood the importance of complying with his orders, knowing that defying them could compromise the mission and carry severe consequences. With a relieved sigh, he made his way towards the Pollak Park train station, inwardly smiling as the burden lifted

from his shoulders. It all seemed so straightforward and easy to him then.

The sun beamed down from a cloudless sky as he leisurely walked toward the station, mentally noting the date – 2 November 1985. Boarding train number 0252 to Springs, he planned to catch a connecting train to Servaas and then a bus to Duduza. He couldn't wait to reach his uncle's place in Duduza to calm his nerves and enjoy a good night's sleep. The combination of driving a long distance for the first time, the anxiety of his mission, and the uncertainty of what awaited him had left him tense and dizzy. The realisation that he would have to undertake similar missions until they vanquished the apartheid regime horrified him and filled him with a sense of impending doom. But he did not mind. He accepted that it would be worth his blood if the lives of the suffering South Africans changed for the better. If only he knew that things would turn take a tragic turn for him.

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November 5, 1985. The day had been plagued by intermittent drizzles, causing the temperature to plummet to freezing levels. Yet, this did not deter a group of determined children from painting their faces, donning adult-like outfits, and gathering at the Orlando Station and nearby traffic lights. Vumani had just disembarked from a train, heading towards his parents' home, when he caught sight of these children, beating tin drums, singing, and dancing.

"Penny, penny for a Guy Fawkes," they sang and danced, collecting money from passing commuters. Vumani watched with nostalgia, reminiscing about his own past when he, too, had taken part in similar performances on this day, unaware of its significance at the time. It was a customary practice for children to celebrate with song and dance. Retrieving a coin from his sweater, Vumani discreetly slipped it into the hand of one of the girls gathering funds from the commuters. Suddenly, the police arrived, charging forward and dispersing the children. The bystanders merely grumbled, having grown accustomed to the unrestricted power the police wielded since the state of emergency was declared on July 20, 1985, encompassing 260 magisterial

districts across the country. They victimised everyone, including children playing in the streets. The commuters wondered whether Guy Fawkes celebrations would be prohibited, like many other things since onset of the state of emergency, which might explain the dispersal of the children.

As Vumani slowly made his way home, he yearned for his favourite machine gun, the AK-47. He wished he could have unleashed a spray of bullets on those monsters who terrorised innocent children.

Maye didn't know that Vumani would be home that evening. She sat shivering in the cold, reading the Bible with Heke, whom she had not seen for nearly two months. Her two young children, Bareng and Senzeni, sat on the tattered carpet on the floor of the cold room. They did not light a fire, since the day's persistent drizzle kept the coals wet. But the weather was insignificant to them. Their warmth came from their parents' love.

Vumani's presence overwhelmed Maye as he entered the house, and tears of joy trickled down her face. She remained transfixed in her chair, unable to tear her eyes away from her beloved child, eagerly absorbing every detail and marvelling at how much he had grown since their last meeting, approximately eight months ago. Despite her elation, a chilling fear gripped her, a fear all too familiar to mothers of children like Vumani in their war-torn country. It was the fear born from the grief and loss experienced by countless women who had seen their sons and daughters fall victim to the escalating violence ravaging their land. It was also the fear of not knowing Bohloko's whereabouts and the haunting possibility that Vumani, too, could vanish again without a trace. Maye's heart ached as memories of Vumile, who had died mysteriously, resurfaced, leaving her with profound emotional scars. A feeling she couldn't fully comprehend took hold of her heart, prompting her to rise slowly and enfold Vumani in her arms.

"Oh, my son, you have grown so muscular and dark! How has school been? I had been wondering when you would return, especially after seeing Selina's children back from boarding

school," Maye said to Vumani, concealing her bittersweet feelings about their reunion.

Indeed, Vumani's timing for coming back was perfect. Many children who had left for boarding schools due to class boycotts in the townships had returned home for the short November holidays before their final exams. Thus, the story that Vumani was studying in the Eastern Cape seemed plausible.

"It is good, Maye. The only issue is that the place gets unbearably hot," Vumani responded shyly, feeling guilty for lying.

"Also, thank you for keeping us informed about your studies through the letters you wrote. We received all of them. It's a pity we couldn't reply as often as we wished. We really missed you. Wetsi and Morena are rarely home. It has been so dangerous to live in the township since the state of emergency was declared," she said, hugging him.

Vumani was surprised. He hadn't written any letters since he left home. There was no way for him to correspond while hiding in the bush. Communication with the outside world was impossible and strictly prohibited. He glanced at Heke, who winked at him. Vumani inferred from Heke's wink that Heke had been writing those letters. Luckily, Heke was there to alert Vumani; otherwise, he would have been bewildered when Maye spoke about receiving his letters. They stayed up late into the night, chatting.

The following day, Vumani woke up long before dawn and made his way to the public phones in Johannesburg City Centre. For security reasons, he ignored the closest public phones at the DOCC/YMCA hall and the post office, and instead ventured into town. At 6 am, he dialled the number he had memorised. Careful not to refer to the person he spoke to by name or title, the conversation was brief. He returned home and prepared for his trip to Sebokeng to visit relatives.

Since his return the previous day, Vumani had made the decision never to stay at home again. Luckily, this plan worked well since, like other families in the neighbourhood, his parents were renovating the house, breaching the bylaws to open a back door

after realising that their homes were prisons. The renovations at Vumani's parents home included constructing three back rooms. Vumani frequently travelled to visit relatives in the East Rand and the Vaal during this time, and he also occasionally sneaked out to Mozambique or Swaziland to fetch the arms and ammunition to be dropped at strategic places in different parts of the country. His confidence increased progressively as he succeeded in discharging his carefully planned operations. His parents didn't mind his absence. They believed he was safer with relatives, especially since his former friends, whom he now avoided like the plague, had become everyone's enemies. If only his parents knew what Vumani was truly involved in.

Although his underground activities meant that the ANC closely monitored his movements, paradoxically, Vumani felt a newfound freedom in these operations. He was inspired by the thought of contributing to a greater cause. He understood the pain and suffering of living under an oppressive system intimately, and wanted it to end as soon as possible. From 1984 to February 1990, Vumani would work like a bee, dedicated to his convictions of a better South Africa.

Nine

Freedom Fires

It was 1985. The majority of the citizens were outraged and a generation of young South Africans had been torn apart by the insidious spectre of apartheid, which had turned them into a horde of moving corpses. The weight of brutal repression had drained their spirits and left them without purpose. Driven by the memories of their fallen peers, they refused to stand down. Every step brought them closer to their graves, but they were immune to the constant threat of death.

In June 1976, children had sparked the flames of the struggle; in the 1980s, militant youths, who called themselves the 'Young Lions', would bleed the apartheid monster dry. Dispirited and betrayed by the racist regime, they hungered for hope and direction in their exasperation. Oliver Tambo's call in his 8 January 1984 speech to make the country ungovernable inflamed the hearts of the youth, giving vent to their idealism and fuelling their violence and anger. This revolutionary call to action could not be ignored.

The fires that had been smouldering for years leapt into an inferno. The youth stood on the front line as vanguards of the liberation struggle. They campaigned for a nationwide boycott of schools, imposing their will by intimidation and violence. Armed with chants, matches, petrol bombs, and stones, they roamed the streets like packs of savage dogs, agitating for their cause, and constantly locking horns with the apartheid forces. Township streets teemed with young girls and boys carrying placards calling for 'Liberation Before Education', and chanting the slogans, 'Apartheid stole our future', and 'Freedom in our time'. The security police hunted them down like ruthless wolves.

The 1980s youth protests coincided with the clandestine return of the June 1976 generation, who had joined the MK, APLA, and AZANLA. They were now trained guerrillas, resisting the

authorities through coordinated campaigns of sabotage. Their operations intensified. Civic organisations, labour movements, churches, and political organisations strengthened their peaceful demonstrations against apartheid. Some of the 1980s youth went abroad for military crash courses and toughened their acts of insurgency throughout South Africa. Libembe and many of her highly trained comrades were among those who returned to the country as competent guerrillas.

During this time, Vumani's former gang had escalated their criminal efforts, thinking that they were contributing towards rendering the country ungovernable. Unbeknownst to them, Mabulala and Modingwana, who were police informants, conspired to turn the gang into vigilantes. The regime's strategy was to covertly train, support, and organise criminal gangs, urging them to attack community members to quash resistance and sustain the propaganda of 'black-on-black' violence.

Vumani had been plucked out of this and brought to Angola for his military training, while the gang had become fully-fledged vigilantes by the time he returned in November 1985. Mabulala and Modingwana incited the gang to viciously attack a hall where activist youth had gathered to plan their programme of action. Very few activists survived that carnage. While the politicised youth were fighting to liberate the country, gangs of vigilantes undermined youth liberators and continued to terrorise township youth for seven years.

Early one Sunday morning, a lady wearing a Catholic church uniform drove towards the Johannesburg army base. She surveyed the area from inside her car and parked near the military building. She stepped out of her car and sat in a nearby restaurant, watching the soldiers guarding the building, then walked towards the taxi rank. Halfway there, she heard an explosion that shattered the army base and the surrounding buildings. Security police and soldiers rushed to seal off the area as a large column of smoke rose above De Villiers Street. She joined a crowd of people running for their lives, and slipped into a toilet at the taxi rank, emerging in a floral dress, and took a taxi to Eastgate, where she met a courier who whisked her out of the country. That explosion sparked a

series of insurgent attacks in the country and lifted the morale of the youth to escalate their resistance. A few days later, Libembe's face appeared in the front pages of the local newspapers as the terrorist who was responsible for explosions in Johannesburg and the surrounding areas.

The chaos of gunfire and explosions devoured innocent civilians. The youth and democratic movements fought tirelessly, rendering apartheid weak and the country ungovernable. The apartheid government's response was uncompromising. On 20 July 1985, Prime Minister Botha declared a partial state of emergency in 36 magisterial districts in the Eastern Cape and the Pretoria-Witwatersrand-Vereeniging area. The state of emergency failed to "govern the ungovernable" townships, and violent protest and raging resistance continued against the regime. On 12 June 1986, four days before the 10th anniversary of the Soweto Uprising, Botha extended the state of emergency to the whole country, his decision fuelled by the June 1976 youths' vow to take over the country within a decade.

The days following the announcement witnessed violence as never before seen in South Africa. The state of emergency granted law-enforcement agencies greater powers and authority to supress any opposition, and to deploy SADF troops to patrol township streets. Within six months, over 25 000 activists and children had been detained, as Soweto and other affected townships were placed under martial law. But the flames of freedom could not be quenched. The youth of the 1980s continued their fight, undeterred by the threat of death or imprisonment.

The military occupation and politicisation of the townships, the crackdown on activists, and the imposition of curfews to restrict citizens' movements did not disturb Vumani much. He returned five months into the state of emergency and persisted with his underground work, traveling in and out of the country while the vigilante gangs intensified chaos, tension, paranoia, and distrust in the townships.

During that time, Goodwill, the journalist who had published the book about Vumani, was assigned as a bureau chief for a foreign TV news broadcasting agency. He went to Vumani's

parents' house and left a message for Vumani to contact him. Vumani found Goodwill's message when he went to his parents' house and excitedly reconnected with him. Goodwill was concerned about Vumani, and enrolled him in a correspondence school, paid for his tuition, and engaged him as a freelance journalist at his company. However, he hesitated to recommend Vumani for permanent employment, believing he was too young to undertake risky assignments in this volatile country. If only Goodwill knew.

Vumani's underground work was dangerous, and he concealed it from Goodwill. His vow of secrecy dictated that he would reveal his activities to no one, no matter how trusted. Vumani continued to travel in and out of the country, sometimes using his freelance journalist cover as a front for his activist work. He wrote his matriculation exams under the state of emergency while the army watched over him, and passed exceptionally well. When his next trip out of the country came, he took his results to Bohloko.

Bohloko and a comrade named Notch (because he notched his belt tight) advised Vumani to register at Khanya College. At first he refused, seeing no need for further education, as he assumed that he would be guaranteed a good position in the new government after liberation. Bohloko persuaded him in May 1988, during one of his debrief visits. He applied that year and resumed his education in February 1989, while continuing his underground work.

Khanya was a hub of political activism, but Vumani was extremely cautious about getting involved in anything political which would put him at risk and jeopardise his underground work. He presented himself as an unobtrusive, apolitical music lover. This disguise allowed him to continue his covert work undetected. He was happy when he passed and was accepted at Wits University, convinced that he had crossed an inflection point of his life and was poised for a new beginning. What excited him most was that Wits was huge enough for him to continue with his underground work without the risk of being noticed.

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His underground activities bore excellent fruits, largely thanks to the recruitment of a comrade named Pina, who increased the volume of his activities. The crackdowns had reignited the youth's sense of injustice, and rebellion erupted with an explosive force. Vumani and Pina smuggled weapons to those who were trained in-country, helping to make the country ungovernable. Gunfire and explosions lay innocent civilians lifeless in the streets as the international community condemned and isolated South Africa with sanctions, disinvestment, and a cultural boycott. Even inside the country, the consumer boycott prohibited township residents from buying groceries in towns.

The tide was beginning to turn. Despite the government's efforts, violent mayhem continued for the next four years. Botha tried to calm the militant resistance with superficial reforms, introducing the "Total Strategy" campaign, attempting to win the hearts and minds of township communities through economic reforms. But the angry youth refused to be placated. They wanted change and wanted it now. By the late 1980s, it became clear that the cost of maintaining apartheid was just too high. Botha resigned in 1989, and FW de Klerk replaced him as the state president of South Africa.

The frequent changes in presidency did not concern Vumani and his peers much, as they had not voted for any of them. A change of president was a call to intensify their action. Unlike their forebears, who had lived their entire lives under the oppressive system, these young men hoped to conquer apartheid. De Klerk indicated at his inauguration that he would make reforms, which he announced on 2 February 1990.

Vumani was sitting with Pina at her parents' home. The bright, sunny Friday lifted their spirits but a dove pecking on the window caught their attention. It watched them for a while as if conveying a message. Vumani stopped sipping his juice and stared at Pina, who also stared at him. He kept his thoughts about the dove to himself, not wanting to appear foolish in front of her. It was a few minutes before FW de Klerk addressed the nation and

they were waiting anxiously to hear him. At that moment, the dove flew away as if it knew they had to be glued to the screen.

De Klerk's voice was circumspect and emotionless as he announced that he would unban all political organisations, allow all exiles to return, and release Nelson Mandela from prison. The message spread fast, sending shockwaves and cynicism across the country. Vumani received the news with boundless joy, hoping that the worst was behind him. Chuckling, he thought about the dove that had pecked the window, sensing that the hour had come. He imagined Bohloko and Sindi returning to the country and him getting married to her.

Still, the naysayers and cynics dismissed De Klerk's speech as nothing but a load of hogwash. They claimed that his utterance was the great deception that seers had foretold in the remote past. According to them, the unbanning and the return of exiles was a ploy by which the government could commit mass killings of activists. The doomsday preppers stockpiled food and other supplies as they warned of an imminent disaster that would befall the country. But the optimists believed De Klerk was the harbinger of peace who started as a killer, just like Paul in the Bible, and transformed into a powerful prophet. They claimed that Mandela's release coincided with the Second Coming of the Messiah. The town criers continued spreading the message, while South Africans waited anxiously for the day of Mandela's release. They wondered how he would look when he came forth from prison. After his imprisonment in 1964, it was forbidden to show his photos.

On 11 February 1990, the gates of Victor Verster Prison opened wide, as if the heavens had also opened, and Nelson Mandela appeared at the prison gates, holding hands with his wife, Winnie. Euphoria swept over the country as hysterical adherents mobbed Mandela, welcoming him with great fanfare. That same evening, thousands and thousands flocked to the Grand Parade in Cape Town to listen to his address. Those who could not go, watched it on television. His presence evoked awe and wonder. Thousands threw themselves before him and said, "Glory

be to the Heavens! The saviour is here! We will see liberation in our lifetime!"

Those who were stuck to their TVs at their homes held on to those words and prayed in jubilation, saying that the promise of the prophecies had been fulfilled. They pronounced in reverence, as the country erupted in song, "The Messiah has returned to liberate the masses. We have seen the Second Coming in our lifetime. Thank God, You have revealed Yourself to us."

Mandela came preaching peace with his tall and stately aura. In his speech, he cast off all lies and doubt, rejecting violence. He continued preaching for peace, offering mercy to those who persecuted him. The people declared that he was indeed the messenger of the gods uttering divine truths and praised his name in reverence. Perhaps he was the messenger of the gods. Perhaps he had been sent to end the suffering of people and cleanse the earth of all blood so that no blood would ever spill again. But his task would prove difficult. In 1990, at the start of negotiations, Mandela suspended the armed struggle, leaving Vumani confused about his underground activities.

Something was brewing behind the scenes as the dusty streets of South African townships filled with cries of victory. Of course, the people had witnessed historic events that surpassed their wildest imaginings and heard tales of heroism and bravery that were previously unheard of, but something uncanny was on the loose. The entire nation was swept up in euphoria and relief, but peace and harmony proved fleeting. The peace-loving citizens would soon discover that there were still those who sought violence and destruction. The warmongers stirred up old animosities, and divisions and tensions quickly boiled over into renewed violence that spread throughout the country as if contagiously. The country was again plunged into bloodshed.

Once again, the dusty streets of South Africa ran red with blood. The four corners of South Africa and the seven Bantustans bled: the Transvaal, Orange Free State, Natal, the Cape, Bophuthatswana, Ciskei, Gazankulu, KwaZulu, Lebowa, Qwaqwa and Venda. Death and destruction were everywhere. Commuters were ambushed on trains and taxi ranks and mourners were

attacked at night vigils and gravesides while they buried their fallen heroes. Under the command of Mabulala and Modingwana, the vigilantes rampaged. The youth defended their communities through street committees and defence units, fighting at the front lines. Clearly, this carnage had been timed to cause as much chaos as possible. Mandela blamed De Klerk and his secret soldiers and security police, while De Klerk blamed the 'third force'.

Bohloko was shot in Swaziland in March 1990. Although he survived the attempted assassination, there was no communication between him and Vumani until June of that year. Finally, a long-anticipated communication arrived from Bohloko, summoning Vumani to Maputo the following day. It was winter vacation for university students, and Vumani travelled to meet Bohloko. Bohloko wanted to compare notes with Vumani to piece together the circumstances around his assassination attempt. He spent only a day with Bohloko after the meeting, the shortest time since they had reconnected. Usually, he would spend that short time only when he was to take hardware back into the country.

It was time to go. As Vumani climbed onto the back of the Toyota Land Cruiser on the second day, he found it hard to say goodbye to Bohloko. Bohloko and Nelson cut forlorn figures as they stood next to the car, bidding him goodbye. He watched them through the car window as they grew smaller and smaller, until they receded into specks of dust. Vumani couldn't hold back his tears, not knowing if he would ever see Bohloko again.

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19 October 1990. The afternoon was a typical Spring Saturday, the sun shining bright in the cloudless sky. Vumani had just picked up his journalist friend Mduduzi in town, where he had covered the 4th commemoration of Samora Machel's passing. They were heading to Soweto, the car radio blaring music, when a police car signalled for them to stop, flashing its lights. The police searched them after searching the car and confirming that it was not stolen. They attempted to confiscate the radio. Mduduzi was annoyed. A scuffle ensued. The police tackled Mduduzi to the ground and stripped the radio from the car while Vumani watched helplessly.

Meanwhile, in Lusaka, approximately 2 000 kilometres from Johannesburg, a different kind of drama was unfolding. It was a day like any other for Bohloko, a promising young South African. Two of his known comrades came to fetch him while he played with his seven-year-old daughter and a three-year-old son. He bade his family goodbye, promising to be back by late that evening.

It was not to be. He was tortured and bludgeoned to death before being loaded into a Kombi and thrown across the Great Lakes Road, where his badly mutilated body was left to be run over by passing cars. Satisfied with their job well done, the 'comrades' shook their bloody hands and went their separate ways.

Monday 21 October 1990 was a breathtaking day. Rising early, Vumani felt a sense of wellbeing and headed towards the library to prepare for an impending exam on Wednesday. Yet an unexpected heaviness settled within his heart. Vumani sought solace outside, sitting on the retaining wall across from the Wartenwailer Library. A vibrant bloom of lavender-blue jacaranda flowers burst forth from every branch, creating an enchanting, almost surreal, shade that enveloped everything below. This beautiful tapestry mesmerised him, but failed to alleviate his overwhelming sadness.

Vumani couldn't understand why he felt this way. It could not be the exams. It could also not be the police having taken his radio. A gentle breeze blew through the jacaranda trees, rustling the leaves softly and creating a soothing melody that filled Vumani with wistful thoughts of Bohloko and Sindi. He tried to cheer himself up by reminding himself that the exiles were coming back home and he would soon reunite with his brother, but this did not quell his feeling of being weighed down.

The sadness that Vumani felt years ago at Vumile's funeral had returned. His lower eyelid twitched persistently. *It means I am going to cry*, he thought. Just then, a classmate waved blissfully and blew kisses at him as she went into the library. He remembered that he sat there because he had wanted to go to the library, but resolved in his mind that he should rather go visit his parents in Orlando. Somehow, he had an uneasy feeling that

something was wrong at home, not knowing that startling news awaited him there.

As Vumani rounded the corner to his parents' home, the anguished cries of his brother Morena echoed through the air. He entered a sea of mournful sobs, and found himself in the bedroom. This was a makeshift gathering place for mourners. Ten dishevelled individuals mirrored the havoc within him. Maye sat upon a low mattress, while his sister Manini concealed her face on her lap. Five women clung together, tears streaming down their faces as they prayed. Morena slumped in a chair, hands covering his face as he wept. Vumani stood amidst the grieving company, awaiting an explanation.

"Please take a seat, Vumani," said Maye, with stoic, calm features. Vumani sat while Maye prepared to deliver the devastating news to him.

"They killed..." said Manini, sobbing, her eyes puffy and full of tears.

"Who did they kill, Maye?" Vumani fretted. Maye looked up at him. At that moment, Bhaye entered the room, summoned from work to hasten home, unaware of the unfolding tragedy.

"They killed your son, Bhaye. Bohloko is no more," a neighbour who was also in the room said, sobbing.

Bhaye stood with stupor on his face. Just like Maye, his hopes had clung stubbornly to the possibility of Bohloko still being alive, despite his long absence. They had not buried him in their minds, although they thought him perhaps dead. It was difficult for Bhaye to admit that Bohloko had finally died. To him, it was as if he died twice. He remained standing, unable to grasp the reality that his son had passed away after they had already mourned him when he disappeared. His mind raced in disbelief; how could Bohloko die twice? Numbness and confusion held him captive, refusing to let go.

Vumani's eyes filled with tears as he watched Bhaye standing, confused. The shock and pain of Bohloko's passing paralysed Vumani, shattering his hopes and dreams of a better tomorrow. He could not receive the bad news just when he thought

he would celebrate Bohloko's return home. He clenched his teeth and held his face tightly, tears streaming. He wanted someone to say something to ease his grief. He wanted someone to assure him that Bohloko was alive and that this was all a bad dream.

No one in the room was strong enough to step forward and console him. His thoughts drifted to the precious moments he had spent with Bohloko since they had reconnected. Bohloko had been full of life, joking as he usually did, braving the unsafe streets of Swaziland and Maputo, where danger lurked. He thought about the trips he had made in and out of the country, hoping that his contribution would oil the wheels of his brother's speedy return. It was not to be. Now he was no more. Vumani screamed hysterically, "No, not Bohloko! How can he die?"

He searched his mind frantically for answers but couldn't accept living without Bohloko. Fate toppled the monumental pillar he held onto for his existence. He remembered his last moment with Bohloko. Images of Bohloko receding into a dot played in his mind. He could not believe that it was all over in a flash. Bohloko's death marked the end of everything; the end of his life, his schooling, his hopes and promises for a better tomorrow, and the end of the revolution. For the first time, Vumani understood the futility of everything. He could not believe that his brother, his most intelligent mentor, who had worked tirelessly for the struggle, was laid in a mortuary somewhere in Lusaka. For him, Bohloko's death spelled his own death as well.

He tried to remain standing, but fell to his knees. Eventually, he gathered his strength and stumbled into his room outside, weeping uncontrollably. Overwhelmed with grief, he fell asleep still crying. In a dream, he saw himself in a raging flood, trying to cling desperately to a large tree growing on the riverbank. The water rose rapidly, washing away the earth beneath his feet, making it difficult to maintain a grip. Despite the danger, he held on tightly, his face etched with fear and determination. He awoke later that evening, still dazed by the devastating news. The stark reality that his favourite brother was no more, was so hard to bear. For the first time, Vumani reflected on the arms that he had smuggled into the country and the lives they may have destroyed.

He suddenly felt that he could not forgive himself for the pain he had caused others, now that he was feeling the pain of losing a loved one.

Finally, Bohloko's badly mangled body was brought back to the country and interred without the military honours due to him. A member of the ANC's National Executive Committee delivered a glowing eulogy of his bravery at the graveside. Vumani did not have many memories of that day, only a pervasive sense of sadness and grief that hung over the cemetery. One man in particular wailed loudly, his cries echoing throughout the cemetery. Vumani would have wailed too, but the grief left him numb and dry, without a voice or tears. He knew from that day on that he was forever changed by the loss of Bohloko.

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A tough-looking man arrived at the campus residence at sunset, just after Vumani had entered his room. He knocked once, turned the doorknob, and walked in without waiting for a response.

Startled, Vumani stared at the stranger, wondering who he was and why he had barged into his room uninvited. The man surprised him by giving him a hug and settling down on his bed.

"Vumani, how are you? Finally, we meet. Obviously, you don't know me," he said good-naturedly.

Vumani's room was small, located on the top floor of the Braamfontein Centre. Originally used as servant quarters, the university had assigned these rooms to postgraduate students. Vumani had chosen this floor because it gave him the privacy he needed. In addition to a desk, a study lamp, and a chair, there was only a single bed and the small cupboard in the room. It was a self-catering student residence. Every so often, Vumani cooked food at the communal kitchen and stored it in the cupboard.

"Finally, I have found you," said the man, grinning. Vumani stared at him. He wondered who this person was who had the cheek to talk to him in that manner. If it was meant to be a joke, there was nothing amusing in his statement, Vumani thought.

"I know you don't know me, although I am sure you know my name. I am James."

A crushing pain seared through Vumani's heart when he heard the name. He remembered that he had been told that James had fetched Bohloko from home before his mysterious murder. His mind flooded with the horror of Bohloko's tragedy as the man he believed to be his brother's killer sat before him. He wondered how James knew that he was a student at Wits, and why he had come to see him. He looked at him carefully to make out if he carried a weapon, but saw no indication of any.

James spoke perfunctorily, his bloodshot eyes wandering around the room as if examining its contents. "I need to clear my name. I didn't kill your brother. We went to a club after picking him up from home. He left the club just after midnight, and that was the last time we saw him."

He kept quiet and stared at Vumani. Vumani couldn't believe James had the audacity to approach him and give him such a weak alibi. He wondered what James wanted from him, and whether he, too, was in danger. As he struggled to figure out how to respond, he realised that the ANC should have investigated James for his brother's murder.

Vumani pierced his angry eyes into James and said, "There's no point in reliving the trauma. Bohloko is dead and nothing will bring him back." He didn't care what James thought. If he had come there to kill him, so be it. He was a sitting duck in a room that James had turned into a kill zone. He thought of making a run for it, leaving James in the room, but concluded that he did not want to live his life as a fugitive. He braced himself for the worst.

James pretended he hadn't heard Vumani's response. He chatted about lots of things, including what a nice person Bohloko was. Finally, he said, "I need your help, Vumani. The country is in chaos, and I need arms. I know you can help me. You have Dead Letter Box maps in the country, isn't it?" Vumani thought of the weapons cached in different places in the country. He remained silent for a moment.

From James' statement, Vumani discerned that James knew that he worked underground with Bohloko. That meant that Bohloko's assassins had lots of information about him, he thought. Obviously, he was a comrade, but only Bohloko, Nelson, and perhaps the person Bohloko reported to knew what Vumani had been up to. It confirmed Vumani's suspicions that someone high up may have sold out Bohloko.

"Well, unfortunately, as you may know, I didn't stash the arms I smuggled into the country. I left the cars I used at random places. I don't even know who collected them, let alone carry any myself. I only carry a Bible," Vumani said, pointing at a Bible on the bookshelf bolted to the wall. Vumani distrusted James, but would not show it. He believed James would reveal the identity of the person who gave him the orders to assassinate Bohloko.

James nodded, his gaze shifting to the bookshelf, and continued chatting about unimportant things, unmindful of the time. Vumani believed James was only warming up and would reveal more incriminating information later on, but it wasn't until very late that Vumani recognised that it was possible James actually had come to see him to get information about arms caches in the country. Moreover, it became clear to Vumani that James was reluctant to leave. So, Vumani offered to prepare some food for them both in the communal kitchen. They ate and then they both retired to the single bed in the cramped room. James left at dawn, leaving Vumani contemplating his next move.

Vumani didn't feel safe and moved out of the res, hoping to avoid James. He moved to Randlodge in Berea and squatted with friends, but James was somehow able to find him there as well. He changed his location six times, but James always knew where to find him, even when he squatted with his female friends, Princess and Fezeka, at Glyn Thomas. He felt as though he was being monitored, although he didn't know why.

Eventually, James disappeared from Vumani's life, and a few months later, he heard that James had been killed in a cash-in-transit heist. Although James was dead, the fear and uncertainty that he had planted in Vumani remained for a long time.

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Heke was a natural for covert operations and had primarily spent his time on reconnaissance missions prior to the unbanning. On this particular day, however, he was not conducting reconnaissance, because he was on an underground mission. He found himself crouched next to a bush beside a shop, patiently counting each member of the household as they left, as he had done for the previous four days. Once he was certain that they had all departed, he quietly entered the yard and peeked through the window. There he saw Maye sitting by the stove, warming her hands. A feeling of excitement filled him. It seemed everything would go according to his plans. He entered the house, his footsteps muffled. The sudden presence of someone in the house rattled Maye, especially since she had not heard the door open.

"Who are you?" Maye asked, a cold shiver running through her body.

"Don't be scared, Maye. Please don't, Maye. I don't mean any harm. I am here to pay homage to my fallen commander. Don't you remember me?" he asked, a smile of joy lighting up his face as he extended his arms overhead, showing that he had no weapon. He went closer to her, trying to hug her. Maye remained seated.

"Aah, is it you, Heke!" she said, recognising his face, a smile replacing the expression of alarm. "Where have you been? Unfortunately, I can't stand anymore, my child. I need to be assisted to stand and to walk. Manini left me here to warm myself. She quickly dashed to the station. She should be back soon."

Maye could never forget Heke. She loved him as her son and enjoyed the Bible discussions she had previously had with him. "But why do you give me such a fright, Heke?" Her face was marked by bags under her eyes and a palpable sense of sorrow. The intensity of her grief was overwhelming and difficult to bear.

"I am hungry, Maye," said Heke, looking at the boiling kettle on the stove. He was aware that Maye would likely have something for him to eat. Although they were poor, Maye often cooked abundant food to accommodate any unexpected visitors who frequented her house, including those from areas outside

Johannesburg seeking treatment at Baragwanath Hospital, those who came to Johannesburg in search of better opportunities, and many others who utilised her house as a stopover. He was shocked seeing Maye's state of health, which had deteriorated rapidly since Bohloko's passing.

"Don't worry, my child. There is soup in the fridge. Please take it out and warm it on the stove. There is also bread in the cupboard. Manini will make tea as soon as she comes back." She looked at him. He had grown thin and emaciated since she last saw him.

Heke opened his bag and took out a single page and gave it to Maye. It was Hank Snow's song, written by Lloyd Campbell and Ernest J Ford. She read it:

He'll Understand and Say Well Done

Give when you give
The best of your service
Telling the world that
The Saviour has come

Be not dismayed when
Men don't believe you
He'll understand
And say well done

Oh, when I come to you
The end of my journey
Weary of life
And the battle is won

Carrying the staff
And the cross of redemption
He'll understand
And say well done

Misunderstood, yes
The Saviour of sinners
Died on the cross
He was God's only Son
Oh, hear him calling

His father in Heaven
Not my will, Lord,
But thine be done
And when I come...

Heke served himself soup, bread, and some vegetables he found in the fridge. He made coffee for Maye and sat next to her as he dug into his plate of food with gusto. His restless left leg belied his calm exterior. He let out a long sigh of distress.

"He never lived to see the liberation he fought so hard for. And what a pity that he died a gruesome death... They thrust the spear into the back of a comrade. The very spear that was supposed to fight *for* the nation turned *against* the nation. I fear for our country," he said, thinking deeply, flecks of bread spraying onto the table. Maye was focused on the song sheet and paid little attention to him.

While he cast his eye around the room, Heke saw Bohloko's picture hanging on the wall. He quickly stood up and raised his right hand in a reverent salute. "We salute you, Commander, the greatest warrior of our liberation struggle! You remained loyal to the movement even as you faced death. Salute!"

Maye swallowed a lump in her throat, her mind lost in deep thought. Heke took his seat again and continued eating, slurping his soup.

"Maye... Maye... Maye..." he sputtered, almost choking.

She stared at him. "Are you fine, Heke?"

Heke observed Maye. Tapping at his left foot, he lowered his voice, "I was saying, I am sorry Maye, that you have lost a son, worse still, in the manner that he perished. He had so many wounds, as no part of his body was spared from the machete. Even wild beasts do not kill each other with such cruelty. All for power, fame, and fortune. It was nothing but a power struggle."

Pain tore through Maye's heart. She nodded, giving no indication of what she thought.

"What will we say, my son? The wise say a bird builds its own nest using the feathers of another bird," she said, her voice calm and measured.

He slurred around a mouthful and said, "This battle was not for the fainthearted. Your son fought a gallant and a good fight for this liberation. He demolished garrisons and fortresses. He was a powerhouse. He fought as though he had divine power. The song that I printed for you best describes his achievements. He and many others like him believed that they were giving their best service. They had a strong sense of duty. They trusted the people they worked with, not knowing that they were being used and manipulated and would ultimately be killed only for the stomachs of the traitors and their families.

"Our God and our deities will look at Bohloko and many others like him, understand, and say, 'Well done!'. They are sleeping right now, those who have passed on. But they know, wherever they are, that it was not in vain. They knew they would die, but they did not know when or how they would be killed. They did not expect to be killed by one of their own. Like myself, they were sent on missions they could not understand, but because they were soldiers, the great servants of the people, they complied, knowing that they were being led to their graves. They thought Bohloko would die in battle when they shot him in order to conceal their treachery, but he survived. They finished him off because he discovered that they had betrayed him. He saw them. He knew they were the ones who got him shot."

Heke's statement evoked Maye's grief. She wanted to stop him but at the same time, she found his words soothing.

He continued, "I am sorry, Maye. To think that they took his body parts, all this while still alive, it torments me. I am certain they used his body parts for muti – it was ritual killing. They really tortured him. Imagine the agony he went through. They threw dust in your eyes and claimed that it was a car accident. One day their handlers will expose those despicable traitors who parade as comrades. They will speak the names of all those wolves in sheepskins who worked with them. The truth will come out one day. They may try to blot out his name now. In time, it will be engraved forever in the books of history..."

He stood and went towards the stove. He removed the boiling kettle and sat again facing Maye.

"And therefore, I tell you, Maye," he spoke with his mouth still full. "If they gave the best of their service fighting the unjust, be not dismayed when people don't recognise them. God understands and He is saying 'well done' to them."

He paused, as if gathering his thoughts. "Your tears won't trickle in vain, Maye. They will meet all your needs and those of your children. No one will suffer in this house."

He stared at Maye and blurted out, "We can cry crystal tears or cry until blood seeps out of our eyes. Bohloko will never come back. He is gone forever. Who knows, maybe his death was an act of immolation to the deities of the struggle? We must, therefore–" He heard the kitchen door opening, dropped his plate of food, and went out using the front door.

Heke left Maye crying with grief. His words were too much for her to absorb. She quickly wiped away her tears. She had to be strong for her children and did not want them to see her cry.

Vumani had returned from campus to relieve Manini of their mother's care. As he stepped into the house, Maye's tearful eyes met his, overwhelmed by grief from Bohloko's passing. Losing a son was hard enough, but losing one while the other exiles were returning home was unbearable. She struggled to appear strong for her children, who were also grappling with their brother's death. Although she preferred solitude, she had to be there for her family.

"How was your exam?" she asked, her voice low.

"I'm struggling, Maye. Not with exams, but with understanding life. It's just unfair. Why would the Creator give someone such amazing gifts and then take them away in the prime of their life? Thirty years is too young to die. I can't believe this," Vumani replied, his eyes brimming with tears. It wasn't just Bohloko's death that affected him, but also the betrayal and lies surrounding it.

"We learn our best lessons in difficult times and in pain, my child. Life is unpredictable, and we have no control over certain things. Don't let the things you can't control consume you," Maye advised, not knowing how best to respond to Vumani.

"But why did it happen to us, Maye? Why did our family attract this like a magnet attracts steel? I'm going to avenge his death," Vumani said bitterly.

Maye's eyes darkened at the mention of revenge. She knew the pain of losing someone and didn't want to subject another family to it too. "We have been torn apart by your brother's murder, Vumani. They didn't just kill him; they killed us too. The machete that chopped his body to pieces slowly consumes us every day. But there's no need for revenge. The price is too high, my child, no matter how justified it may seem. Blood is contagious; it seeks more blood the minute you spill it. We must break this cycle of violence and help people to see each other as human beings."

Vumani pondered Maye's words, but he couldn't agree with her. He was determined to make a noise about his brother's passing until they told the family the truth.

"I hear you, Maye. But why did they hack him with machetes? If his spirit is looking down upon us right now, I want it to retaliate," he said furiously, tears rolling down his cheeks.

Maye couldn't bear to see Vumani in such pain. She gathered her strength, fighting back her own tears, and continued in a subdued voice, "I pray that no one should face the sorrows we have confronted. Please don't hold grudges, my son."

Vumani could tell that his mother was nearly in tears, and he knew that Bohloko's passing was too much for her. He turned away so that he could not see her eyes fill with tears, and left the room, feeling deep loss and inconsolable grief.

As Vumani left, Maye thought about his pain. She wished that all her family would accept Bohloko's passing and let God mete out justice instead of wanting to dispense it themselves. She wondered what would happen if Vumani did not heed her advice.

A pang of worry hit her as she thought of the consequences Vumani would face if he sought vengeance. She felt as powerless as had she felt on 16 June 1976, when children were massacred and parents did not know who to run to to protect their children. That evening, she knelt and made a short prayer. It was the first time in a long time that she did not pray for her children. "God, please take my life and spare me the grief to bury yet another child."

That night, at the age of 52, Maye succumbed to her sorrow and broken heart, leaving Bhaye to care for their six other children. She lay on her bed as if smiling, with her eyes closed, and in complete stillness. It was the end of the journey for a mother who had silently battled against the pain of losing her children. She died disturbed, not knowing the truth behind their deaths, leaving behind a family still struggling to come to terms with Bohloko's death and now her own passing. The keepers of tradition would claim that Bohloko's death cleared the path for Maye's departure. They would proclaim that the spirits carried the mother alongside her beloved son to the land of the ancestors. This might explain why Maye's passing occurred when the grief over Bohloko's departure had scarcely subsided. It was worse for Vumani, because he was writing his final exams.

Maye's frugal funeral was held three days later. For Vumani and his family, it felt like Bohloko's second burial. There was nothing Vumani could do but stand at the graveside and wipe his tears as the coffin was lowered to the ground. Years later, Vumani learned that his mother's official cause of death was heart failure as a result of takotsubo cardiomyopathy, or broken heart syndrome. It was clear that his beloved mother never recovered from Bohloko's tortured murder.

Vumani bore his grief stoically, keeping it hidden from everyone around him. He wasn't just grieving Maye's death; he was still reeling from the loss of Bohloko. The days following Maye's funeral were a blur, and Vumani felt numb and disconnected from everything around him. The pitying looks he received from his family only made him feel more dissociated.

Vumani left the house one morning, walking aimlessly along the street. Staring at the ground, he kicked a stone, and he was suddenly overcome with waves of intense despondency. Memories of Bohloko flooded his mind, and he was struck by the realisation that he would never experience those moments again. His heart ached with devastation, and he shuddered despite the scorching heat.

The unrest and violence that plagued South Africa reflected Vumani's turmoil. Regardless of the conflict's outcome, the scars inflicted upon his country would endure for generations. A feeling of dread gripped him tightly. Vumani continued living his life fearful that something bad would happen.

Back on campus, Vumani struggled to connect with others. His inner turmoil pushed him away from human interaction. The world felt distant and foreign, draining him of motivation and energy. Trying to focus on his exams became a torturous endeavour as he stared blankly at his books, unable to absorb a single word.

In an unexpected turn of events, one evening Vumani returned to his campus residence to discover a note tucked beneath his door.

> *Hi VP,*
>
> *You never stay at res, neh! It seems as if old habits die hard in your case (smile). See you soon. Mwah!*

The surprise set Vumani's heart racing as he read the message. Although it was anonymous, he immediately recognised the familiar handwriting as Sindi's. It meant Sindi was in Johannesburg, he thought as regret filled him for not studying in his room as he would typically do. Sindi had managed to track

Vumani down at the campus hostel a few weeks ago, defying orders to avoid him. Her heart had always longed for Vumani, but she could not risk searching for him because she was deployed outside Johannesburg. Only when a special mission in Soweto emerged did she finally have a chance to locate him. Bound by her responsibilities and the risk of angering her commanders, she could not stay long at Vumani's residence. This left her no choice but to leave a note, uncertain if they would cross paths again.

As Vumani absorbed the contents of the note, he understood the intricacies of Sindi's underground activities. The unbanning hadn't fully eradicated such operations, and he clung to the hope that he would soon be reunited with his beloved girlfriend.

Ten

The Burning Coffins

The plan was concretised three months after Mandela's release from prison. News of his freedom bore the portent of impending emancipation for the shackled South African masses. As in the beginning, Vlakplaas went unnoticed in South Africa. Only Teufel, his masters, and his minions knew about it. His minions, desperate to obstruct the forthcoming change, conspired without a care for the repercussions. Their actions were driven by a relentless oppressor who cast a malevolent shadow over their existence. If only they had perceived the perilous dance with evil into which they unwittingly descended. But their unwavering loyalty to Colonel Teufel spurred them to kindle the flames of discord that would soon submerge the country in blood.

When Teufel's squad violently attacked the residents of Sebokeng hostels in July 1990, clad in their UDF/ANC insignia, the colonel savoured the realisation that his sinister designs had reached fruition. At long last, he had orchestrated discord among the nation's populace, pitting brother against brother. This initial massacre heralded a harrowing sequence of savagery that swept across the country, with unarmed citizens bearing the brunt of the violence. Funeral vigils, the dusty byways of townships and villages, family hearths, and the mournful carriages of trains all transformed into grim theatres of civil butchery. This grim nightmare stretched out its grisly hand in Natal, Thokoza, the East Rand, the Vaal, the Northern Transvaal, the Free State, Soweto, Ciskei, and beyond. As the National Peace Accord of 14 September 1991 held out a promise of peace, Colonel Teufel and his masters redoubled their efforts.

On 1 April 1992, Colonel Teufel leaned on the edge of his sturdy desk in his dimly lit office. Two of his most loyal executioners, Modingwana and Mabulala, flanked him. The palpable tension of each moment strained under the heavy burden

of the day's impending events. The colonel had summoned them and all his executioners.

As the morning sun rose, the assassins had individually received their calls from the colonel. They were initially sceptical, and suspected that this might be an elaborate ruse, a macabre April Fool's prank. But Colonel Teufel was known for being stern; his reputation left no room for frivolity. They understood that these summonses held a gravity far beyond mere jest. Reluctantly, one by one, they converged on the colonel's lair, punctual and with trepidation. Each arrival added to the mounting unease in the chamber.

Warlord, a man of shadow and silence, arrived shortly after Modingwana and Mabulala. He entered Colonel Teufel's room with measured steps, his heart beating a disquieting rhythm of both reverence and dread. His eyes darted nervously as he approached the colonel, the malevolent intent of their meeting sinking deep into his conscience. The colonel's twisted grin sent icy tendrils down Warlord's spine. There was no time for pleasantries; the gravity of the situation hung like a shroud in the room.

"I have no time to spare," Colonel Teufel declared with a tone as sharp as a blade. "My schedule is littered with staggered meetings throughout the day. Modingwana and Mabulala will assist you in loading this trunk into your vehicle. You understand the task at hand. Not a single bullet should be squandered. Our aim is to sow chaos and to destabilise the nation, to quash any prospect of elections. The spectre of communism looms, and I have written explicit instructions for you regarding where and when to strike. Your associates are free to employ any means at their disposal, should our arsenal prove insufficient. Both the police and the military are aware of the impending assault and will aid you in your mission. I shall reconvene with you soon."

With these chilling words, Colonel Teufel steered Warlord out of his office, and Modingwana and Mabulala meticulously loaded the trunk with a deadly cache of weapons into the waiting vehicle.

Following Warlord's departure, the four askaris – their once steadfast confidence now visibly shaken – approached

Colonel Teufel. With cunning moves, they had infiltrated the ranks of young, unsuspecting activists, who believed they were to receive training in the use of arms. These innocent activists never suspected that their trainers were Teufel's agents. As the trembling hands of the askaris accepted the concealed arsenal, the dim light revealed the palpable fear in their eyes. Once, they had sought solace within the communities they were now meant to dismantle. The spectre of their impending actions bore heavily upon their souls as they left Teufel's oppressive presence.

Judas Madi, a man once devoted to his political ideals, entered with his jaw clenched in internal turmoil and his brow furrowed with worry. Teufel's insidious influence had twisted his convictions into a grotesque perversion of their former purity. As he accepted the vial of poison meant for his comrade, he felt gnawing pangs of guilt and fear, struggling to reconcile his once noble beliefs with the abhorrent mission now thrust upon him.

"Since you failed to bring that Libembe girl in alive," Teufel intoned coldly, "I want you to poison her. She wields great influence and could undermine our plans if she continues to live." The colonel's penetrating gaze bore into Madi as he turned away, wrestling with his conscience.

Comrade Zinhle, a recent recruit, trembled as she entered Teufel's office. Her innocence stood in stark contrast to the surrounding darkness. Mabulala had lured her into Teufel's fold, deceiving her comrades, who placed their trust in her unknowingly. Her wide, fearful eyes fixated upon Teufel. He seemed more menacing than the revered commander they had portrayed to her. The weight of dread pressed heavily upon her heart as she, too, received an abhorrent order – that she should organise the scorching of Ngoho's house. Her heart trembled, her spirit burdened by the ominous path that lay ahead.

Oupa and Lunga were the final arrivals in this macabre gathering. Lunga, a young man haunted by the weight of his past sins, had grappled with the terrible decision to join this unholy alliance. His voice trembled as he reluctantly consented to his orders, and Teufel's gaze bore deep into his soul, leaving him no recourse but to accept the evil weapons. The fear of incurring

the wrath of his newfound companions and the crushing guilt of his own betrayal gnawed at him as he and Oupa loaded the boot of their car with weapons destined for the flesh and blood of their own.

By the end of the day, Teufel was in high spirits. His project to destabilise the country had come to fruition. One by one, his minions had received their weapons, their fear and culpability casting a pall over their conscienceless hearts. Each assassin found themselves ensnared in a relentless vortex of dread, their belief in the wickedness of their impending actions colliding headlong with the torment of conscience. Yet, there was no viable escape. Colonel Teufel stood as a figure of unrelenting terror, his influence warping their very beings into horrifying instruments of mutilation. The seeds of sadism had been sown, awaiting the day they would bloom into a sinister harvest of torment and suffering.

On 3 April 1992, Teufel, Warlord and an unknown sergeant briefed a band of 30 men, heavily armed with guns and machetes. At midnight, Warlord dropped them in Boipatong in the Vaal. Some of them had balaclavas and some had their faces darkened to make them appear black. The community of Boipatong were woken by the sounds of gunfire and the wailing of humans and of sirens. It was around midnight when the band randomly went into houses, shooting at residents indiscriminately, while those who carried machetes hacked at them. As screams and pandemonium broke, with terrified residents running for their lives, leaving their houses, other assailants on the streets opened fire at them. In the chaos, many ran straight into the line of fire, thinking that they were running away from it. Many bodies lay on the dusty grounds by the time Warlord ordered his assailants to cease fire. By the morning light, dozens of bodies and blood littered the streets and houses. They counted 69 bodies scattered around the area.

The anguished cries had long subsided by the time the clock struck 2:30 am. The township lay paralysed in a deep fear after the gruesome murderers had struck. An eerie silence stole over the township. Not a soul ventured out; only stray dogs roamed the desolate streets, their tongues lapping at the remnants of the

grim scene. Amidst the silence, the faint groans of a few survivors pierced the stillness.

Warlord, a sardonic grin playing upon his lips, guided his pickup van through the dusty thoroughfares of the forlorn township. Sleep might never visit his conscience, but he took perverse satisfaction in accomplishing his ruthless mission. The indiscriminate massacre of innocent civilians was but one more addition to his dark narrative. He and his collaborators revelled in their ability to transform the country into a melancholy graveyard. But the ghosts of the murdered activists roamed in the shadows, soon to reincarnate and continue with the struggle with the energy of the next generation.

Those who had perpetrated this heinous act did not seek solace in sleep upon their return. Instead, they remained glued to their television screens, watching as their deeds blazed out in news reports. They were overcome with a sense of elation, seeing themselves as creators of headlines. Untroubled by the weight of history's judgment, they willingly embraced their roles as cruel and ruthless figures in the archives of the future.

While the country descended into violence, Vumani was hidden at the campus residence. If Bohloko were still alive, he would, like many of his peers, be at the battlefront, protecting communities from this mayhem. But Vumani's disenchantment barred him from engaging in anything.

The following night, a Kombi parked on a field a few metres from a mine dump and switched off its lights. Phiri, Sela, and the third askari saw the Kombi exited their car – also parked in the dark – and walked towards it. They were excited. Their plan to entrap the youth seemed to have worked exceptionally well. Phiri had gained access to the young community activists under the pretext that he was an MK member. Before long, he promised to train them as community defence units. He could not conceal his thrill as the eight community youth members came out of the Kombi when they saw Phiri and Sela approaching.

They too were excited. Finally, they were going to get the training they needed to use firearms so that they could protect their families and communities. They had nothing to suspect.

They knew Phiri as member of the MK – which he previously had been, before he had turned into an askari. They were a few metres from each other when Phiri threw a grenade on them and opened fire. All eight youths died from the shots that strafed their bodies. Teufel was elated when they reported back to him and when he watched the news. His plan had materialised. The incident would serve as a warning for any youth who wanted to be involved in political activism.

The following morning was cold and misty. Warlord armed his assailants with guns and spears, and dropped them at Naledi Station. He went back to his hotel room to watch the news. At around 7:30 am, 33 men spread themselves throughout each of the 11 carriages of train number 9463 to Johannesburg Station, with weapons hidden under their heavy coats. As was always the case at that time of day, the train was packed with commuters travelling to work. As soon as it left the station, the men unleashed a volley of fire at the passengers in all the overcrowded carriages. Some commuters jumped out of the moving train, trying to save themselves. The shooting was designed to cause as much carnage as possible. By the time the train stopped at Merafe Station, approximately 70 commuters had been killed and more than a hundred badly injured.

Seven days later, a night vigil was held in Diepkloof on the eve of the funeral of the eight boys who had been killed by the askaris. Oupa, Lunga, and their gang were instructed to attack the night vigil. Usually, the mourners sing dirges and freedom songs and make speeches the whole night in the tent erected especially for the vigil. It was around midnight when Oupa and his gang arrived at the tent, also singing, pretending to be mourners. They were with a company of unknown men, who were also armed to the teeth. They fired shots with their automatic rifles. Screams of terror erupted from inside the tent. The shooting continued for more than five minutes, unleashing chaos and panic. The corpses and the coffins were not spared. The assassins burned the eight coffins of the deceased that were lined up inside the tent, and threw in hand grenades as they dispersed. Pandemonium spread as those not yet hit scrambled and dived for cover. Corpses of mourners, friends, comrades, neighbours, and community

members lay strewn throughout the tent. When the shooting stopped, 27 more people lay dead. Lunga quit the group the following day, as he deemed it savage to burn the corpses inside the coffins.

That's how the story of the 1980s militant youth went. They were under attack and died in large numbers in a country where their lives did not count. Life went on uninterrupted for those who did not die, while those who died were mourned and buried. The survivors had nowhere to go. This was the only country they had. They would remain in the country and continue to fight. Those who did not fight would await their turn to die. The fighters remained staunchly loyal to their cause. The more people were killed, the more their hopes were restored. They knew that God was on the side of the oppressed and that they would be victorious one day.

All this happened while negotiations were taking place. Still, there were no signs of the violence abating. Teufel and his henchmen were uncompromising. He continued goading his men and women to a reign of terror that lasted for over four years. As the death toll climbed, Mandela pointed his finger at De Klerk for orchestrating the violence, while De Klerk defended himself, saying that it was the 'third force'. The media referred to it as 'Black-on-Black violence', 'The third force', or 'vigilante killings'. Whatever the label, it was slaughter of the innocent perpetrated by Teufel and his henchman. Whether or not De Klerk knew it, his police and soldiers masterminded the massacres, taking orders from the upper echelons of the government with the consent of some of the military and the government officials. It would later become clear that their aim was not only to persecute, torture, and kill activists as well as innocent civilians, but also to subvert De Klerk's reform programme. At least 50 000 activists and civilians were executed over four years, with thousands more being detained in prisons and many more disappearing without a trace.

Back in Mozambique, Libembe and Sindi and a group of a few women were informed that they would be returning to South Africa indefinitely, although they would be underground. Libembe

didn't see this as a great move. She knew that she was on the police wanted list. She reluctantly agreed, taking consolation in the idea that the political organisations were unbanned and exiles allowed to return home. She became concerned on being told that she would have to execute some missions in the country.

But Sindi was excited that she was finally going home. She had longed for the moment when she would reconnect with Vumani. She was not overly concerned about the missions she was supposed to undertake. Going back home meant one thing for her: the rekindling of her love with Vumani and the prospect of marriage.

Eleven

The Honey Trap

It was the morning of 10 August 1991. The sun had just risen, and the weather felt weird. Birds twittered under the trees outside, and the streets were abuzz with people going to work and others coming back from night shifts. Lunga had quit the gang. Killing activists was not to his taste, and he was tired of living in fear and constantly evading comrades and schoolchildren. He had taken himself in hand and planned to return to varsity the following year to complete his studies. For the past year or so, Lunga had kept out of the public eye by staying indoors, painting, and reading. He relied on the neighbours' children to buy him groceries at a nearby shop.

He heard an alarming wail that startled him. He peeked through the twisted curtain. Something untoward was happening in Petros's shack next door, Lunga thought as he put down his copy of Bloke Modisane's *Blame Me on History*. He reduced the volume of his hi-fi and listened attentively to the noise coming from outside. Suddenly, the door flung open and a young boy ran in.

"Come and see what is happening to Petros... come, please come, *abut'* Lunga!"

"What? What are you saying? Speak!"

But the boy had already disappeared. All the same, Lunga decided to continue with his book and disregard Petros's antics. Outside, a crowd quickly filled the street, hearing the cries for help.

They thought they would rush to their neighbour's aid, but stood transfixed by the strange spectacle. A distraught young man, yelled, "Help! Petros is dying! Help! We can't allow this terrible death!"

Another person cried out, "Hey, don't leave him to die. He may be facing his past misdeeds, but let's not abandon him." But no one dared intervene. Petros's body was hanging from the towering blue gum tree, threatening the crowd like a sinister witch.

An old man arrived, wielding a bludgeon and shouting, and pushed through the crowd, as if ready to leap into action. The sight of Petros's body threw him off balance. He dropped his bludgeon, cried out in distress, and fell to the ground, screaming. The crowd scattered momentarily in panic. Another man approached, chastising the bystanders, but took no action.

Then Lunga appeared out of nowhere like a violent storm. Petros's younger brother watched Lunga walk to the tree. The crowd knew there was animosity between Lunga and Petros after Petros had attempted to shoot Lunga.

The crowd milled about, gawking at Petros's now lifeless body hanging in the air. Lunga pushed his way through the throng, and saw Petros's heavy studded boots dangling before him. A rope looped over a tree branch noosed his neck. He shuddered.

"Get me a knife!" he screamed at the bystanders.

Someone quickly handed Lunga a knife, and he climbed the leafy tree, manoeuvring his way through the branches. He glimpsed Petros's toes through the worn-out boots, and reached his body. He breathed heavily as he sat on the branch, the body dangling below him. The wind rustled unexpectedly. He stretched out to pull Petros's corpse towards him. The body was immensely heavy and unmanageable. Lunga flinched as the branch cracked under the strain. He realised that it might snap at any moment. His heart pounded from fear and exhaustion. He tried to shift himself and Petros's body towards another branch, but there was no way he could carry this lifeless body down the tree. He fiddled with the rope around Petros's neck and looked down. Everyone below looked like ants. They could sense Lunga's desperation.

"Cut the rope and carry the body on your back," instructed a man wearing a miner's helmet.

The crowd screamed as the branch cracked loudly again, about to fall with the two men.

"But why did Petros inflict such terrible pain on himself?" a short, stout woman winced.

"You shouldn't have climbed the tree. You became unclean by holding a fresh corpse. Don't you know our customs? This is why the world is such a mess," said a man smoking a pipe.

"Leave the body and come back, my son. There is no way you can climb down with it," called a woman.

The crowd had blocked the road, creating noisy chaos. Lunga yelled at the top of his voice, "Someone must come up!" The branch cracked noisily again. Panicking, Lunga pressed Petros's body to the trunk and desperately tried to hold onto the branch, but it snapped abruptly. Lunga and Petros's dead body fell to the ground with crumbling remnants of the branch.

"Oh no, they are falling! Help! Help! What a terrible disaster. Oh my God in Heaven, how could this happen?" A woman exclaimed, her hands on her head.

Screams for help pierced the street as the two bodies crashed down, sending shockwaves through the dusty ground. The rope still twisted around Petros's neck. Onlookers scattered, frantically calling for help. Then they returned huddled around the unmoving bodies, in shock and disbelief.

Fortunately, by then the police had already arrived at the scene. Lunga remained motionless, his eyes closed, consumed by a sense of loss and despair. He remained still, listening to their conversations, feeling a mix of emotions.

"He is dead," said the old man with the bludgeon. He shoved at onlookers, like he had when he'd arrived.

"Poor Lunga, this is the price he paid for being nice. He died for another person's sin," a woman said pitifully.

"What did he think he was doing? He thinks he is Superman or Tarzan!" a policeman said, walking towards Lunga. The young man who A young man who had long looked up to Lunga

as a model of brilliance and dignity, overtook the policeman and violently shook Lunga. He held his hand and tried to lift him as the police took Petros's body to the government mortuary.

"Hey Lunga, wake up, man. Wake up! Are you hurt, Lunga? Should we help you stand up?"

Lunga pulled his hand away and shook his head. He propped himself up on the pavement for a moment, pensive and in despair. The curious stares seemed to blame him for Petros's suicide. He buried his head in his hands, guilt weighing heavily on his shoulders.

But the crowd cheered and clapped hands for him. He was not sure whether they mocked him or were genuinely applauding his heroic deed. A girl in school uniform walked slowly towards Lunga. He gazed at her as she stood next to him, wanting to chase her away.

"You tried, brother Lunga, thank you. You did well under the circumstances. Thank you so much. You handled everything with surprising aplomb. You are handsome, brave, and intelligent," she crooned. Lunga beamed at the compliment.

The girl seemed jittery as she spoke. He could not tell whether she was nervous or just traumatised by what happened. She smiled, to calm her nerves. Lunga noticed her dimples as she smiled. He gazed at her, his eyes heavy with shame. He tried to remember if he knew her from somewhere.

"Are you going to inform, eh, eh, eh, brother Oupa and, eh, eh, eh, the rest of your friends about Petros?" she asked Lunga, still strung out.

Just then Petros's younger brother came and gave Lunga a crumpled piece of paper. Lunga struggled to read Petros's terrible handwriting:

> *Please tell them to inscribe these words on my headstone: "Let me die the death of the righteous, and may my final end be like theirs".*

Lunga recognised the verse from the Bible. He continued reading the note, the girl sneaking a peek at it as he did so.

> *And tell my friends to stop killing other people. Life is precious and should be spent fruitfully. Killing innocent lives is fulfilling the purpose of the devil. Goodbye, cruel world.*

Lunga remained silent for a moment before he broke down. He stood, looking drained and fatigued, and went home and locked himself in his bedroom.

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The sun was fading, and dusk was well under way. Something uncanny hovered in the air. Lunga sank into his chair with a feeling of dread. He sensed something bad was about to happen, but dismissed it as the psychological ramifications of that morning. Someone knocked softly on the door. Lunga ignored the knock as he wanted to be left alone with his thoughts.

"It is me, brother Lunga, please open," The dimpled-cheeked girl appealed to him. Lunga recognised the voice from that morning and wondered what she wanted now. He opened the door, burning with curiosity, and ushered her into the kitchen-cum-living room. She wore a floral shirt and a pair of jeans which made her look more mature than her earlier schoolgirl look.

What a stunning lady! Lunga thought as he went from surprise to joy. "Oh, you are back. Sorry I left unceremoniously this morning. It was too tough for me to hang around there," he said, opening the fridge and offering her a glass of cold drink. He was completely smitten with the lady. For a fleeting moment, Lunga forgot about his problems and wondered how it would be to live with the lady but his rational mind dismissed the thought. Ever since his single mom, Emily, had died about eleven months ago, Lunga had stayed alone in the house. It had never bothered him until the moment this lovely lady stepped into his home.

Her eyes scanned the room as Lunga gave her a drink. She saw Dikobe's novel on the table.

"Thank you, brother Lunga. You read this book. It is a beautiful book." She was more relaxed and calmer than she'd been that the morning.

"Oh, you know Dikobe? How do you know this book?" he asked excitedly. "It is banned here in South Africa."

"And how do you come to possess a banned book?" she asked humorously as she sipped her drink.

Lunga smiled, relishing her teasing, thinking that she was witty and charming. "We might as well stop living if we observe all the bans. You know everything is banned here, including love," he said, chuckling.

She smiled and changed the subject. She was in a hurry, although she tried as much as possible to relax. "I am sorry about your friend Petros and everything you went through this morning. I hope you are feeling better now, and that your other friends are not too devastated by this. Please accept my sincere condolences."

Lunga accepted the expression of sympathy. He said, his voice soft, almost teary, "I broke up with them a while ago, when I discovered that the gang was a killing machine for the system. They are no longer my friends. Besides, I don't know whether they know about Petros or not. I doubt though that anyone reached out to them. No one knows their secret hideout except me. They have been in that hideout for over six months now. They go out to hunt schoolchildren, and retreat to their lair after the killings. That is how they operate. They are animals, those boys. I hang my head in shame to think that they were my friends." He looked down in self-repugnance.

"No, you should not. You shouldn't be disgusted. It is they who are up to no good, not you."

She kept quiet and observed Lunga. He rubbed his eyes and remained silent, thinking about the events of the day.

She continued the conversation. "Remember, you climbed that tree on an errand of mercy. Better complete your mission and inform them. You were all faithful friends at some stage. They

may wish to attend his funeral or perhaps pay their last respects to him."

Lunga thought for a while and said, "I doubt if they will ever come out of their hideout. The comrades will kill them on sight. But I think you are correct. They must know, whether they will attend the funeral or not. I am the only person who knows where they are. I will go and inform them right away."

"I can come with you, if you invite me nicely," she said, eyeing Lunga. Once again, he kept quiet and looked quizzically at her. He felt uneasy about going to them and did not want to expose his friends' hiding place to the lady. He had a hunch that told him to stay at home.

She quickly said, "It is fine. I will not go with you inside the hideout. In fact, I will hang around about 500 metres or a kilometre away. I don't have to see it, as I know that they don't want it discovered. I only want to give you as much support as possible following your harrowing experience this morning," she said, trying to conceal her feelings of urgency.

It was an easy job for the dimple-cheeked lady. Lunga didn't need much persuasion. Her words instantly eased his mind. "Thank you, that's very kind of you. I am very lucky to merit this honour. Truly, you are very kind," Lunga said, thinking that informing his friends about Petros's passing would free him from the guilt of not informing them. He sighed with relief and ushered the lady out of the door, contemplating a nice evening walk with his potential girlfriend. But his consuming passion for the lady made him easy to lure into a maze with no way out. The dimple-cheeked young lady laughed inwardly. *I have enticed the subject to take the bait*, she thought to herself. For a moment she thought of her commander. He would be proud of her. She had been covertly following Lunga for the past three months, thinking that he would visit his friends, but to no avail. The morning incident came as a perfect opportunity.

Lunga's fall had left him limping. It was already dark and windy outside as they walked towards the hideout. Lunga did not notice that they were being followed by three young men in heavy coats. He was utterly pleased and enjoyed the walk with the lady.

They passed a few blocks and entered a yard blaring with music. The smoke-filled tavern room reeked of stale beer and a rowdy crowd. The three young men remained inconspicuously outside.

"Hey Lunga, come this side! Where have you been? We have not seen you in a while." Almost every patron yelled at Lunga, trying to get his attention. Lunga and the dimpled-cheeked lady joined six other ladies at a corner table.

"Please look after my friend," Lunga asked. "I will be back in an hour or so. Buy her some drinks." Lunga handed a R50 note to a stout woman. He suddenly realised that he did not even know his companion's name. He figured he would find out later; he was anxious to inform the gang of Petros's death and wanted to get the task over with. He felt awkward leaving the lady there, but circumstances forced him to, since there was no better place. He could not risk exposing his friends' hideout. He dashed out of the tavern.

"Oh, no, I forgot something. Excuse me for a minute, please," said the dimpled-cheeked lady to the other women. She stood and followed Lunga discreetly, leaving the six ladies wondering why this lady, who was obviously new in the area, would brave the township streets at night alone. Worst still, they didn't know what they would say to Lunga when he came back for her.

The young men in heavy coats were under Dimple-cheek's command. They followed her as she discreetly followed Lunga. A few streets away, the nine young gangsters, intimately bound by fate to the melancholy dance of their times, sat dining in their dark hideout. Their lives were tarnished by the gruesome murders they had committed. Now death was dancing furtively towards them like fire to dry grass.

Lunga arrived in time to dine with them in the darkness. The four who followed him waited by the opposite house. The young woman signalled the men to follow Lunga as he disappeared into the yard of a house. The house was dark. She walked stealthily towards the door. It was secured with a huge padlock. That meant that there was no one in the house, she thought. She went around to the backyard. There was no sign of Lunga. Puzzled,

she wondered where Lunga had gone, and figured he may have jumped the fence to another house.

She was about to leave the yard when she heard the toilet flush. She strained to listen, and heard voices. She smiled, thinking how smart it was of them to lock themselves inside, creating the impression that the place was empty. She and her three comrades approached the house cautiously, their weapons hidden under their coats. She positioned herself next to the door, as she had done in the past months in Soweto, the East Rand, and the Vaal when she attacked the police-sponsored gangsters in the townships. She signalled to the three men to take their positions. She was in no hurry. There was no escape for the gang members caged inside the house like trapped animals. She put her ear to the back door to listen to the conversation inside the room while the men waited for her to cue attack.

"Now listen here, Lunga," Oupa said with a voice full of rage. "You are going to expose us if you leave and return to the group as you like. Make up your mind. You are either in or out. And stay here permanently if you are in."

Oupa's remarks annoyed Lunga. "What makes you think I want to rejoin the group? I was just catching up with all of you before I inform you of some bad news." He exhaled deeply. "Petros is no more. I am here to tell you that. Nothing more, nothing less." He stood, preparing to leave.

"What?" asked Stranger, startled. Sorrow filled the room.

"What do you mean, Lunga? Please sit down and tell us what happened. We were expecting him to come back. He left this morning to meet with Mabulala and promised to come back this afternoon."

Lunga related the entire story, starting from when he had heard the noise, then the fall, and then the note, which he read aloud.

"I think it is high time we cease hostilities and call a truce with the comrades. Otherwise, violent death awaits us all," said Toro.

A surge of anger went through Oupa. He exploded, "Shut up, chicken! You can join Lunga if you want. Go on! Betray our oath of allegiance. Go on, betray us like your friend, Lunga."

Lunga found himself in a perilous predicament, unwittingly serving as bait. The air grew tense as they heard the back door creak open, and the gravity of the situation hung heavy as they realised that they were about to be attacked. Dread filled the eyes of his friends. There was a tangible fear of impending doom. The ominous sound of a gun being cocked reverberated through the room as four heavily armed youths made their entrance into the house.

Oupa drew his pistol and the room thundered with screams and the continuous spitting of Kalashnikov bullets. Four sharpshooters maintained their composure and engaged in controlled fire, carefully picking off targets with precision and accuracy. Stranger fell. Vuyo followed. More gang members collapsed as bullets shattered the room. The dimple-cheeked lady saw Lunga crouch down in fear, slipping under the sofa as a hail of bullets whizzed past him. It was over quickly. The nine gang members lay sprawled on the floor. Firing ceased. The lady ordered the three men to leave. Lunga emerged, contorted with fear. Dimple-cheeks stood motionless for a moment.

How could such a young schoolgirl have fired a rifle, let alone commanded others? Lunga thought. She smiled her beguiling smile that distracted him from seeing the assault rifle in her right hand. Lunga was now at the mercy of the dimpled lady. He gazed at her; her breathtaking face becoming benevolent. She turned the rifle barrel toward Oupa, who lay injured on the floor behind Lunga. He was aiming his pistol at Lunga's back. Lunga lifted his hands in peace, thinking the lady was aiming the rifle at him.

"Take cover, Lunga! Move!" she screamed in a desperate attempt to protect him.

It was too late. Oupa had fired his gun. Pain seared through Lunga's back as the bullets entered his spine. He fell, stiff and powerless. His vision blurred as Oupa attempted to shoot the dimpled lady. She took cover effortlessly and fired her Kalashnikov

rifle while lying on the floor, instantly killing Oupa. She ceased fire, looked around the room, casually put the rifle under her coat, and hastily left, leaving no trace of their presence. Only the ten lifeless bodies were left to tell the tale.

The police heard the raucous gunfire and went to investigate. They arrived and cordoned off the area as they searched for evidence of the murders. A large number of onlookers stood around. Mabulala and Modingwana arrived shortly after the pathology unit.

"What a relief, they are all dead!" Mabulala said to Modingwana, chuckling as he shoved past the crowd, trying to get a better view.

"I am glad. No one will know that we worked with them. These boys would have exposed us. We are safe now. Colonel Teufel is the only one who knows, and he is a tough cookie. He will not say a word," Modingwana whispered into Mabulala's ear.

As the police pathology unit bundled the dead into body bags and loaded them into the van heading for the government mortuary, the onlookers remained silent, shedding no tears over the heinous murders.

"They deserve neither sympathy nor our tears," Mabulala said, dancing jubilantly. The crowd joined him.

"This is unbelievable. They are all dead. It must have been a professional who did this," one cop said to his colleagues as he dragged away the last body.

"The person knew that they, too, were seasoned killers. That is why he made a point of eliminating all of them," said another police officer as they closed the van door and left the scene.

Lunga was not supposed to be shot that day. He had quit the group. But he had been used as bait to eliminate the vigilante gang, and became collateral damage in the process.

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The arrival of ten bodies at the government morgue unsettled the two convicts who worked there. The morgue was

already overflowing with unclaimed corpses, leaving them unable to accommodate the new arrivals.

"Bizarro, I hate this. I've been telling Bra Sello to give the bodies that have been here over two months to the undertakers for paupers' burials. Look at the problem we have now. There's no room for these corpses. What do we do now?" Stallion turned to his fellow inmate for answers.

Stallion and Bizarro served their sentences working in the government mortuary. They generally found solace in their work, except on days like this, when the mortuary was overwhelmed.

"Aah, the boss is useless. All he knows is women, nothing else. We must sort these bodies. No one else will do it. Let's decide. These lazy cops dumped these bodies here because they know we will sort out the mess. It is sad to be a prisoner." Bizarro removed a cigarette from his mouth, contemplating the crowded scene before them. The police had haphazardly piled the ten corpses on top of each other.

As their shift came to an end, their supervisor still hadn't returned to the morgue. The two convicts reluctantly left the bodies stacked upon one another, inert. On the third day, Stallion grew increasingly concerned when he and Bizarro arrived to find the corpses in the exact same disarray as when they had left them.

"It appears our boss expects us to clean up this mess. We need to decide. I can't bear to see these bodies lying here like a pile of debris," Stallion voiced his frustration. "I have a solution. Let's stand the corpses upright. It will force the boss to address the overcrowding issue once he returns from wherever he's gone," Stallion suggested, heading towards the mound of bodies.

"You're out of your mind! Are you even listening to yourself? How on earth can we stand these corpses upright?" Bizarro retorted, finding Stallion's idea absurd.

"Come and help me. I'll show you how," Stallion insisted, pulling the topmost body towards the shelves.

Bizarro observed Stallion dragging the body and concluded that his fellow inmate was peculiar. But then Bizarro thought he

saw the hand of one of the corpses in the middle of the pile twitch. He blinked and focused his gaze on the body, realising that it was indeed moving. His eyes widened in shock. "Hey, look!" he nervously exclaimed. "One of the bodies is moving. Someone is still alive!"

Bizarro gasped in horror at the sight, repeating himself in disbelief. "One of them is still alive! Yes, one of them is moving! He's not dead! Hey, one of them is still alive! Hey, hey, hey..." His voice echoed through the corridors of the morgue, sending chills down his spine. Within moments, a stretcher arrived, and the body was swiftly transported to the emergency room.

~

He heard a faint voice calling his name, as if in a dream.

"Lunga, can you hear me?"

He slowly opened his eyes to a flood of lights. His gaze blurred around a young woman who stood next to him wearing a white coat. "I am Doctor Dwane. Do you remember me? I have been seeing you since you arrived at Baragwanath Hospital. You have been unconscious for the past two months. You regained consciousness last week. I am glad to say that you are healing quite well. It is a miracle that you are alive. You are a real fighter." She smiled and fiddled with her stethoscope. Here was pain in action, she thought as she gazed at him.

Lunga rubbed his sleepy eyes and observed the doctor and the three gentlemen who stood by his bedside. He was feeling weak and drowsy from high doses of medication.

"We are very sorry for what happened to you two months ago. I am Warrant Officer Masipa. This is Sergeant Ntelezi, and you may know this gentleman, Mr Mabulala. We want to ask you a few questions."

"How are you, my brother? I am sorry for what happened to you," Mabulala said haughtily. Lunga stared at them blankly. The sight of Mabulala, who held a notebook and pen, infuriated him.

"Do you remember what happened on the day you were injured?" asked Warrant Officer Masipa.

The scene of the day he was injured replayed itself in Lunga's mind in flashbacks: the gum tree, Petros, the stiff wind, the rifles, the beautiful young lady with dimples... his friends falling one by one, their corpses... He blinked and closed his eyes. "Do you remember anything, Lunga?"

Lunga's owlish eyes fluttered open. He looked at the white ceiling, the fluorescent lights, and the ceiling fans that whirred between them. He lay on the bed, pensive, contrite, and in despair. He looked away, stuttered, and stared around the ward; his eyes blurred with tears. He tried to speak, but his words turned into spluttering sounds as tears trickled down his face. He blinked and dabbed his eyes with the hospital blanket.

"There were four of them," he managed to get out. "All carrying automatic rifles..." His body began to shake.

They stared at him, nudging him to continue.

He shook his head. "Please leave me alone. I am tired." He closed his eyes.

"Warrant Officer Masipa, I think we should let Lunga rest," said Dr Dwane.

"It is fine, Doctor, thank you. I think Mabulala may have been correct. These were uMkhonto Wesizwe terrorists. We have a profile of the girl. I suspect that she is the unit commander. She may run, but she cannot hide." He returned his gaze to Lunga. "They thought you were dead when they left you. You are very lucky to survive such an ambush."

With that, the two policemen left the ward. Lunga tried to move his legs, but something heavy held them down. "Doc, please remove the chains on my legs. I want to go outside."

She put away her stethoscope and smiled faintly at Lunga. "There are no chains on your legs, Lunga," she said gently. "You are paralysed from the waist down." Her eyes met his with pity. "As we explained to you last week, you will never walk again. I'm afraid this is a new reality that you have to adapt to. We will do our best to help you live normally with a broken spine."

Lunga gazed at Dr Dwane blankly and hated her for pronouncing his doom. Enraged, he gave Dr Dwane a cold stare. The more he looked at her, the more he felt heavily encumbered. He became hysterical. "There goes my future. Bring back my future!" Lunga thought he was shouting at the top of his voice, but the others in the room heard only a strangled howl. He howled recurrently, the walls of the ward throwing back his piercing yell. "Don't come here again! I don't want to see you. Never set your ugly feet here!"

"Nurse Daphney, please give Lunga some Valium," Dr Dwane instructed as she stepped out of the ward. Nurse Daphney had established a good rapport with Lunga. She was the only person who could handle his temper. She reached out for Lunga's hand and lightly caressed his fingers.

"Don't worry, Lunga, you will be fine. The worst is over. You have your whole life ahead of you. You will be fine," Daphney said, her voice full of pity. Lunga stared into space. He knew his future would not be good. He let out a howl of anguish.

Twelve

Songs to the Trees

January 1993 was not a good time to speak to Madi about assassinations. Negotiations were progressing favourably, raising the possibility of the ANC assuming power. Madi was on track to secure a significant cabinet or similar position in the new South Africa, making any probing into his past actions a potential threat to his prospects. But Teufel remained resolute, unwavering in his pursuit. Unlike their previous arrangement, where Teufel received lists, this time he was the one who provided a list to Madi.

"Take care of these people. It will exceed your expectations," Teufel remarked as he guided Madi towards the exit.

"But..." Madi hesitated, clutching the list.

"We are soldiers, my friend. We follow orders from our commanders. We have no choice but to comply. I'll monitor the progress in the news. See you next Monday," Teufel insisted.

Madi's heart was pounding. He scanned the list before starting his car, then concealed it inside his jacket pocket. There were ten names. He decided to memorise them, planning to tear the list into shreds and flush it down the toilet to avoid any evidence.

That evening, he went to bed hungry, consumed by the impending task. Even though he had disposed of the list as intended on his way home, he couldn't shake off his anxiety about the mission. Before retiring for the night, he had contacted two of his trusted associates, who had agreed to assist him. Now his remaining task was to make a few phone calls and persuade his targeted comrades.

Libembe was roused from her slumber by the ringing phone. She was still groggy. The bedside clock read 4:30 am.

"Good morning, Comrade Libembe. I apologise for waking you," Madi began.

"No problem, Comrade Madi. Is everything alright?"

"Well, it's not too bad. There's potentially good news..." Madi paused, attempting to conceal his nervousness. "I'd like us to meet urgently, before the January 8 statement."

The January 8 statement marked an annual tradition where the ANC president unveiled the organisation's plans for the year. The ANC, established on 8 January 1912, began this practice on the same date in 1972. During his address, the president would announce a theme for the year. In 1993, it was 'The Year of Votes for All'.

Libembe sensed a weight in Madi's voice and patiently waited for him to share.

"I'm sorry, I'm a bit distracted. I had a troubling dream. I'll tell you about it when we meet," he lied, attempting to alleviate the tension brought about by their silence. Obviously, he wouldn't be discussing any dream with her.

"No problem, leadership," Libembe responded. Where should we meet?"

"Let's meet at the Horror Café in Newtown. I like it because it is busy. We will find a spot there without people noticing us."

"When and at what time, Comrade Madi?" she asked impatiently, failing to understand why Madi did not give her all the details.

"Unfortunately, time is short. The January 8 statement is only two days away. We can meet tomorrow at 2 pm. It will be a brief meeting, lasting about an hour."

"Alright, I'll be there, Comrade."

"Oh, I forgot to mention something, Comrade Libembe. Please bring someone you trust and have been mentoring. They might benefit from our conversation and keep you company while you wait for me."

"Thank you, Comrade. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Until tomorrow, Comrade. You know the rules – don't tell anyone except the person you're bringing. It's a secret meeting." Madi sighed with relief after ending the call.

Libembe, despite her suspicions, decided to honour the meeting because she trusted Madi. In her eyes, he was a revolutionary with an impeccable record. She was unaware that Judas Madi was a schemer with a history of destroying the lives of his comrades.

She tried to decipher what Madi wanted to share with her, but couldn't quite grasp it. She knew Madi held her in high regard and had involved her in special missions before. She thought he might be discussing new positions, even though she had no personal ambitions and was willing to take on any role she was assigned. She considered Sindi, whom she trusted and had been mentoring because of to her exceptional abilities. Libembe was certain that Sindi would hold a significant role in the new dispensation, given her outstanding work in underground operations.

Later that day, she contacted Sindi and informed her about the meeting with Madi the following day. That night, Sindi thought about Vumani and decided to visit him before her 2 pm meeting with Madi. This wouldn't interfere with her underground work, as the meeting had freed up her day.

Sindi awoke to the sounds of birds chirping outside her window. She prepared herself and caught the 7:30 am train from Randfontein to Johannesburg, arriving at the campus residence around 9 am. She knocked excitedly on Vumani's door, her heart racing at the thought of seeing her lover again, whom she had last seen years ago. Sindi's deep affection for Vumani was not reduced by the distance or time that passed since they parted ways in the dense bushes of Angola. It was a clear case of 'absence makes the heart grow fonder'. Fortunately, the same emotions applied for Vumani. The lady from the next room heard the knock and came out.

"Good morning, my sister. Are you looking for Vumani?" she asked.

"Yes, do you happen to know where he is?" Sindi enquired.

"He left early this morning. He should be back soon. As you may know, our academic year starts in February, and we're here for research. So, I don't think he'll be gone long. Please come inside and wait for him here," the neighbour said, inviting Sindi into her room.

"Thank you! You're very kind," Sindi replied, entering the room and scanning the bookshelf, which was full of books and newspaper clippings. The lady introduced herself as Nikiwe. Sindi was not sure whether to introduce herself as Sindi or Lerato. She settled for Lerato.

"So many newspaper clippings," Sindi said, curious, but careful not to offend.

"Oh, yes, I am doing research about women in the struggle. I want to write a book about them. I subscribe to most newspapers, although some of them are conservative. They deliver them here every morning," Nikiwe responded proudly.

"How nice! This could be a phenomenal book, especially since history deliberately turns a blind eye to the contribution of women in the struggle," Sindi said, and shared some of her knowledge about women revolutionaries all over the world, including South Africa.

Nikiwe was immediately taken with 'Lerato', finding her charming and exceptionally intelligent. They sat and chatted over a meal for three hours, with no sign of Vumani.

At 12:30, Sindi said, "Niki, there are no signs that Vumani may come back soon. I have to go. Please lend me a pen and paper – I want to leave him a message. I might return in the afternoon, but I have to rush somewhere now."

"Sure, no worries, Lerato. Here's a pen and paper," Nikiwe responded, handing Sindi the requested items. Sindi quickly wrote a poem and a note. Out of courtesy, she handed the page to Nikiwe, but she politely refused. "No, Lerato, this is private and confidential. Please slip it under his door. He'll find it when he returns," she said, smiling kindly.

"Thank you so much for the meal and the enlightening conversation, Niki. I have found a sister in you. The world would be a better place if everyone were like you." Sindi stood, hugged Nikiwe, and left the note under Vumani's door.

Vumani returned shortly after Sindi left. It was as if he was waiting for her to leave. He found the note under his room and read it, thrilled:

Songs to the Trees

If only for a glimpse
A miracle or a mirage
Eyes yearning to see
But only shed tears

A promise or a punishment
Grim written in mirthful ink
An enduring dance of youth
Longing for a distant lover

I am too near, yet too far
The melodies of my song
Howl poetic dirges
As my love straggles
Along a winding course

A drop of blood, a fading rose
I soar into the air
Never to return
And my heart whirls
Songs to the trees
In raptured winds

The stars stare out
A bright future dawns
I sing and endure
The wind sings
Songs to the trees
To my dreamy ascent

Vumani scanned the poem, but his attention was drawn to the message written at the bottom of the page: *Today I am going to break the romantic stalemate occasioned by underground work. I will be back soon. Please expect me at 4 pm.* She ended the note with sketches of a smiling face and two hearts.

Sindi entered the bustling café, heavy and fetid with smoke shortly, before 2 pm and navigated through the crowd to find Libembe, who sat at a window table with a glass of water. A man at an adjacent table observed her as he enjoyed some cake and coffee. The afternoon sun streamed in through the window, casting an angelic glow on Libembe. A waiter saw Sindi and brought her a menu as she settled into a chair next to Libembe. At around the same time, a man entered and walked up towards the bathroom. He came back and walked straight to their table. He drew a 9 mm pistol and aimed straight at Sindi's head before firing six shots at point-blank range. Libembe couldn't quite believe that it was happening. She jumped to her feet, trying to disarm the shooting man, but the man who sat at the adjacent table joined his friend and fired three shots at Libembe. As the guns spat the bullets and the two women slumped to the floor, the patrons scattered in pandemonium all directions. The killers moved swiftly out of the café and jumped into a getaway car parked a block away. It did not take long for the crime scene clean-up police to arrive and remove the two bodies, while journalists took pictures and interviewed eye witnesses.

In the res kitchen, Vumani worked hard to prepare an intricate meal for Sindi. Unknown to him, a sinister drama had unfolded beyond his walls, as the perpetrators of Libembe and Sindi's tragic fate made their stealthy escape. The clock marched past 4 pm, yet there was no sign of Sindi, leaving Vumani in a state

of impatient anticipation. He waited, knowing that Sindi would not make false promises.

He looked closely at the now crumpled note that lay before him, and delved into the poem's depths. On a cursory reading, Vumani had initially interpreted the note and accompanying poetry as tender and romantic. Now, there was a disquieting undercurrent that sent an involuntary shiver down his spine. Still, he waited. At midnight, Vumani reluctantly retired to his bed, haunted by questions that refused to sleep – what could have befallen Sindi?

A thunderous and insistent knock at the door tore Vumani from his uneasy sleep. Disoriented, he swung open the door and saw Nikiwe standing at his door, trying to control her breathing to suppress her frantic emotion, clutching a dishevelled newspaper.

"Look, Vumani, you won't believe this!" Nikiwe exclaimed, her voice shaking, and flung the copy of *The New Nation* newspaper toward him with palpable distress. It was as though her mind was incapable of reconciling the vibrant and brilliant woman she had seen only a day before with the grim revelation now before her.

Vumani gathered the scattered pages and gazed upon the headline's anguished scream: *TWO PROMISING MK CADRES MURDERED: The cruel hand of fate struck down two gallant fighters in the broad light of day*. In a heart-wrenching photograph, he gazed at Sindi's radiant smile and dimples. She was seated beside Libembe, both illuminated by the sun's gentle warmth. The still frame had been taken from the café's surveillance footage. This was a haunting testament to their final moments.

The accompanying report unfurled like a tapestry of tragedy:

> *The renowned MK Cadre known only as Libembe, a leader of the June 16 Detachment, long sought by authorities, met her tragic end alongside her comrade Sindi Moloi, also known as Lerato, at the Horror Café around 2:10 pm yesterday. Libembe, a perpetual thorn in apartheid's side, had orchestrated nearly 40 attacks on the government's strategic installations between 1977 and 1992. Moloi, her loyal comrade, was implicated in*

multiple skirmishes across the townships, where she confronted and felled vigilante groups, police officers, and soldiers. She also trained a number of self-defence unit members inside the country. Her name was further entangled in the 10 August 1991 murder of at least ten gangster members who worked with the police. As dawn breaks, the perpetrators remain at large, with the relentless pursuit of justice fuelling the investigations.

Vumani's gaze remained fixed on the newspaper, but the words and images seemed surreal, as if part of a terrible dream. He clenched his jaw. The magnitude of the news he had just absorbed was unbearable. Just when he believed he was beginning to heal from the wounds left by Bohloko's and Maye's tragic departures, this devastating blow struck him down. The image of Sindi's dimpled smile stayed in his thoughts, haunting him.

Unable to confront the relentless emotions, he tossed the newspaper aside and sat down, burying his face in his hands, as though to shield himself from the harsh reality. He had endured years of grief, but this loss was the culmination of all the pain he had ever known. He was seized by the urge to flee, to escape to an unknown sanctuary. He rose from his seat, attempting to quell this compulsion, but remained motionless and silent, his face hidden, his heart aching. Nikiwe, standing there with eyes wide and disbelieving, gently placed a hand on Vumani's shoulder.

"What a tragedy," Nikiwe whispered, her voice heavy with regret. "She was so astute, so knowledgeable. I had plans to seek her assistance with my research after consulting with you. Who will write their stories when they perish like this? She looked my age and probably had a long way to go."

Vumani remained lost in the depths of his thoughts, his head bowed. He contemplated the poem Sindi had left for him, recognising the irrevocable finality of its message. He understood that Sindi's untimely demise would leave an enduring void and scars deeply etched into his soul. He contemplated the bitter truth that the day of misfortune arrives unannounced. If only he had returned earlier, perhaps he could have somehow averted Sindi's tragic fate. His mind swirled with questions about who might have

orchestrated their deaths. The grim realisation that there would be no investigation, no justice, left him utterly devastated.

Thirteen

The People Speak

27 April 1994. At last, it was happening. A veil of calm and harmony descended overnight on South Africa, as if a mystical figure had taken over and enchanted the country. After years of uncertainty and violence that suspended the country over a precipice, the majority of South Africans were going to vote for the first time. Indeed, sanity and calm prevailed. It was extraordinary to observe that ballots had replaced bullets.

Bhaye woke up with excitement in his heart. He hummed his favourite hymn as he reached under the bed for his boots, where he had stuffed his passbook inside a sock. The passbook, the bane of his life for years, was an important document that day. He needed it to cast his vote, and had protected it the day before lest he lose it and would not be able to cast his vote. As the red and orange light of dawn broke, Bhaye stepped excitedly out of his home and rushed to the open patch of ground where a polling station had been set up inside a large tent.

They came out to vote *en masse*. Bhaye joined a large crowd gathered in a long, serpentine queue. Like many others, he felt this was more than just a day to cast a vote. It was to honour Bohloko and many others who had fought and died for this election to be realised. It was a day to celebrate the right to have a voice in government, and put a final nail in apartheid's coffin as the country transitioned to democracy. Many stayed up all night to be the first to cast their votes. The queues moved slowly, but Bhaye and the crowds moved with dignity and silent determination, their faces glowing with the joy that comes from participating in a historic event.

"We endured countless hardships to get here," said one woman in traditional dress and a headscarf.

"Look at us today," said another man in a construction hat and paint-stained overalls. "In the same queue – black and white,

rich and poor, friend and foe, the educated and the less educated, employers and employees, believers and non-believers, prophets and disciples, teachers and learners, healers and their patients are all in one line. Today we are all equal. No one is above the other. That is what will happen in the new South Africa."

"You should say thanks to that man," the head-scarved woman whispered, pointing at Bhaye. "His son was one of the fighters."

Bhaye did not hear her. He was minding his own business. The man looked at Bhaye and smiled broadly.

A rush of emotion overwhelmed Bhaye at around 10:30 am, as he stepped into the voting booth. He held the pen and scrutinised the ballot paper for a long time before he put his 'X' on the black, green, and gold box with Mandela's face – the party that his eldest son had loved, and in whose hands he had perished.

Bittersweet memories flooded Bhaye's mind as he walked away from the polling station. He thought of Maye, who had died without ever experiencing what it was like to cast a vote. He thought of Bohloko and felt proud that he had contributed to this day. He was elated and felt his lifelong burden lift as he entered his yard. He believed that his children and the coming generations would grow up in a free country, where people would not be downtrodden because of the colour of their skin, or live in perpetual fear that something dreadful would happen to their families. He felt proud that he had made history and that his voice had finally been heard. He chuckled, feeling a renewed sense of hope and possibility. He called out to Vumani, and went to his room at the back of the house when his son failed to respond.

Vumani was, unusually, still in bed when his father opened the door to his room.

"I have just voted," Bhaye declared. "Mandela is going to be our president. Are you not going to vote? Where are Morena and Wetsi?" he asked, excitedly flashing a thumbnail blotted with ink to show Vumani that he had voted. Vumani stared at him silently and shook his head from side to side.

"Go vote, my son. We paid a heavy price for this day. Wake up, go cast your vote," Bhaye said enthusiastically.

Vumani had made it his life's purpose to bring about justice for his brother. Now he was being asked to vote! How could he vote when he had not made any progress? Bohloko's face flashed in Vumani's mind as Bhaye spoke to him. He pictured his last moment and imagined what had come to his mind when he saw what he thought were his comrades turn against him. For a moment, he looked sadly at Bhaye, with his heart sinking.

It was ironic that Bhaye had voted for the same party that had concealed the circumstances that led to the callous murder of his son. Vumani felt the betrayal of his brother, who had sacrificed his blood and bones. He could not fathom why his family members would taint Bohloko's memory by voting for the party that covered up responsibility for his assassination. He wondered what their votes would mean when the very same party that refused accountability won the election. He buried himself under his blanket and wished that the election euphoria would subside. Bhaye understood Vumani's pain well. He did not want to bother him any further. He left him to his pain as he stepped out and went to the main house.

Despite Vumani's misgivings, the election was calm and peaceful, marked by laughter, tears of joy, songs, and dance. There were no incidents of political violence, no explosions, no gunfire, no angry crowds, and no intimidation as the naysayers had predicted. The results were announced after a few days, the ANC winning with 62.65%, marking a turning point in South Africa's history. That day would replace Republic Day with Freedom Day.

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11 May 1994. The sun shone brightly over the Union Buildings in Pretoria, as if smiling in acknowledgement of the culmination of a long, hard-won struggle. The eagerly awaited day had finally arrived. Birds soared gracefully in the sky as the new flag of South Africa flapped in the breeze, taking the place of the '*Oranje, Blanje, Blou*'. Just two weeks earlier, the majority of South Africans had voted for their president in the country's first democratic election. Now they gathered in large numbers to witness his inauguration.

A black president in South Africa had never been thought possible, but on this day, it was a reality. It was a momentous occasion, and many had come to be part of it. The Union Buildings, once a symbol of apartheid that barred black South Africans from entering, would now be occupied by a black president for the first time. The atmosphere was electric, as people carrying new, six-coloured flags sang and chanted on the grounds of the Union Buildings.

Away from the crowds, some of the world's great leaders and dignitaries gathered in the auditorium of the Union Buildings, waiting for Mandela to take his oath of office. Those who were not there watched the event on TV. Yet, there were some, like Vumani, who chose not to watch the inauguration. Instead, he found solace in reading Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*. This day reminded him of Bohloko and the many others who had sacrificed their lives for it to come. The ceremony was a stark reminder of Bohloko's unresolved fate.

As Mandela walked onto the stage, the crowd sang and chanted, celebrating the historic moment. He took his oath of office, followed by a moving and stately speech. The tone of his speech surprised many, who had been used to his revolutionary oratory. They applauded just the same and raised their fists high even though Mandela did not raise his clenched fist nor chant '*Amandla*' before or after his speech.

Mandela declared, "The people have finally spoken. Let freedom reign. The sun will never set on so glorious an achievement," and the crowd erupted in ululations, whistles, and chants.

After his speech, Mandela inspected the soldiers in a passing-out parade, ensuring that they were in proper order and ready for duty before the canons fired the salute. The formation of fighter jets and other military planes and helicopters overhead, emitting green, yellow, black, red, white, and blue smoke – the colours of the new South African flag – was dazzling and sent roars through the crowd.

Moments later, as the festivities continued, Comrade Madi, who sat with his other comrades, was also celebrating

in jubilation. Two rows away from his seat sat Modingwana and Mabulala in silence. If Vumani had watched the television, he would have recognised Modingwana as the man who had attempted to slaughter him at MmaMalome's house and Mabulala as the person who had chased him and Vumile out of church when they were children.

Unlike the rest, they neither cheered nor applauded, even when Mandela made his speech. As they watched the festivities, a sense of condemnation and curse weighed heavily upon them. The marks of assassins were carved on their cold and calculated appearance. Their steely, emotionless gaze represented people ready to murder on demand and carry out the regime's dirty work, stopping at nothing to achieve their grizzly objectives. They grumbled about why Teufel had made them attend the ceremony. Somewhat depressed amid thousands who danced and celebrated, they feared the inevitable – the future looked bleak for all who had collaborated with apartheid.

As four helicopters with huge flags fluttering on poles hung beneath them rattled above the sky, and the celebrations began, Madi got up from his seat in the auditorium and approached them.

"I'm glad you made it. Colonel Teufel told me to come and meet you," he said. The three men hugged and shook hands.

Mabulala and Modingwana knew from the media that Madi was one of the senior members of the organisation, also working for Teufel.

"We're honoured to meet you, Mr Madi. We thought we were backing the wrong horse. Are we in danger of being ostracised?" Mabulala asked, with a hint of horror in his voice.

Modingwana agreed with Mabulala and added, "We didn't have anything to do with the birth of the new South Africa. Why did Teufel bring us here?"

"You can call me Comrade Madi," Madi said, giggling. He patted Mabulala and Modingwana on their shoulders. Those pats sealed their pact as natural bedfellows.

"'My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me... No one will snatch them out of my hand.'" He grinned and quoted John Chapter 10, Verse 27 before he quoted yet another verse from the Bible: "'Don't let your hearts be troubled'," he said, his grin widening. "Trust in me! In our kingdom are many opportunities. Not everyone who called me 'comrade' will access those opportunities. Rest assured that your place is guaranteed in the new South Africa. More work begins now. We will discuss everything later. I just came to greet you quickly before I go," Madi said, smiling as he left them and returned to his seat. He had calmed their nerves, and they joined the large crowd on the ground, singing and dancing.

The day ended with great optimism of a new dawn. It marked the end of over 300 years of colonial rule in South Africa.

While South Africa was celebrating liberation, Rwanda was plunged in a genocidal civil war. Such was the unbearable paradox of people experiencing joy in one place while others are immersed in pain in other parts of the world. Vumani wondered, as the day ended, after reading *The Wretched of The Earth*, whether the new ruling elite would prove Fanon's predictions false, or adopt the colonialists' ethos and values.

Part Three

Sketches of Pain

1996 - 2018

Fourteen

The Seeds of Withered Dandelions

An old woman came to Vumani in a dream. She had long, black, dreadlocked hair that covered her face. She pushed her fringe back from her face and smiled, her eyes glittering against the backdrop of a rising sun. She stood next to an open fire with a cauldron.

"Take," she said, and gave Vumani a container made from the hollowed and dried skin of a gourd. Inside the gourd was a liquid substance that looked like honey and some dry seeds of dandelion.

Vumani hesitated.

"Take. This medicinal potion will cure your chronic back pains and your stomach ache," she said.

Vumani was about to take the gourd when it fell into the fire. Suddenly, it turned into an open book and yellow flames became visible in the middle of the pages.

"The secret to your healing has been revealed to you. Please find your path," she said, and melted into the soil.

Vumani awoke feeling miserable, and he had a reason to be. For over five years, he had endured excruciating back and abdominal pain. He had consulted medical specialists who checked his liver for cancer cells, his stomach for ulcers, and many other things, to no avail. Even chiropractors and alternative medical practitioners such as homeopaths gave him a clean bill of health. Yet, he felt these pains. With no help in sight, it seemed as if Vumani would have to reconcile himself with the fact that he would live the rest of his life with these pains. He did not know how he managed to complete his studies, let alone execute his assignments at work. Now this dream. It felt real and occupied his mind the whole day. He had no clue where to begin his search. Maybe Bhaye could assist him, he thought. He promised himself to go and see him after work and enquire about his dream.

"Vumani, you seem disorientated today. What's wrong?" his colleague Tumi asked him after the daily staff meeting. Almost everybody had noticed that Vumani's body was there, but his mind was elsewhere. Tumi took it upon herself to go to his office and talk to him about it.

"Oh no, Tumi. I'm just thinking about a dream I had," he said, and he told her about the dream without checking if she was into dreams or not.

"You know, the dream was so real. I feel like the woman came to me personally and told me where to find a cure for these pains. I cannot bear them anymore," he said, looking frustrated.

"Well, I know an excellent dream interpreter. A woman *sangoma* who lives in Evaton, in the Vaal. I like her because she has a diverse worldview. I can give you her number in case you would like to go for a consultation." She stepped out of Vumani's office into hers, and came back with a diary.

Vumani was not interested. He shrugged.

"Try her, Vumani. You have nothing to lose and possibly much to gain. Just try. Who knows, this may spell the end of your restricted diet." She paged through her diary and wrote an address for Vumani on a piece of paper. Vumani reluctantly took the paper and put it in his pocket. Suddenly he felt an enormous tension in his neck that caused a severe headache. He left the office immediately and drove towards Soweto.

Morena's car was parked outside when Vumani arrived at his parents' home. The kids were playing with the neighbours' kids on the grassy lawn. The garden was full of golden dandelions in bloom.

Vumani stood, fascinated. The sight of his nieces and neighbours' children picking dandelions in the garden made him nostalgic. He remembered how he used to pick dandelions as a child, how he had made wishes and blew the seeds into the air.

The children took no notice of him as he stood watching them, enchanted. One child took a dandelion gone to seed, made a wish, and blew it. They all followed.

"My wish is to grow old and work like the old people do."

"My wish is to sleep well at night."

"My wish is to have too much money."

"My wish is to see the sea."

The children blew the puffballs. They formed soft clouds of feathery spores in the air as they dispersed. Suddenly, Vumani's dream reappeared in his mind. He lurched into the house and found Bhaye chatting with Morena. Bhaye knew something was wrong the instant he saw him.

"Hey son, you are here early. Are you not working today? You don't look well. Is everything fine with you?

Vumani told Bhaye about his dream and said after his narration, "It was an intensely vivid dream, Bhaye. I've been trying to ignore it since I woke up, but it stays with me. Even now, I feel like I am daydreaming. A colleague gave me the address of a woman in Evaton whom she said can explain the dream." He took out the address from his pocket and gave it to Bhaye.

"Son, let's not waste time. We should go and see her. There is a deeper meaning in this dream." Bhaye was already on his feet. The dream was enough of a puzzle. He didn't want to waste any more time if there was someone who could take his son out of misery.

"I am coming with you guys," said Morena.

Vumani complied, not knowing what was yet to come.

The sun was high in the blue sky when they arrived at a nondescript, terraced house in Evaton, south of Johannesburg. A young woman wearing a red skirt and a goatskin with beads on her upper body met them. She bowed and clapped her hands, greeting them.

"*Thokozani bantu abadala*, happiness be upon you, elders." She had a broad smile on her face.

"*Thokoza gogo*, happiness be upon grandmother," Bhaye responded, clapping in accordance with the *sangoma*'s greetings. He knew that, regardless of age, *sangoma*s are addressed as either

grandmothers or grandfathers, as they are believed to embody the spirits of departed or ancient souls.

"Makeda asked me to come and greet you. She said she has been waiting for you. Please take a seat. I will be with you shortly." She rose up and disappeared in the direction from where she had come.

Vumani was confused, thinking that the young woman had mistaken them for someone else. They had not announced that they were coming, and it was the first time that they had been there. Vumani hadn't even told Tumi that he would be going. How could she possibly be expecting them?

There was an open fire and a cauldron where they sat. Vumani shivered in amazement. He could not believe the coincidence. On the outer edge of the yard, through a neat, green archway, stood a rondavel, what the *sangoma*s refer to as an *indumba*. This round hut was made from clay, with tree branches supporting a pointed, thatched roof. *Sangomas* used the *indumba* as a sacred space for consultation. There, outside the *indumba,* sat the same old woman Vumani had dreamt about.

"Bhaye, this is creepy. That's the old lady I dreamt of. Do you know her?" Vumani asked, bewildered, indicating the dreadlocked woman. She stood and watched them.

"No, I don't. But she looks familiar," Bhaye responded. He grasped that those with the ancestral calling usually dream of the person who should initiate them. The young woman came back while Bhaye, Vumani, and Morena watched the dreadlocked woman enter the *indumba.*

"Makeda has asked me to usher you in," the younger woman said, gesturing for them to follow her. They followed her through the neat, green archway to the *indumba.*

"Please take off your shoes, elders, and enter," said the young woman as they reached the door of the *indumba.* She clapped her hands and bent to enter the *indumba.* Another young woman, who wore similar clothes to the first, followed shortly. Once inside, she knelt and greeted them similarly to the woman who had ushered them in.

A gentle breeze carried a sweet, herbal, flowery scent into the *indumba*, making it cool and tranquil, like natural air conditioning. Patterned cloths and beads adorned the walls and reed mats covered the floor. A shrine stood against the wall facing the door on the western side of the *indumba*. A tiger skin and a few patterned cloths lay on the ground near the shrine. Two goatskin drums stood on either side of the shrine. Nearby was a large reed basket. A cow-tail whisk lay on the ground near a gourd, together with wooden bowls and spoons.

One of the young women directed them to sit on the reed mat on the northern side of the *indumba,* next to the shrine, while she took her place on the southern side. The aura of tranquillity in the *indumba* immediately calmed Vumani's spirit and eased the heaviness and tension in his shoulders.

Vumani's eyes darted around the *indumba,* trying to locate the dreadlocked woman. He was bewildered, finding no trace of her. Only the two young women who had guided them into the *indumba* remained. What had become of her? He was certain he had seen her enter, yet she seemed to have vanished.

Makeda then entered the *indumba,* walking slowly, exuding an aura of mystery. Something evoked immortality about her, although nothing suggested that she was a *sangoma*. She was clad in a long, floral dress and a pinafore. She sat cross-legged on the tiger skin, lay a lion-patterned cloth on her lap, and lit seven coloured candles in a brass candelabra.

"*Thokozani bantu abadala,*" she greeted them, her eyes focused on the candles. "I am glad you finally brought this young man here." She pointed at Vumani, her eyes still focused on the candles. She lifted her head after lighting all the candles and looked at them, smiling. Her smile and a twinkle in her eye relaxed them, although they were surprised by how she had guessed that they were there for Vumani. Strangely, Vumani felt a deep sorrow he could hardly explain. The lady's face and the hut were all too familiar to him.

"I have been waiting for you for long. Your ancestors informed me long ago that you would be coming. At least the pains in my body will end today! You really made me sick. I am not

going to ask you what you are here for, since I already know. As a formality, I am going to read the bones for you, although I know exactly what they will say. Your ancestors told me months ago that you would be coming."

She lit a stick of incense and took out a goatskin bag from the basket. She lay a small reed mat next to her on the tiger's skin, took a pinch of snuff from a container, sprinkled some on the reed mat, and put some in the bag.

"*Thokoza gogo*," Bhaye interrupted her. "Something is baffling me. We saw an old lady enter here when we sat outside. My son said it is the same lady he saw in his dream. Strangely, we don't see her now. Where is she?

Makeda smiled and observed Vumani contemplatively. "You were seeing your ancestor, who may still be here with us. She is the person who guided you here. She chaperones you everywhere, all the time."

The three just sat there bemused, not knowing what to say.

"*Thokozani zindlondlo ezinhle*, I greet you all and invoke your spirits to be here with us now." She clapped her hands, took the cow tail-whisk, and waved it over their bodies. The two other ladies also clapped; heads bowed.

She paused briefly. "By the way, what is your surname?"

"Mzondeki," responded Bhaye, tilting his head.

"We call upon you, the Mzondeki ancestors. We are here with your grandchildren. Come join us. Be present with us and tell them what you want them to hear. We consult you, the ones who are wise in the ways of life, as we petition your guidance. We are your faithful servants. Please collaborate with my ancestors and give us direction."

She held out the goatskin bag to Vumani and said, "Blow here, please." She emptied the goatskin bag onto the small reed mat, throwing the bones.

Aa assortment of objects scattered in all directions. Although they are referred to as bones, these miscellaneous

items served as necessary paraphernalia for *sangoma*s to perform divination. In this case, they included cowrie shells, a lion's tooth, crystal stones, ivory tusks, phalanges of tigers and lions, seeds, goat bones, a small ankh, pair of dice, a wristwatch without a strap, a key, some dominoes, a ring, and foreign and local coins.

She inhaled snuff and studied the bones. A large, dotted shell lay close to a beaded goat bone. Next to it lay a lion's tooth with a red domino on top, lying perpendicular to it. A tiger's eye, a foreign coin, an oval shell, a die showing the number 6, and a few other bones clustered together not far from the red domino. Finally, a striped cowry shell and another large, dotted shell lay outside the reed mat.

There was an uneasy silence. The two other ladies stared at the bones apprehensively, silently praying for Makeda not to ask them to interpret the formation. Initiates usually fear to perform divination rituals in the presence of their principal.

"I will make you agree. say '*siyavuma',*" she instructed, before calling out, *"Vumani!"*

"*Siyavuma*," said Bhaye. He was familiar with the procedure of divination. A *sangoma* asks those who are consulting whether they agree when she says, "*vumani*", and they respond by saying, "*siyavuma*", meaning, "Yes, we agree with what we are told".

"*Yezwa! Yezwa! Yezwa!* Hear! Hear! Hear!" Makeda spoke lyrically, as if singing. "Maybe I need to start teaching you the bones. I told you that I've been waiting for you for so long. Your bones confirm this. Your ancestors tell me that you are like me. *Vumani*!"

"*Siyavuma*," echoed those in the room.

"You see this bone?" Makeda asked, pointing at the large, dotted shell with her beaded stick. "This is you. You are surrounded by your tutelary spirit. *Vumani!*" she explained, pointing to the goat bone fastened with beads, firmly attached to the dotted shell.

"*Siyavuma!*"

"Your guardian spirit wants you to be as firmly attached to her as she is to you," she said, pointing at the lion's tooth. "This is because of the gift she has bequeathed you. *Vumani!*"

"*Siyavuma!*"

She continued with the reading and explained that, according to the bones, Vumani's maladies were a result of neglect of the ancestral spirits. She talked about the fortune that smiled on Vumani and was likely to manifest itself sooner than he thought. Then she made unbroken eye contact with Vumani and said to him: "I'm afraid your career is on the rocks. It may take years, but you *will* lose your job. The attempt to save it will be the last roll of the dice, and I doubt if it will succeed. The bone that represents your job is out of the parameters within which this divination occurs. You can see for yourself." She pointed at the striped cowry shell beyond the reed mat. "You also lost your twin soul. It will be hard for you to love again. *Vumani!*"

"*Siyavuma*," responded Vumani awkwardly. It was a subject he would not broach in Bhaye's presence. In truth, he felt that Sindi was his twin soul, and he had never considered having another relationship after her passing.

"I know this sounds like a contradiction because I intimated that there is a huge fortune coming your way; your fortune is not connected to your current career. You will not acquire wealth through your career. What is written in the stars is connected to your spiritual work. *Vumani*!"

"*Siyavuma!*" they chorused.

"Any questions?" she asked, not looking at them but gazing into the flames of the candles as if seeing visions there.

"No questions. We are content," Bhaye responded animatedly. "Everything is as said. We cannot perfect perfection. It is up to the young man now to do the necessary."

Vumani and Morena nodded.

The *sangoma* collected the bones and placed them inside the basket that lay near the candelabra. She paused momentarily and fixed her eyes on a moth that circled around the flames of a candle

and burned to death. She watched it for a long time and said, "This moth tells us something about you and the light that you pursue. I will tell you more about it in due course. For now, suffice it to say that awareness is a double-edged sword. It cuts to heal on the one side and cuts to kill on the other side."

She paused and continued, "I have deliberately kept silent about the vision that brought you here. I always save the best for last... What did you see in your vision? Share it with us. Your ancestors tell me that they visited you today. What did they say to you? Are you...?" Her lips began to form her usually pleasant and contagious smile and stopped midway. She looked Vumani in the eye. He scratched his head in complete bewilderment. How could a stranger know so much about him? he thought.

Vumani narrated the dream to Makeda while she listened intently. She smiled amiably and shook her head.

"Your dream is telling," Makeda said, kind-heartedly. "Earlier on, I explained that the old woman you saw in your dream is your guardian angel. She brought you here. I will explain the significant symbols of your dream. You will piece it together for yourself.

"I suppose you know that physical outcomes are manifestations of metaphysical equity. The pain is like a spirit. You are a messenger, the carrier of wisdom. The spirit of pain has been talking with you for a long time and you are refusing to listen. Your dream says you have a spiritual calling. Your back and stomach pain will disappear when you accept your spiritual calling. You are a healer, just like I am. The chronic pains stem from you ignoring this call."

She paused and stared at Vumani as if studying his face, and continued, "Your ancestor, the one that you dreamt about, is a child of Mother Earth. She melted into the earth as in your dream, and has resurfaced to remind you about your purpose in life.

"The important symbols of this dream are the old woman, the rising sun, the open fire with a cauldron, the gourd, the honey, the dry dandelion seeds, and the book that does not burn. The old woman has already announced herself to you as your ancestor.

You saw her in the flesh when she entered here. The cauldron on an open fire symbolises the ancient times, and a gourd that turns into a burning book represents the ancient knowledge in modern times. The word 'dandelion' originates from a French word and means 'lion's tooth'. I just explained the significance of the lion's tooth during our divination session. One thing I like to explain about the dandelion is that it is a resilient flower, capable of rebounding no matter how often it's tread upon. Above all, its puffballs disperse their seeds across great distances in a brisk breeze."

Vumani nodded. Makeda's explanation held his complete attention.

"Simply, the dream calls on you to answer the ancestral calling of *ubungoma*. The glittering eyes and the stars simply mean that your energy resonates with the stars. You are supposed to bring light to people, just as the stars lighten the skies. Spend time with the stars at night. Your energy will awaken."

Vumani gazed at her intently. She blinked and continued, "Life has caused you so much emotional pain. What you went through as a child was excessive. You were buried alive; you lived as a street kid; you scoured through the corpses and lived in the bush with animals. All these were part of your initiation. The universe was preparing you for your spiritual vocation. Your spiritual journey began long ago and has culminated in another phase today. Do you want to continue the journey?"

Vumani stared at Makeda in stunned disbelief, grappling with the depths of her uncanny knowledge about him. He shifted his gaze to Bhaye and Morena, both appearing bewildered and at a loss for words. A surge of questions flooded his mind, but it wasn't his nature to vocalise them. He hesitated, not wishing to offend Makeda, despite her outwardly approachable demeanour. A sense of enchantment pervaded the air, emanating from the place, Makeda, or perhaps both.

His chronic pains, typically severe, had inexplicably subsided the moment he'd stepped into Makeda's yard. A compelling urge now overcame him, driving him to take immediate action to restore his wellbeing. Bhaye also sensed

Vumani's strange transformation and shared his newfound determination. If walking the path of *ubungoma* could alleviate his son's suffering, he was willing to embrace it too.

In that moment, it became evident to Vumani that he would choose to continue with this journey. Makeda glanced at her watch, realising that the divination had taken an unusually long time. "I will give you a chance to decide what you want to do. We can start immediately. Your father and brother can bring your clothes tomorrow. There is a shop nearby where you can buy toiletries." She gazed at them with her large, bovine eyes – the gaze that transformed her cordial face. She left the *indumba*, to give them a chance to decide.

"I have decided... I will stay," announced Vumani. He stared at Bhaye and Morena, hoping they would say something. There was nothing they could say. They were happy that Vumani had finally found an antidote for his spiritual and physical illnesses. Vumani had agreed to stay, mysticism eagerly waiting for him, summoning him into the world of the soul.

There was a flurry of activity outside the *indumba* when they came out. Two initiates and two *sangoma*s were already back from work and were busy with their rituals. Some were singing and dancing as Morena and Bhaye left. Vumani sat, watching them, wondering what this new chapter had in store for him. At sundown, they all clustered around him and started drumming, singing, and clapping hands. Daylight faded. It was the time for them to induct Vumani into *ubungoma*. This entailed giving him his ancestral name.

Makeda came out of the house and observed the dark sky lit by the glitter of the moon. She chuckled and summoned the drumming crowd to the *indumba*. The two *sangoma*s present and the five initiates went to the entrance of the *indumba*. They bowed and entered, kneeling as the two others had done earlier on. Makeda followed with Vumani, Vumani occupying the same position he had occupied earlier on.

Just then, an initiate brought a large, white sheet and gave it to Makeda.

"Please come nearer, *baba*," said Makeda, gesturing Vumani to the centre of the *indumba*. "We are now going to see if our divination was true. I want you to go to the land of your ancestors and let them speak for themselves. Please bear with us and relax as much as possible. This is the last process of the day. You've been through the worst in your life. What you are now going to do is nothing compared to what you have gone through. Sit still, relax, spread out your legs, and surrender completely to the process," Makeda said, covering Vumani with the white sheet the initiate had brought. She put some herbs on an enamel plate, lit them, and put the plate under the sheet.

Vumani didn't know what to expect. He was burning with curiosity as he wondered what the land of ancestors was like, and what they looked like, if they even existed. It remained to be seen whether his Marxist mentality would help to him prove or disprove the existence of spirits.

More drumming and singing started. "*Sabela gogo uyabizwa, nali idlozi limile liyakubiza, liyakubiza sabela.* Respond! You are being called. Heed the call of your ancestors. They are waiting for you. They want you. Heed their call."

Under the sheet, Vumani saw a wisp of mist rising, creating a shroud around him. The mist became thicker as the drumming intensified. Makeda, the *sangomas*, and the initiates watched Vumani shaking slowly under the sheet. The shaking continued gradually and peaked into a violent tremor. The drumming and singing continued.

Vumani felt its sound echoing from somewhere beneath an infinite tunnel. He saw himself floating through this long tunnel towards a bright, dazzling light that temporarily blinded his eyes. Suddenly, something white and foamy enclosed his space and made him feel as if he was in a bubble. Then a force, fierce and mighty, seemed to propel him into an infinite space. He shivered, feeling cold, as if he was in the depths of the sea. Suddenly, his head felt like it had exploded like a volcanic eruption. Convinced that he was dying, he desperately kicked, straightened his body and stretched, trying to resist death. Then came an ear-piercing

cry as he violently pulled off the sheet and watched them as he gasped for air. The drumming stopped instantly.

"I have never seen a man who fears death like this. Did you hear that scream?" Makeda couldn't help laughing as she helped Vumani to sit up properly. "You agreed to be a *sangoma*," she continued. "You agree to die when you agree to be a *sangoma*. You must die and be awakened as a *sangoma*. Remember, being alive is an agreement to die. You die in order to awaken. Nature tells us these things. A seed has to die in order to germinate. A person has to die in order to grow. The very exercise of life is death. Do you want us to go through this process again? You almost died. You needed a few more seconds to reach the land of the dead. Just surrender. Defeat death and live again. There is no difference between the seed and the spirit. The seed goes through pain in the dark in the soil and it liberates itself and sprouts and is attracted by the light. That is exactly what you went through when you went through the tunnel and saw the light at the end. That is exactly what the seed goes through. It goes through darkness and is pulled by the light which is outside of the soil, and is liberated there. Remember, you need to die so that you can face up to immortality. Immortality is about death and rebirth. Don't fight against it. Do not refuse to let go. Surrender. Allow death to invade you. Surrender and allow what needs to happen to happen! Face your death head on, my son."

Vumani felt as if it was Maye who talked to him, rather than Makeda. He remembered that he had surrendered to death as a soldier and was at peace with it. He also remembered a conversation he had had with Sindi one day at the camp. During that conversation, Sindi had impressed on him that, in truth, nothing ever dies. Neither the flesh nor the spirit dies. It only disintegrates, and disintegration does not mean that the components of the flesh do not continue to be active in new forms. It simply means that what was is changed into what was not. The old becomes the new. That's what death is. Death disintegrates in order to reintegrate. Sindi even gave Vumani a biological example, explaining that where we find death or compost, there's another life of fungi and worms. It is death, but with life of another dimension. Anybody who would want to refute life beyond the

grave is a person without an understanding of the meaning of life. There is always life in death and, in some instances, death in life. That is why people act the way they act.

He imagined his death and perceived how it tasted. He thought of Vumile, Bohloko, Maye, Sindi, and many of his close friends and relatives who had died, and concluded that he knew more people in the land of the dead than in that of the living. He thought that it did not matter if he had to die. He observed the *sangoma*s and initiates sitting around him and said, "I will do it now once more. If I must die, so be it." He completely surrendered to his fate.

The singing and drumming started once again. Makeda put some more herbs on an enamel plate, lit it again, and covered Vumani with the same large, white sheet. The singing and drumming rose steadily and reached a fever pitch. Beneath the sheet, Vumani no longer felt like a physical body, but rather like an energy drifting through a long, pitch-dark tunnel. Suddenly, a faint light emerged, gleaming with brilliant, iridescent hues reminiscent of hospital lights at the tunnel's far end. It was as if he were once again immersed in water. His body quivered, as if shivering from the cold. A streak of white, laser-like light flashed before him. It enveloped the entire sheet and filled the space with a blinding brightness. He had the sensation of transforming into a cloud as the sheet changed into a foamy, transparent bubble that enclosed him. A tremble started in his hands and then spread through his body. He felt a force pulling him, swiftly propelling him towards the expanse.

They knew what was happening to him and continued beating the drums, singing and chanting. A scream followed. The scream turned into a wail. Then, a scream again. Then a scream and a wail simultaneously. Finally, a wailing scream. In a hypnotic-like state, Vumani saw himself joining a community of people he didn't know. He could hear their mutterings but could not see their faces. He felt lightheaded and vaguely heard this community ululating, welcoming him. Then he recognised them: Vumile, Bohloko, Maye, Sindi, Libembe, Mbuya Nehanda, Dedan Kimathi, Dulcie September, Mmanthatisi, Lozikey Dlodlo,

Phila Ndwandwe, Olof Palmer, Bantu Biko, Solomon Mahlangu, Job Tabane, Richard Mapela, Samora Machel, Amilcar Cabral, Ben Barka, Felix Moumié, Eduardo Mondlane, Hastings Ndlovu, Hector Petersen, Abram Tiro, Nzinga Mbande, Sarraounia Mangou and many other people spread in the air like drifting dandelions puffs. He partially lost consciousness. Slowly the drumming and music stopped. Just then, a piercing scream shrilled through the *indumba*... And then nothingness.

"The spirits have descended," one initiate shouted excitedly, noticing no movement from the sheet.

"Shh," said Makeda and watched casually, taking snuff. The moment she expected came easily for Vumani. It often took days, weeks, or even months for other initiates to determine if indeed they had the ancestral calling.

"*Thokozani*," Vumani was now in a trance. His voice was feminine, breathing heavily as if gasping for air. All attention was rivetted on the spirit talking through Vumani.

"*Thokozani silalele, khulumani zindlondlo ezinhle? Ningobani?"* Makeda engaged the spirit. "Greetings. Who are you? Speak to us, gentle spirits. We are all ears."

"My name is *Tsebo ea boholo-holo*, the ancient knowledge. You can call me Tsebo, the well of wisdom. I have lived many times, over and over again. I carry with me the ancient wisdom, as wide as the ocean. I am not alone. I come with the spirits of all those who died resisting colonialism. There is no way that we can be destroyed. All of us who were killed, butchered, and maimed are back to call our killers to account." She spoke in short sentences punctuated by silences, in fluent Sesotho, a language Vumani spoke poorly.

"Welcome, Great Spirit," Makeda said excitedly, clapping her hands. "We are happy for your visit. Talk to us! Share with us the wisdom of–"

"I bear good tidings from the oceans of ink. My ink sinks deep. I perished on the sea in a slave ship being transported to foreign lands. I am an ancient book. I healed through song. I carry spiritual lore of ancient past, spanning the many lifetimes. I have

traversed the world of the mortal as well as of the immortal. I am here to tell you that we have resurrected; our spirits are resurrected. The blood and tears that drenched our beautiful continent should be no more. We have come to avenge. The plans of our assassinators have failed. The bloodshed, massacres, and the mayhem you see right now on our beautiful continent are nothing but the labour pains for a new birth. God created Africa. Nothing will stop us from rising. We have risen!"

"We hear you, great Tsebo. Share with us your knowledge."

"I won't burden you any further. It's enough for your twin brother to live in you. I only want to work through you. You don't have to do much. Just write all the things I say to you and share them with the public. *Ubungoma* is an ordinance of great antiquity. I want to work through you to put it to its rightful place in the assembly of world religions.

"Secondly, and most importantly, our flow of ink, through you, the pen, wants you to restore Africa. We have resurrected... Tell them we did not die. We were sown as seeds and now those seeds have produced crops. All of us have risen, as you can see." She paused. Vumani's shoulders heaved. He exhaled deeply.

"Your body has been battered, but your spirit remains intact. You, too, will have to heal before you embark on this journey. Part of your healing is extracting yourself from every last trace of the violation of your spirit that happened by living through apartheid. You, too, are being resurrected. Allow the lion that you are to emerge from the subterranean cage. The broken Africans are always around, and they will want to stop you. But that's just the way it is; there have to be snakes. Let our ink move through your pen. There is more we want to say about immortality and the circle of life, through you."

"We are grateful for the news that you have brought us," said Makeda, clapping her cupped hands. "We will heed your message as per your instructions. Please spell out exactly what you want your grandson to do." She could not hide her excitement. It seemed as if she liked engaging with *Gogo* Tsebo.

"We will work everything together as we walk along. For now, suffice it to say that there is no need for war. Healers who promote war are false healers. Spiritual awakening makes one understand that life is sacred."

Tsebo paused. "We have said everything we needed to say for now. I am going back to the oceans where I came from. A *sangoma* holds the flame of light of the village. Open yourself so I, the bodyless one, can work through you. You must wield your pen in our name. Use the power of immortality to promote a revolutionary agenda. Souls are not mortal. Just as the lizard regenerates its tail after losing it, you need to regenerate all the alienated souls with your books. Grant these warriors immortality, so that they can continue to live through your books."

Makeda gave thanks: "*Thokoza gogo*, we are glad you came. Your child has received your calling. He has answered your call. Make his journey less arduous. Please also visit us again next time and greet everyone there." She bowed and clapped her cupped hands twice.

Vumani's voice, a hoarse whisper at first, wove into a haunting melody as he fought his way back from the depths of unconsciousness. It wasn't just a song; it was a tribute, a heartfelt homage to the fallen heroes of the struggle.

As the white sheet that had covered him was pulled away, those around him joined in the chorus, despite hearing the song for the first time right then. Their voices rose like an unexpected symphony. Vumani's roar, growing louder with each passing moment, echoed like the fierce roar of a lion.

With a determined effort, he pushed himself up from the cold, hard ground, slowly regaining full consciousness. Blinking, he scanned his surroundings, his gaze cutting through the lingering mist. A strange numbness overwhelmed him. His puzzled expression deepened as he realised he couldn't feel his body. Disorientation clung to him like a shadow as he gradually emerged from his trance.

Finally, he summoned the strength to open his eyes, the world coming into focus in slow increments. His gaze settled on

Makeda and the others, and he watched them with a mixture of astonishment and disbelief. He couldn't help but think that these people possessed the uncanny abilities of magicians.

"What a hauntingly beautiful piece of music!" Makeda said to Vumani by way of greeting. "You can tell that your guardian angel was a songstress. Welcome back, Vumani! A *sangoma* is a person who is awoken by those who are asleep with a song, and you rose with a song when you came back from your trance. If there was ever any doubt that you are called to heal, everything that has happened here today proves beyond doubt that you are. Be happy! You have accessed the world of the ancestors, and we are glad you came back. Many go there and never come back," she said excitedly, stretching Vumani's arms and legs. Vumani exhaled and looked at her blankly. He had no clue what she was talking about.

She continued as she watched the fluffy puffballs of the dandelions float gently through the *indumba*. "Those who live close the eyes of the departed and the part open the eyes of those who live... We had a visitation from your ancestral spirit. Yes, you channelled the great Tsebo, that's what she said her name was. From today, we will call you Tsebo. She was the most benevolent spirit I ever encountered. We really liked her..." She paused and watched Vumani, looking confused.

"Vumani, the people who took power after liberation are broken African collaborators. This will not restore Africa to Africans. The so-called liberation is nothing but a different mask on the face of the same preacher. Our beautiful continent remains, through them, under the control of colonialists. The task is to restore Africa. The civilisation of the Western world is collapsing. You have been called to take part in this great spiritual battle. What you are fighting against is the narrative of religion because it has weakened the ancient spirituality by demonising it, calling it witchcraft. You are restoring it to its rightful dignity. You are neutralising the narrative that demonised it. That narrative has been made impotent. Yours is the superior weapon.

"You are healing people individually from their traumas. *Sangomas* played a major role in the liberation struggle. Now

they want you to play an equally significant role in the process of eliminating and purging Africa of the last vestiges of colonialism. Colonial Christianity is a travesty of authentic religion. It is used as an instrument to subdue and subjugate the people under its power. It is a cult of oppression. It has no connection with spirituality. Zero. It was always a malevolent, predatory institution operated by the military and political powers. The process of colonisation was accomplished entirely through this means. And the process of eliminating the last traces of colonisation is accomplished through *ubungoma.*

"What is called religion is a political organisation. Power which imposes itself in the name of God takes advantage of the sheep that follow it. They would incite people to violence just like any other political power, for the purpose of holding on to power and gaining economic advantage. But the poor sheep are blind and drugged with blind faith and nice music, pretty pictures, and romantic stories. The broken Africans have betrayed the continent. The ancestors want you to restore the continent through your writing."

Her gaze swept across the room, as if exploring a vacuum with her eyes. "The political resistance has run its course. There is now a spiritual upsurge that calls for people like you to usher in a new, spiritual victory. This is in the context of the falling apart of a patriarchal, domineering, and warmongering civilisation. The time for the cult of oppression and aggression is over. It is now the time for the spirituality of liberation. And you are one of the people chosen to pilot it."

Fear gripped Vumani. He remained confused about what exactly had happened to him, even though he resonated with the message. He remembered that he had always loved writing. At high school, he had contributed significantly to the school newsletter, and he also started a publication when he was a student at Khanya College in 1989. He had even written a book as a teenager, which he had left in the Oracle when he skipped the country. But how could he restore the continent when he needed restoration himself? He looked around the room and observed the others watching him, mesmerised.

Vumani knew exactly what Makeda meant. He thought of the role Mbuya Nehanda, who was a spirit medium, played during the First Chimurenga Revolt in Zimbabwe with Sekuru Kakuvi against the British from 1897 to 1898. He was also well aware of the roles many *sangomas* had played in South Africa during the liberation struggle. He understood what Makeda meant. His only problem was that a *sangoma* was an unpolluted channel through which an important work can happen.

He understood that the energy and the voice coming through was much greater than he was. But even if it was greater, it had chosen him. He had to override any obstacle that told him he was not ready. He remembered that Maye was supposed to become a healer, and that she had resisted. He knew it was a debt one had to pay, and nothing would be resolved until that debt was paid.

Makeda continued, "Let me explain to you clearly: You are being called to adopt an identity that is far greater than yourself – an identity of immortality. We write these stories so that the dead may rise again. Part of your healing is extracting from yourself every last trace of the violation of your spirit that happened by living through apartheid. This makes the book itself a resurrection.

"Christian morality for the oppressed is a systematic process of defanging and shaming the magician by calling him or her demonic. Through this, the *sangoma* relinquishes her power and becomes impotent. The *sangoma* must engage in a quest to restore her claws, teeth, and speed – to become again one with the wild. A turtle confined in a tank forgets the ocean. When you threaten someone for being who they are, they doubt themselves and become conciliatory. This is your sickness. We need to heal you from it. You paid in blood for your liberation. Now you have to pay again, in another way."

Makeda's message spoke directly to Vumani's apathy. Ever since Bohloko's, Maye's, and Sindi's passings, Vumani had lacked interest in everything. He had pledged to avenge their deaths, but he knew that war had passed its use-by date, which Makeda also alluded to. What Makeda had just said reminded him of the book he had read by Nina Nonke, which focused on spirituality

and revolution. Nonke's argument was that a *sangoma* is the next stage after armed revolution. She argued that armed revolution is usually followed by the collaborators who come into power rendering the armed revolution unsuccessful. Thus, the *sangoma* must take the next step beyond armed revolution, as a purifying influence, and bring the revolution to completion.

Vumani had never thought about the significance of his transitioning from guerrilla to *sangoma*. For the first time, his conversation with Makeda made him think deeply about this. A guerrilla doesn't die. She replicates herself in the same sense that a *sangoma* does. Both the *sangoma* and the guerrilla leave their bodies, and come back. They fight from the grave even before they come back. This makes it clear that war is completely meaningless, because people don't die. Once you have people who can come in and out of death, who operate in immortality, it becomes politicised. Killing those who resist oppression is a waste of time because they come back. Whoever you kill weakens you. You do not weaken those who resist oppression, the so-called terrorists. He nodded as he uttered these thoughts to himself.

Makeda watched Vumani nodding and said, "*Ubungoma* cannot be fought against. It cannot be destroyed, because it is immortal. The soul will reincarnate, and it will do things from the subtle world. You can be more effective when you reincarnate. We will help you resurrect, Vumani. Our society is in pain. It needs restoring. That is the physical pain you carry in your body. We must mend and rebuild so as to recover from our adversities. Transcend your past and transform yourself into an ocean of healing. We must work closely with the Creator and our ancestors to repair the world. People are afraid of *sangoma*s because they fear to be cursed. They try to destroy something that they fear, but they can't destroy something that's immortal... You have taken a step to a place from where there is no return. To enter a spirit world is much scarier than the material world. You have crossed the line. When you cross over that line, you are going into a spiritual, unknown territory. There is no turning back."

"Need we say more?" said another *sangoma* as she started a song. The night percolated with an expectant energy. As was

tradition, they celebrated the visitation of spirits with song and dance. Makeda approached Vumani as they celebrated, and whispered something to him.

They all danced for hours to the point of exhaustion. Vumani could not muster enough energy to walk after the celebration; he slept peacefully that night. His stomach and back pain had completely subsided. Only his emotional pain lingered.

The secret that Makeda had imparted to Vumani under the moonlight remained with him. Vumani knew that he would be reborn in some way, but he was unaware that it would happen the very next day. In the early hours of the morning, Makeda woke Vumani from his sleep, a knowing glance exchanged among the other initiates. The symphony of dawn had begun, and they answered its call. Bags in hand, they moved towards the river, guided by the nocturnal whispers of the forest.

A meandering stream flowed along, leading Vumani and the other initiates on their secret journey. They walked a rugged path, perilous yet promising. In time, they reached a lush clearing and paused in reverence.

Makeda knelt at the river's edge, her fingers caressing the cool sand.

"Come," she whispered, beckoning to Vumani and the other initiates. It was an invitation into the sacred. Their voices merged with the rustle of leaves, rising to the heavens like tendrils of incense smoke. Makeda lit candles. Each flame was like a whispered incantation upon the river's surface.

A pause, a breath, then the rhythmic beat of drumming resumed.

"Please take off all your clothes and be as you came into this world," Makeda said as she shed her own clothes, her bare feet greeting the river's embrace. Uncertainty flickered in Vumani's eyes, but the desire for healing propelled him forward. He surrendered to the ritual, took off all his clothes, and knelt on the bank of the river. Shoba, a male sangoma who lived in the community and typically assisted Makeda with male cases, quickly shaved all of Vumani's body hair.

The river spread out like an ancient book, its pages whispering secrets of ages past. The drumbeats harmonised with the gentle ripples, creating an ethereal melody. Makeda, the embodiment of the river's wisdom, stepped into the water and anointed Vumani with its timeless grace. The river's cool waters kissed Vumani's body like a soothing melody, bringing him deep peace within.

Vumani emerged from the womb of the river with the weight of old burdens lifted. Three viceroy butterflies encircled him delicately. These were symbols of metamorphosis and hope. Everything happened against the canvas of dawn. Indeed, it was an otherworldly promise of new beginnings.

Lebone, one of the trained *sangomas* and Makeda's assistant, was sharpening a diver's knife with a whetstone when Vumani and the others returned from the river. She left whatever she was occupied with and took Vumani into a room, where she circled him, sniffing at him like a dog trying to get information about a stranger. She thrust the knife into the air, then pointed it directly at Vumani, her eyes fixed in a deadly glare. Vumani thought she was going to stab him, and tensed his muscles, adjusting his body to defend himself. He relaxed when he saw her lowering the knife, and told himself that he had no choice but adapt to the unfamiliar world he had been plunged into.

After Lebone completed her task, Makeda began the painstaking process of purgation. She cleansed him using herbs, which was followed by steaming and vomiting.

Makeda explained: "You must be detoxified from all the stuff that you lived through. As a survivor, you have to be like a dandelion seed that goes into the earth and starts growing new dandelions. You have to be in your power. The empowerment of the healer and the healed come together." The purgation took seven days.

Vumani felt transformed. The cleansing felt like it had rid him of his past. He felt he had broken free from what had enslaved him. Indeed, the process proved to be a kind of demobilisation for him, as well as a mobilisation into a new, spiritual warfare.

Then Vumani's *sangoma* training began in earnest. One day, Makeda said, "Your head is now clear to receive messages. I am sure that you are ready to begin your journey. We are now going to cover your head with the ground, to join you with your ancestors." She dreadlocked Vumani's hair and smeared chalky, clay soil – referred to as *ibovu* – on Vumani's head. Vumani didn't know it at the time, but he would not wash his head until he graduated as a *sangoma*. He bore the smell and the colour of ochre, reminiscent of the house in which he was once torturously locked.

"Spirits are considered to be underground, where they are buried. Ochre is part of the ground and the river. You head is now sacred, and no one is allowed to touch it. It would be defiled and lose its capacity for you to hear messages," Makeda said as soon as she was finished. Vumani stayed with the ochre throughout his training.

For the next six months, Vumani woke up at 3 am with five other initiates to invoke the ancestors. After the invocation, they would be given herbs to enable them to communicate with the ancestors. Sometimes, at around 4 am, they would take hoes and sacks, and walk many kilometres into the bush to forage for herbs.

Vumani liked being taught to dance the most. Makeda would say as she taught him, "Where there is a song, there is a dance. That is why you rose from the land of the ancestors with a song. *Sangomas* take their whisks to sing and dance. When you dance, you don't dance for yourself. You only awaken the spirits of those people who inhabit you."

And so it was. Vumani did not wear the goatskin like the other initiates, thanks to Kora, a gentle goat designated for sacrifice during one of Vumani's rituals. Early one morning, Vumani, accompanied by Makeda and Lerumo, set out to find a goat at the nearest abattoir. Joining them to assist in the ritual were Bhaye and Morena. Upon reaching the abattoir and approaching the pen, all the sheep and goats scattered in various directions. Only one goat approached them, wagging its tail.

"This goat is prepared to sacrifice herself for you. Let's take her," Makeda said, smiling, interpreting the goat's gesture as a readiness to serve as the sacrificial lamb. As an experienced

sangoma, Makeda knew that some animals did that. But she was open-minded, because her experience had taught her that one learns something new every day when facilitating *sangoma* training.

What followed was unexpected. They brought the goat home and tethered it to a tree. The goat continued to emit a rhythmic bleating sound, akin to a melodic hum. The time for the ritual arrived. They went to untie it and led it to the shrine, where Vumani offered it some water and sorghum beer. The goat attentively observed them during the prayers, shook its head, and drank the water before the sorghum beer. It seemed to enjoy the beer and its sediments, licking its lips. Then it belched and bleated. Afterward, it gazed at Makeda and Vumani for an extended moment before moving to stand beside him, wagging its tail.

"Do you see what I'm seeing? I have been in a *sangoma* for 35 years, but I've never seen this. This is not an animal. It is a human being. *Gogo* Tsebo, to be specific. Here we get the guidance from our ancestors. I don't think they want us to kill, skin, or eviscerate this goat. What do you think we should do?" Makeda asked as they exchanged puzzled glances, amazed by the goat's unexpected display of affection. Finally, they collectively decided against slaughtering it. The goat bleated, as if acknowledging their decision.

"I am learning so much from initiating you," Makeda said. "Your ancestors want us to redefine archaic *sangoma* practices, and we are willing to comply." They domesticated the goat and named it Kora, the 'singing goat'.

The days raced by swiftly. Soon, the six months Vumani was to spend at the initiation school came to an end. The final day arrived, for the final ceremony. It was October 1996. In the pre-dawn darkness, four initiates, accompanied by Makeda, Lebone, and three trained *sangomas*, made their way to the river, carrying their ritual tools. Upon arrival, Lebone promptly leaped into the river, spear in hand, to gauge its depth and ensure safety. He gestured to the secure area within the river. Makeda took herbs and scattered them into the designated congregation space within the river.

The four initiates sat bare-chested on reed mats at the riverbank, drumming and singing, while Makeda invoked the spirit of the river to be with them as they concluded their training. She knew that neglecting to appease the river spirit could have dire consequences.

Lebone made incisions on the bodies of the four initiates. Vumani's body oozed blood as they applied herbs to the wounds. They were given a herbal concoction to drink before submerging in the water. They performed rituals within the river, preparing themselves for their return home.

While they were in the river, the other *sangomas* discreetly hid their tools and artifacts, setting up a test to assess their readiness for practice and determine their qualification. The drumming commenced, and they began their journey homeward. Vumani hadn't walked a long distance when a trance-like state overcame him. He ran, seemingly possessed, in the direction of the school, followed by the other three, equally entranced.

When he reached the school, Vumani instinctively went to the locations in the surrounding areas where his paraphernalia had been hidden. To the amazement of onlookers, he effortlessly found all his items, receiving applause. The most significant item, his divinity stick, was hidden in a tree. He retrieved it and danced. They all danced into the late evening, celebrating their graduation.

The next day, Vumani awoke to the sight of fresh green leaves sprouting from a once lifeless stump. He recognised this as a symbol of the old sprouting anew – a fusion of the past and the present. A sense of euphoric freedom engulfed him as he felt a rebirth from the ashes of his tumultuous past.

Fifteen

Lunga

Lunga was astounded by the brutality of his destiny. He had known intuitively since childhood that his life was fated to be an ordeal, and that it may well have been on account of something much greater and deeper that he may or may not have done.

When people do things against the voices of their consciences, they never forget that they deserve the negative consequences, the afflictions that necessarily come. But when something is destined, then it has to be interpreted differently.

Although Lunga was dealt terrible blows, he viewed his life dispassionately. He was neither antagonistic nor favourably disposed towards it. Even when bruised or battered, he bore everything with equanimity. His intellectual training had made him an agnostic, and his primordial connection with ancient African spirituality became dormant.

But the voices of the ancestors do not remain silent. When a high-quality soul must face a harsh destiny, there is meaning and significance hidden in signs that must be read with a discerning inner eye.

Lunga was now a paralysed man. Day after day, he sat under a mulberry tree in his wheelchair and watched those with normal lives pass by on the street, while his body wasted away, and he waited for death. But one day, Lunga sat with his head bent in deep contemplation, as his eyes followed a colony of ants moving back and forth. Someone entered the yard and walked towards him.

"Prof!"

Lunga looked up, his face gaunt and shaggy. His piteous eyes lit up when he saw Vumani. Vumani stood, bewildered, holding a plastic bag in his left hand. Lunga smiled at him wretchedly. For a moment, he forgot that he was in a wheelchair and tried to stand.

He toppled over. Vumani dropped the plastic bag and rushed to help him back into the wheelchair.

"Are you hurt, Prof?" Vumani looked at his cousin in disbelief.

"Ah, it is you, Vumani," Lunga said, brushing the dust from his trousers. "No, I am not hurt. You are the only person who calls me Prof in the world of the living. All the others are dead. And so, we meet after centuries, my brother. Why did you go into hibernation?" he exaggerated. He had last seen Vumani about ten years before. "I thought I would never see you again. You look as shocked as I feel. Now, tell me how you are, my dear brother, before I run my mouth."

"I am well, thanks, brother. And how are you?" Vumani said as he gazed at his cousin with compassion. He sat carefully on a rotting, rickety bench under the tree next to Lunga's wheelchair.

He could not contain his shock at Lunga's appearance. Lunga was emaciated and haggard. He looked like death, but his mind was alert.

"Everything is harmonious in disharmony, but disharmony is harmony," Lunga said, enigmatically. Vumani looked at Lunga, his eyebrows raised. He was accustomed to Lunga speaking cryptically. Lunga sensed Vumani's frustration and said, smiling, "That's life. Whatever was meant to happen, happened. Nothing could have prevented it. *Que sera, sera!* I am the pain of the so-called lost generation."

Vumani sank his teeth into his lower lip and gave Lunga a frustrated look. Lunga stared at the tree and listened to the chirping birds. He observed Vumani and smiled once more. Since Vumani's arrival, Lunga's face was nothing but smiles. Looking back up at the tree, Lunga said, "Sparrows sing all day long. Sometimes their soulful songs pass us, unheard. Sometimes we hear these songs and do nothing about them. It makes no difference whatever we do. Why bother? Leave things as they are. It is life; everything happens and passes, yet life goes on. Just enjoy your life. The rest will take care of itself."

Vumani grimaced and shifted his position. The bench creaked, threatening to disintegrate beneath him. "What exactly do you mean, Lunga?"

"I am weighed down by the paradox between fate, karma, destiny, free will, betrayal, and moral dilemma. This is me: the cross between a moral philosopher and a lawyer trying to argue for what is right and wrong. Don't mind me, I am trying to figure out who has moral responsibility for things that are not good," Lunga said, smiling.

Vumani scrutinised Lunga. He looked nonplussed and subdued, a far cry from the cordial, eloquent, and most brilliant member of the gang. Vumani thought how cruel life was. Almost ten years ago, his cousin was bubbly and full of life. Now he appeared withered, his spark gone. He had turned into his shadow. Was such a noble soul as Lunga being tested by the ancestors or God, such that it forced him to ego death? Vumani wondered. What had robbed him of his life? Vumani had heard about Lunga's condition, but never expected to find him in this state. He had avoided seeing Lunga for a long time because he could not forgive him. He wondered whom he stayed with after his mother died. He tapped his foot and fiddled with the plastic packet he held in his hand. He remembered that it was meant for Lunga.

"I brought you this gift. I hope you will enjoy it." Vumani rose carefully from the bench and handed Lunga the packet.

Lunga leaned forward to grab it, and tossed it aside. It fell with an audible crunch next to his wheelchair.

"Look at me, Vumani. I have turned into a garbage heap. Are you not seeing an innocuous old man? Please, look at me! Don't be afraid. My morbid fascination with death has turned me into a powerful spirit. My body is only flesh and bones. My one foot is here. My other foot is in my grave. See the power of my spirit," he laughed triumphantly.

Vumani stood silently, comprehending the greatness and the horror of his cousin's fate.

"Don't be scared, my brother. l am like a shop-window mannequin. Maybe you should put me in a museum for public

display, or rather parade me around as a man strong enough to manage when fate dealt him an ordeal required to gain victory which is not yet accomplished."

Vumani remained standing, motionless, transcendent in a torrent of emotions. Tears streamed down his face as he watched his cousin try to put on a happy face but fail to mask his wretchedness. Vumani's presence collapsed the equanimity Lunga had maintained ever since his tragedy. Clearly, the war was not yet finished. What they had passed through was one of the many battles.

"Daphney, Daphney," shouted Lunga, trying to get the attention of his wife. "Come and see who is here. Please bring something for him to sit on. He will fall if he continues sitting on this dilapidated bench."

Daphney appeared with a crate, gave it to Vumani, and remained standing, looking at Lunga to introduce her to the stranger.

"Vumani, this is Daphney, my dear wife," Lunga said animatedly. Vumani wanted to say something, but Lunga interrupted him.

"Daphney, this freshly minted *sangoma* who smells like burned grass is my cousin and my childhood friend. He is my only remaining brother. Remember I told you about our gang? There were 13 of us. We were friends who vowed to remain brothers. The rest betrayed me, and died. This is the only faithful brother who refuses to die because he cannot betray me. You can tell from his name that he was born to be a *sangoma*," Lunga said, cryptically.

The unusual introduction made Daphney take special interest in Vumani. Despite Lunga's horrific medical condition when she had begun to care for him as a nurse in the hospital, Daphney had discerned a man of inner substance and fortitude. She saw in him an unbroken revolutionary who had emerged alive from a gang of delinquents, psychologically and physically torn and tormented, but nevertheless spiritually intact.

"Oh, I have heard a lot about you," she said genially. "A day never passes without Lunga talking about you. He is happy

now that you are here... Well, I am happy that I can put a face to the name." She extended her hand. A long-time friend of her husband, she recognised that Vumani must also be a man of noble aspirations founded upon a humanitarian bedrock. *What kind of healer is this man?* she wondered.

Vumani smiled. "I am happy to meet you too."

They shook hands, and Daphney left the men in the yard.

Of course, Vumani knew of Daphney. The Majolas were well respected in Soweto. They owned almost every business there. When Vumani had skipped the country after Mhlupheki's murder, Daphney had been a student at Baragwanath Nursing College and was every boy's dream. Vumani watched Daphney in admiration as she went back to the house. He marvelled that she was still in such excellent shape. In her eyes, he saw a sparkle of depth and compassion. He recognised a kindred soul.

Lunga gazed at Vumani thoughtfully. He had waited for this moment for years. He had an overwhelming desire to release the burden that weighed heavily on his shoulders. "The little games we played..." Lunga said faintly, his voice barely audible. "We were in the madness of youth, a phase we paid and continue to pay for dearly. We did dreadful things, Vumani, things I am ashamed to even speak about... We thought we were smart. It is only now that I realise that we were kamikaze pilots, hurling our lives into Hell. We stood at the edge of the precipice, thinking to jump without falling. But we toppled into the abyss. It was an insane reaction to our environment."

"Exactly, my dear brother," interjected Vumani. "It was the insane violence of the apartheid system. It poisoned our souls and made us turn away from conscience to the unconscionable. We were deliberate products of apartheid; we became the proof of their invective against us."

Lunga sat up straight in his wheelchair and stared into space. Vumani nudged him with his eyes to respond. He knew Lunga had a lot to say, and he wanted him to say it all.

"Yes, we were in the thick of the battle – one we never started, which we never won either. We were mired in it because

we were born here. We lived under siege from that cruel system. We were sitting ducks. People make bad choices when they live under siege. We were caught up in the confusion of our time."

Lunga blinked his large eyes and laughed with a tinge of bitterness. "It was a hard trial, and yet both of us survived. It means our work is not yet complete. Something of the past still hangs in the air, that prevents me from moving forward. It is to me a hospitable inhospitality. I jumped into a pit toilet thinking I would come back smelling like a rose. Smell me, Vumani – don't I smell like a toilet?"

Vumani frowned at Lunga. Lunga's gaze drifted from Vumani to the corner of the house.

"Talking about the toilet, please take me to the toilet. I need to..."

Vumani obliged and wheeled him to the toilet. Lunga turned on the outside tap and washed his face. He motioned to Vumani to take him back where they had sat. Vumani looked at him, confused.

"You think it is nice to live a life of dependency? I am now dependent on people for everything." Lunga thought for a while. "I am better than you, though. What's with those beads and scars all over your body? Did you ever dream that you would be what you are now? Look at you. You look like a pasture, and you smell like death. Maybe it's the animals you slaughter as sacrifices for your spirits. Shame on you. You enjoy a life of servility. Even when you are supposed to be free, you still surrender your power yet to another master. You are no different from a hamster in a cage, running furiously in a wheel. Can't you see that you are chasing ebbing mirages?" He giggled and evoked a sad laughter from Vumani. Vumani could not resist the urge to retort.

"You never change, my brother, Lunga! Toro was correct, you will pontificate until you reach your grave."

Lunga shook his head gravely and wagged his finger. "No, no, no, no, no! Don't remind me of our erstwhile friends. Those characters," he said with a hoarse voice as he gripped his wheelchair hard, "they all fell by the wayside while I watched

helplessly. It could have been me or you, but for a moment of grace. Maybe their spirits are in a state of unrest where they are right now. They were all caught up in a frenzy of raving madness, just like us. I couldn't even attend their funerals." Lunga's voice was full of pity.

"Remember, Mhlupheki was the first to go. That one was doomed from the beginning. His death was not an accident. While our misadventures came piecemeal, his was swift. Did you know that Oupa murdered him? That one was a sadistic beast. By his own admission, Oupa fired the bullet that killed the hapless Mhlupheki. According to him, he killed him to prevent him from contaminating the rest of us with his ill fate. Remember how we searched for his corpse? Had we known that Oupa was answerable for his death, we would have forced him to take the responsibility of deciding what to do with his body. We would not have subjected ourselves to the agony of dumping his body in the bush and mining for it at the government mortuary.

"Petros followed, three or four years after Mhlupheki. I hate him. How could he commit suicide?" Lunga scorned. "Petros was too weak to handle the consequences of what he was doing, too weak to not do it, too weak to take his decisions to their logical conclusions. He thought he could be exonerated by taking the death of the so-called righteous, pleading for his friends to stop killing people. This is not a valid act in death, but should have been an act in life. Not only that, but he created the situation that got me into this stupid wheelchair with only half a body. But poor Petros, he was sensitive and righteous in that sense. After he got into the hands of Mabulala and the other collaborators with the apartheid regime, he was bound to his weapons and forced to act as a vigilante against our own people. Once he realised how they were using him, suicide was in fact the only escape. It was the same for some of those SS guards in concentrations camps in Nazi Germany who could not escape their gruesome functions except by suicide."

Vumani sat and listened attentively. He had always wanted to know how Lunga had ended in a wheelchair and how the rest

were murdered. "So, what happened on the day Oupa and the others died? How where they killed?" he asked.

Dimple-cheek's face flashed across Lunga's mind as everything of that ill-fated day became vivid to him. He clenched his teeth. "Please, let us not speak about it, Vumani. I won't sleep tonight if I go through it again. These things haunt me. Suffice it to say that Oupa was a real genius who was never discovered, despite his cruelty. He would have been a great person if he were born in a different country."

Lunga sighed deeply. "We could have been assets to this country. Pity we did not have the power over our destiny." He paused for a while, then took a deep breath. "Not only did the apartheid government use us as smoke and mirrors by making us hired guns to cover up their sickening system, but we were also used to distract people from focusing on the real issues. The police gave us guns and manipulated us to kill activists in Soweto. I was Oupa's lieutenant in a war against our brothers and sisters. We were duped into operating as gangsters, hired by the system to foment violence and mayhem in the townships. We all fell for it hook, line, and sinker. The security police were stringing us along. Our main targets were the youth political activists. We killed anything in a school uniform. We would even have killed a pig if it wore a school uniform. Apartheid really set us up for self-destruction," Lunga laughed with self-deprecation.

Vumani shrugged his shoulders.

Lunga continued: "We were inoculated with poverty and violence right from inception. That led directly to the atrocities we performed. It evokes tears for me now to think how blind we were. But my eyes have become a dry well. My laughter is my cry," Lunga snorted.

"Hindsight is 20-20 vision, Prof," Vumani replied. "The question is: What are we becoming now? We broke down only one layer of the fortress of apartheid. There are walls within walls, and our target is the central nucleus, the core. Our war is not between the races to determine which one is superior, but to free ourselves and anyone else from seeing only the external, the visible, the

physical. We must return to the fierce, wild protector of our ancestral heritage. This is the meaning of a warrior."

Lunga retorted: "And so, it matters not if we chose the hard road, or if the hard road chose us? We lived in a country where it was utterly wrong to be right and utterly right to be wrong. As innocent children, we were conscripted as weapons of mass destruction against our fellow brothers and sisters. What matters is that I am now left alone to sit with the consequences. I have nothing left but my disillusioned mind and heart."

Lunga clicked his tongue. "First, we killed our conscience and other spiritual forces in our minds. Then we killed everything that breathed. We created chaos and mayhem, as per our mandate. But then I left them. I was tired of killing. I left them in 1988, long before 1990, when the winds of the illusion of change blew through the country. Then, one day..."

He closed his eyes, recollecting. "This gorgeous, intelligent, dimple-cheeked girl arrived. She appeared as a Heaven-sent angel to me, as Sade sang in her beautiful song, 'Kiss of Love'. It was a case of love at first sight on my part. I thought I had found a life partner in her. She gave me the kiss of life that turned out to be a kiss of death. I wonder where she is now or whether she thinks about me."

Lunga shook his head. His cheek muscles tensed, and his eyes bulged. He took out his handkerchief from his pocket, blew his nose, and cast his eyes on the ground. He considered that his life had been as fast and confused as a stampede of wildebeest. He craned his head and blinked as his mind jolted back to the day he was injured and his friends were killed. He had quit the group about two years earlier and changed his life completely. At the time, he had made several attempts to convince the gang to mend their ways, but to no avail.

Lunga wiped his forehead and sat, tensed. "I was fortunate that Daphney – an angel I had known for a long time without realising she was one – saved me. She is my fortress," he said, wiping his forehead with his hand. He remembered the day he was informed of the shattering news. Dr Dwane was doing her morning rounds in the neurological ward when she broke the bad

news to Lunga: "Mr Mafakude, we are happy that your wounds are healing extremely well after your surgery. However, we are sorry to inform you that you will never walk again. Tomorrow, we will transfer you to a rehabilitation ward. There you will have physiotherapy to help build your upper body strength."

Lunga had listened to Dr Dwane with an indifferent mind. He had heard them hint that he would never walk again, but the words had never really sunk in. He wanted nothing to do with paralysis. The two and a half months he spent at the neurological ward had given him hope that he would walk again.

"Why am I not going home? I can do physio at home." Lunga had said irritably.

"You don't seem to understand, Lunga. You will never move again. You will depend on a wheelchair for the rest of your life. The main reason we transfer you to the rehabilitation ward is for you to learn to operate a wheelchair. You have a spinal injury from the mid-spine downwards. There wouldn't be nurses, doctors, or therapists at home to care for you. You are safe here. The therapists will help you acquire the essential skills to use a wheelchair, while the nurses and doctors care for you," Dr Dwane had said sympathetically before quickly exiting the ward, leaving Lunga mulling over her words.

Fear had overwhelmed Lunga. He had thought of how he would navigate life without his legs. Fear gave way to confusion, confusion to hurt, and hurt to anger. Finally, he had fallen asleep, devastated, feeling that everything had come to a standstill.

The following day had become a nightmare for Lunga. He had woken up in the rehabilitation ward to the sight of a massive, fiery sun on the rise. This flared his anger as it dawned on him that it was only his life that had stopped, and not the universe. It became difficult for him to accept that his situation was life-changing and would turn his world upside down, while others went about their days as normal.

He had been vibrant and active; now he had found himself confined to a hospital bed, dealing with the shattering news that he would never walk again. Truly, he could not believe that the

simple act of walking, once taken for granted, now seemed like an impossible dream.

Inside the hospital's dead walls, Lunga's feelings had wavered like a stormy tide. He had struggled to accept how terrible his circumstances were. The idea of facing the world in his paralysis was terrifying, as every day appeared to be a reminder of the life he had lost.

Daphney Majola, a talented nurse, had appeared at that time and became a lighthouse for Lunga. Reputed with a gift of seeing souls, Daphney had looked past Lunga's pain and rage and stood by his side. With her kind heart, she had offered Lunga not just medical care, but a lifeline of hope and transformation. With Daphney's encouragement, Lunga had found the strength to embrace his situation and the courage to redefine his life. Slowly, he had begun to gain strength and focus his energies on his rehabilitation. In no time, Lunga had recognised that his physical limits did not determine his worth.

As the months passed, Lunga's relationship with Daphney had deepened and culminated in full-blown love. With Daphney by his side, Lunga had not only learned to navigate the uncharted path of his new life, but had found a partner who would do it with him, step by step, for all the days to come.

Vumani now watched Lunga thoughtfully and nodded. He imagined how emotionally draining it must be for Lunga to recount how he was injured. He let him continue. He knew the therapeutic effects of Lunga verbalising his feelings, since he no longer had any friends.

"It is acceptable even if it is unacceptable," Lunga concluded. "Whether we like it or not, those things that are unacceptable are also acceptable." He laughed and digressed once more.

Lunga's freedom was that he did not look back, or turn into a pillar of salt, he said. He was purged from all impurity when Daphney helped him come to terms with everything and achieve ego death. He harboured no bitterness or illusions about his past life. His acceptance had cleansed him. It was total liberation

for him, although he eagerly awaited his death. "I say I, too, am going, my brother. I am aware of approaching my grave. I am now waiting, counting down every second, minute, and hour. I do not have anything to live for, and so much to die for. Life has always been an enemy I wrestled with, right from my beginning. I don't complain; it is my destiny. I pay for sins I never committed. I sit here each day remembering that I have the soul of a warrior. Sometimes I get tired, and my spirit dampens. Sometimes I despise myself, but most of the time I feel good that my life remained always in the spirit of honour, despite so much betrayal and deception due to which I did despicable things." He was calm and composed as he spoke. It was not difficult to reconcile what he said with his composure.

Vumani nodded. "I think you are correct. Our friends and brothers completed their destinies, and since we are still alive, there is some reason and purpose to our lives that is not yet fulfilled. Maybe we did not die because the Creator has another assignment for us. It may well be the beginning of our new chapter. The beauty is that we can turn the old story into fertile ground for the seeds of our new chapter. Let's dream anew and set new goals. The future is bright. Let's start a new future now."

"In spite of all we did, good or bad, nothing has changed," Lunga complained. "Besides, the longer I live, the longer I suffer. I am being attacked on all fronts. Maybe it is my penance for my past crimes. I cannot forgive myself for not seeing that I was being used by traitors to our real purpose. It makes me sad to think that I caused so much pain to so many families, whether justified or not. Such fearsome circumstances are needed to break the ego of a know-it-all. I have come to terms with all that happened. I accept the inevitability of it all," Lunga's voice strained. He suppressed tears. "Perhaps, together with Daphney, we can find the strength to pick up the pieces and go once again to the battleground, fighting with something more subtle and effective than guns and dynamite."

Vumani placed his hand on Lunga's shoulder, empathising with him. "The circumstances were different then. As you correctly say, we lived under siege. Ours was a generation of the

wretched. How do you explain the fact that the minute we were born, we realised that we had an enemy we did not make? Worse still, this enemy was far more powerful than us. Remember the day the police let their dogs loose on us?"

Vumani's response carried Lunga back to one of the tragic events that occurred to them in the late 1970s. It was the December holidays. Everyone in the township was in a festive mood. Vumani may have been nine years old and Lunga 14. Baybs, a neighbour's son who was almost the same age as Lunga, had a bedwetting problem. Popular township lore claimed that eating *imbiba*, the African striped mouse, cured bedwetting. Baybs had asked Lunga secretly to help him find the African striped mouse. The plan was to hunt for the creature the following Sunday, and to grill it for him as part of the festive feasting. Sunday had come, with lots of anticipation and excitement. The sun had shone brightly against the clear blue sky – perfect weather for hunting. Vumani and another friend, Wandile, were at the top of a plum tree, indulging themselves.

"Hey, Vumani! Have you ever hunted *imbiba*? Let's go hunting," Lunga had invited him. The idea was to initiate Vumani to hunting the African striped mouse, but also to make him taste it.

Vumani had tasted birds, although he disliked the meat. The thought of *imbiba* meat was abominable to him, though he was curious to see how they were hunted. He had immediately climbed down from the tree and invited Wandile to join Lunga and Baybs in the hunt.

"*Bhuti* Lunga, why do we have to go to the field, when we have plenty rats here at home?" Vumani had asked as he, Baybs, Lunga, and Wandile walked along the dusty road to the open field where they would find the mouse.

"No, Vumani. African striped mice are a bit larger than rats, and have four stripes on their backs. We specifically need an African striped mouse, and not a rat. We will find them in open fields and bushes."

"Why do we specifically need an African striped mouse?"

"You ask too many questions, Vumani. We are going to have braai. They are nice delicacies. You will enjoy them."

Indeed, those who eat African striped mouse swear by their tangy taste. Still, Lunga had used the taste story as an excuse. He could not embarrass Baybs by revealing the reason behind their escapade.

Vumani's eyes had sparkled with excitement as soon as they reached the hunting ground in the open field. About six boys suspending skinned African striped mice on wire hooks welcomed them warmly. They joined another hunting party, which consisted of four young boys.

The chase had begun, but alas, the course changed immediately when the hunting party heard a terrible scream that echoed across the open field. Before they could figure out the problem, three policemen had unleashed two dogs and ordered them to attack. The other boys had run for their lives and scattered in all directions. The dogs barked angrily as they charged, turning the hunters into the hunted.

Vumani had frozen.

"Run, Vumani, run!" Lunga had shouted as one dog went for his cousin. It was too late; the dog lunged at Vumani. He screamed agonisingly. The police watched pitilessly as the dog latched its jaws around Vumani's left leg.

Lunga had leapt to his rescue. He'd picked up a stick and gone for the dog. The dog had released Vumani, but turned on Lunga, while the other dog joined in. The two dogs pulled Lunga to the ground and attacked him.

One had latched onto his arm; the other bit him all over his body. Vumani's heart had sunk as he helplessly watched the two dogs continue to attack Lunga on the ground, while the policemen laughed. The police finally released Lunga from the jaws of the two dogs after almost ten minutes of mauling. He had suffered injuries to his face, arms, legs, stomach, and neck.

"You think you can fight a police dog? Next time, you will die. Now leave! Begone from our sight. *Hamba*," one policeman

had growled, his face reddening from an anger whose source could not be traced. He was cold and heartless. He must have tortured many people in his career as a policeman, to be able to so easily transfer it to children without a flicker of conscience. Worse still, children whose only provocation was that he was taught to see them as his enemy.

Lunga had risen to his feet with difficulty, holding Vumani's hand. Vumani had clutched his own leg, hopping on his other foot. When they had left home that morning, they had thought they would have a feast of grilled *imbiba*. Instead, they had returned home empty handed and acutely traumatised.

It had been a callous attack on innocent children. Although this incident had happened decades ago, it had inflicted psychological scars that would not heal and memories that had stayed with both Vumani and Lunga, binding them together in their right to call the oppressors to account.

Lunga closed his eyes. He cast his mind back to that day, "I can see those dogs, I can hear their barks, I can feel their bites when they ripped into my body. But I bit the hell out of them too. They felt my teeth," he laughed. He squeezed and twisted his hands, and observed Vumani, who sat silently, deep in thought.

"It was meant to be, just as it is meant to be that I am going to die soon," Lunga said. "There was no way we could have prevented anything that happened, including the dogs they set on us."

Vumani felt Lunga's anguish. He tipped his head to the side and took a long breath. Being with Lunga was exciting and exhausting. "How do you reconcile yourself with living in wait of death?" Vumani asked. "It is unlike you."

"Vumani, you were an operative for your organisation. You must have also directly or indirectly caused people to die. In the midst of battle, the warrior kills; but there is an everlasting effect. Have you heard the scream of a soul dying? It echoes in your ears for the rest of your life. I am sure you understand, Vumani." Lunga's face became serious; his soul had been hardened by the realities of war.

He continued, "I carry the pain of all those people I have caused pain. And it is a searing and onerous burden. It has become part of me. It breathes and lives in me. You were insulated from the degree of violence that plagued us, just like you are insulated from the poverty that gnaws at me today. We had the appetite to kill. We wanted retribution for what they did to us. The horror is that they understood how to use our justified rage and turn us into a killing machine to support their filthy work. I did not see the horrific betrayal, and this is the regret that devours my soul."

Lunga was correct; the gang had killed for the sake of it. Murder had become great sport to them. It was a smokescreen that prevented them from seeing that the problem was not with them, but with the system. They hated those who appeared to enjoy life while they floundered in misery and pain. Sometimes they killed the youth because they were jealous that they showed signs of life, while they themselves were dead-alive.

"We were drawn to suffering like moths to a fire," Lunga continued. "The hostility we encountered was beyond words. My time in the gang haunts me. I don't sleep. I see the faces of the innocent people I murdered. I was a hired gun. I smell the corpses of all the people I murdered. My body has taken on their smell. My body and my conscience accuse me. The scream of a dying soul echoes in your ears for life. Ask Daphney what she must put up with. Ask her!"

Vumani, too, still suffered, but differently. His trauma was deep and hidden but followed him inexorably, waiting for the moment to leap out and attack the depths of his soul.

Lunga knew nothing of Vumani's trials as an underground operative in the resistance movement against the apartheid regime. He knew nothing of the dangers Vumani had faced and the terrible losses he had experienced through the torture and assassination of his brother and so many other heroic fighters who gave their lives under severe pressure.

"I accept my fate with forbearance," continued Lunga, pointing at his wheelchair. "Whatever is meant to happen in the

last few days of my life, it will happen to complete the final circle of my destiny. Death itself will respect the way I will approach it."

"You tried to dissuade us from following Ngoho's prophecy," Vumani remembered. "Remember her? We arrived at her house with the intention to make her tell us who killed Vumile? You denied her foresight. You thought that everything was predetermined and that we should not worry about the future because we could not control it. You were sure that whatever was supposed to happen to us would happen, irrespective of whether we heeded to Ngoho's message or not. Is that correct?"

Lunga nodded and looked expectantly at Vumani.

"I hear you, Lunga, my brother, but the idea that everything in life is exclusively automatic or mechanical – as if operated by a machine – is flawed. It is not the whole picture. Maybe whatever was supposed to happen in our lives has happened. Maybe there is some spiritual or religious order. Maybe it happened by design or by default. We may never know. Circumstances may be due to some lapse or blunder on our part. However, the past cannot be reversed. These past events teach us about life, and make us take charge and redirect our lives. I believe that, amid destiny, we have some degree of freedom to write our own scripts. Destiny is more subtle than just random fate. There are mysterious forces directing our lives, and there are hidden meanings for us to discern."

Lunga considered his situation. "I aspired to be a lawyer, or a performing artist. Yet circumstances beyond any of our control turned any opportunity into a nightmare of unimaginable loss and privation. Apartheid made the achievement of our goals a remote possibility, and our resistance to it cost us everything."

Vumani responded, "Yes, apartheid was a flesh- and soul-eating virus we were infected with before we were born. But we had a chance to cure ourselves of it. We wouldn't be where we are now if that was not the case. Fate dictated us to be born here so that we could fight the system and change it for the better. That's what Ngoho alluded to when we went to her place, and that is why I ended up in the underground structures, fighting apartheid. But our mission does not end with the end of apartheid. You were left

for dead, but the universe gave you a second chance. It is time to make good what was destroyed. That may be why your life was spared the day our other friends died."

Lunga mulled over Vumani's words and stared into space.

Vumani continued, "Don't let adversity wear you down and turn you into an object, when there are still lots of contributions you can make – even if you believe you only have a few more days to live. You still can have a purpose to live for, rather than to sit and wait for your demise, which you are not even sure when it will come.

For a moment, Lunga and Vumani sat silently, looking deep into each other's eyes, tears welling. The wheelchair squeaked from Lunga's tremors, piercing the silence. Vumani stared into space as if looking for answers. Until that time, he had not deeply reflected on his life, or that of his friend's. Daphney brought out some food joined them to eat under the shade of the tree. Lunga did not eat much. He reached for the plastic bag that Vumani had given him when he had arrived, took out a book, and scanned it.

He read the title aloud: "*Salt of the Earth*! And who is Leqhala?"

"Leqhala is my pen name. I just fancied the name and used it. *Salt of the Earth* is our story. It is dedicated to us all, the gang of 13. You will find yourself in the pages. Read it and tell me what you think."

Lunga's face lit up. It was as if he derived fresh strength from simply holding the book. He began to leaf through it. "You have written a book? Wow, congratulations! I knew you would write books. You were never without pen and paper from the time you were a toddler. Why the title, *Salt of the Earth*?"

"Read it, then you will easily connect the title to the book. I don't want to spoil it for you. Suffice it to say that it was inspired by our meeting with Ngoho."

"Congratulations," Daphney interjected. She took the book from Lunga and scanned the back cover. "The book seems interesting. I am sure Lunga will read this overnight. He is an avid

reader. Oh, great, it is autographed. You are very lucky, Lunga – you know a published author. I will also read it."

Lunga took the book from Daphney, placing it gently on his chest, and let the tears flow. He wheeled himself away from them. Vumani stood with the intention to follow him, but Daphney motioned for him to stop.

Lunga returned to them after washing his face. He looked at Vumani and smiled.

"Thank you, my friend. I will keep this book as a reminder that we have a story of great power. This will be my Bible," he said excitedly. "We've been reading a lot about others. Now it is their turn to read about us. Thank you for writing our story... If I had taken a different path and listened to Ngoho, I would have been somebody else today," Lunga said, glancing at Vumani. "But that man would not have the power and depth of understanding of life that I have, so no, I regret nothing. I am glad that I am who I am."

Just then, a scabby dog appeared, sniffing and frisking for food on the ground, a chain strapped around its neck. The dog thrust its nose into the rubbish bin and scoured the inside.

"*Voetsek! Voetsek!*" Lunga shooed the dog off. "Go away! Get out of here!"

Hearing the commotion, two boys ran over from a neighbouring house and hurled stones at the dog. They poked it with sticks to force it out of the yard. It fought, barking ferociously and wincing, causing momentary pandemonium. The boys pulled the dog by its chain. It moved with difficulty, cowering with its tail between its hindlegs, licking its battered body, still wincing. As soon as the boys and the dog were out of the yard, Lunga looked at Vumani and said, "You see how cruel these kids are? They are the children of the lost generation."

Vumani remembered that his generation was labelled the 'lost generation'. The generation that succeeded theirs was labelled the 'free generation'. He sat pondering what the so-called lost generation bequeathed to the so-called free generation. He said, "We have passed on to our children a legacy of trauma and disorientation, and I hope they will find purpose and meaning and

build something solid on the first steps to full liberation that we were able to accomplish."

"You are correct, Vumani. Every generation builds upon the struggles and achievements of its forebears. We are what we are because of our ancestors," agreed Lunga, smiling.

"That may be true at face value, but life is far more complex than that," Vumani smiled back.

Dark clouds, flushed with the gold of dusk, filled the sky. Vumani was about to take leave and figured that it was good to inform them in advance, lest they delay him. "Sorry, I must go now. I intend to pass by Ngoho's place. I will see you on Thursday. It will be good to hear what you think about the book, Prof. Thank you very much, Daphney, for your hospitality. I appreciate everything. I will bring your autographed copy when I come back on Thursday."

"I am so glad you joined us for our meal today, even though we eat muck here," Lunga said. "It does not matter whether it is a Sunday or not. We are affected by poverty. Fortunately, we do not sleep on empty stomachs. We learn from the pigs, who fill their stomachs with mud when they have nothing to eat," Lunga said, and giggled. He waved at Vumani as he reached the gate. Daphney joined him in bidding Vumani farewell.

They saw Vumani off, waving. He departed, leaving them with his debut novel, a nightingale chirping its dusk chorus in the tree above them. Although he had anticipated this, he was unaware that someone had already taken a particular interest in his book and his movements.

Sixteen

Ngoho

Her name was Ngoho. It meant 'truth'. A powerful *sangoma*, she had always been a crusader of truth, and this provoked the ire of the apartheid government. From the beginning, the community took counsel from her in unearthing ancient truths. She was a messenger of truth and was for the gods and with the gods.

Vumani stood at the gate of Ngoho's house for a moment and braced himself to enter the yard. It was years since he had been there, though it seemed like yesterday. Vivid memories of him and his friends belligerently standing there, ready for war, came back to him as he strode across the yard and stood at the door. It struck him suddenly that, as much as he hated to admit it, he missed his friends. He was about to knock, when an old man approached him, introduced himself as Feleba, and escorted him into the tidy lounge.

Vumani sat uncomfortably and ran his eyes along the walls of the room, admiring the paintings and the African crafts that adorned them. He heard footsteps approaching, and figured that it was Ngoho. The door to the room opened and in came a familiar-looking lady wearing faded blue jeans and a plain, purple T-shirt. He was trying to remember where he had met this lady, when she smiled and said in a calm and sweet voice, "Ah, it's you. How are you? Ngoho is in consultation right now. She asked me to welcome you and make sure you are settled. She should be done soon."

The lady smiled and made a dart for the door, leaving it ajar. Vumani strained every nerve to recall where he had met the lady, but without success.

"Goodbye, I will see you next week," came a voice Vumani recognised as it bade someone farewell. "Don't worry about this. It is temporary inconvenience. Soon it will be over." It was Ngoho.

Just then, she appeared wearing a traditional African dress with matching headscarf, looking stoic and solid. Vumani watched

her stride towards him. She must be in her early 70s now, he thought, but her face and agility made her appear far younger. He visualised how she might have looked when she was in her 20s, or even as a child growing up under the apartheid regime. He felt good that, unlike many, Ngoho bore no visible deformities of suffering. She, too, had been battered and bruised, but her face had withstood the ravages of time. She bore neither contortions of misery, nor carvings of injury on her face. Vumani concluded that time may have faded those stains into invisible blemishes. He was well aware that Ngoho had played a significant role in the liberation of the country.

She took in Vumani with her contemplative expression. Vumani stood up from the chair and walked towards her.

The first thing that caught Ngoho's eye was the *sangoma* attire and the beads Vumani wore. She threw her arms around him and wrapped Vumani in a bear hug that put him at ease. She kept on smiling, her eyes glittering, and sat across from Vumani, the coffee table between them.

"How strange. I was thinking about you and your brother just this morning, wondering where you were, only to find that I would be seeing you. *Mehlo madala*! It's been ages since I last saw you. How have you been?" she asked in a fond and solemn tone.

Vumani was surprised. Why would Ngoho have thought about him and his twin brother who had died more than three decades ago? Did she have messages from him or the deities? Moreover, he didn't think Ngoho knew him beyond the one incident that involved his friends, which had happened years ago. Perhaps she was mistaking him for one of his other brothers, or maybe she confused him with his brother who had died in exile? All of this crossed his mind as he genuflected and greeted Ngoho properly, the way *sangoma*s greet.

"*Thokoza gogo*, Ngoho! Greetings to the ancestral spirits that inhabit your body. I am sorry to barge in. I would have called first if I had your number," he breathed deeply.

"There is no need for you to apologise," she replied, "let alone make a formal *sangoma* greeting, comrade. This is the

people's home. It is open to everyone. You are free to come here anytime as long as my soul is still connected to my body. We don't make appointments here. Besides, as I said, I was thinking about you and your brother. Maybe the spirits of your ancestors summoned you here," she said hospitably and stood to embrace Vumani again.

The mere sight of Vumani made Ngoho relive the pain she had felt when she'd heard the harrowing news about Bohloko. "God knows!" she muttered as the sense of longing and of loss overwhelmed her. She sighed and took her seat again. Vumani was unaware that Bohloko had been Ngoho's comrade and underground commander, whom she had venerated as a true revolutionary. The first time Vumani had seen Ngoho all those years ago, he had concluded that Ngoho was stony and dispassionate. The expression now on Ngoho's face convinced him otherwise.

"Thank you, Ngoho," he said. "I thought I should pass by and share with you a project that kept me in short supply," he said jokingly. He took out a copy of his book from the bag he held, and gave it to her.

"*Salt of the Earth*," she read the title aloud. "What a title! What honour do I have to deserve a present of a book with such a title? What is the book about?" Ngoho asked, her face still giving nothing away. Vumani was not sure whether or not she was happy for his achievement.

Vumani put his hand on his head, stroked his hair, and responded to Ngoho's question. "Well, I would rather not tell you, lest I spoil the story for you. For now, it is enough for me to say that this is my memoir. Leqhala is my pen name. You are one of the people who inspired me to write this book. You will see as you read that you feature prominently in it... I have phenomenal respect for you. You have had a profound influence on my life. I would not be where I am today if I had not followed your counsel."

Ngoho ululated as she leafed through the passages. "Congratulations! And thank you! I am flattered. Well done! I am glad you followed my counsel. The wise say, 'It is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness'."

"Eh..." Vumani was about to say something when the door to the lounge opened and the familiar lady who had greeted him earlier entered, carrying a tray with food and drinks. She sat next to Vumani and said in a playful and frivolously voice, "Your timing is great. We were just getting ready for supper. Next time you will find us fighting."

"Wait, we will go back to the book. Do you know this young, brave, and pretty lady?" asked Ngoho. For the first time, she smiled broadly and gestured to the woman with the tray. Ngoho's statement immediately jogged Vumani's memory. He remembered exactly the first time he had seen that lady, which was also the last time.

"How could I forget?" He stood and embraced her. "How can I forget her when she left me stranded in the bushes of Swaziland? Pity she didn't tell me her name, or I would be calling her by her name now," he joked. "You are also in the pages of this book," he told her. "I was wondering what became of you. I would have brought you a copy if I had known I would find you here. I have great admiration and respect for you as well. I will arrange that you get your copy soon."

"How dare you say I left you stranded, when I reconnected you with your brother?" she laughed unreservedly.

"Look, Susan!" Ngoho flashed the book at Susan. "The man who was once a young, mischievous teenager has written a book."

"You have written a book? Is that what the ululating was for? I was wondering what was happening. Congratulations! Bohloko would have been extremely proud of you. You don't know how much he loved and respected you. That is why he decided, much against his will, and against official ANC policy, to recruit you. You were an exception. He used to tell me that he wished none of his siblings to be involved in the struggle. But he defied his principles in your case – thanks to Ngoho, who persuaded him that you would be the most appropriate for our underground operations. You were an excellent choice. Now we can speak, to a certain extent. Everything is not quite over yet. The apartheid government is gone, but the spectre of apartheid and its agents are still lurking in the shadows. The war is not over yet."

Vumani connected the dots. To hear that Ngoho was not only an underground operative, but had also been instrumental in recruiting him, exalted Ngoho's status even further in Vumani's eyes. It dawned on him that she used spirituality as a vehicle and her legend to cover her underground activities. He remembered the Bible divination she had made when he had invaded her house with his friends. Now he understood why she had been calm and undaunted by his gang's threats then. She was a trained soldier.

Vumani ate his meal deliberating on the sophistication of the underground value chain. Even though he had smuggled arms into the country, he knew that someone had picked up those arms and disseminated them accordingly – but he did not know who that was. He figured that, because Susan had helped them skip the border, it was unlikely that she would have been the one who picked up the hidden arms and ammunition – what they'd referred to colloquially as hardware – and distributed them. Perhaps her unit had been responsible for taking recruits out of the country, and perhaps Ngoho had been responsible for taking the hardware and disseminating it, he speculated. It was clear that Ngoho had known Bohloko quite well. Now he knew which brother she had referred to when she'd entered the lounge.

"In case you are wondering, I worked very closely with your brother before and after he left the country in 1976. He was young – about 15 or 16 years old at the time – and he was as sharp as a tack."

She paused for a moment and said in a quiet murmur, as if in an otherworldly state, "In war, honour is more important that survival. He died with honour. His blood was the seed. Liberation is the harvest."

She returned to the here and now and said to Vumani, "I am sorry that we seem to have neglected your family. Well, many of us wanted to reach out to you but we were afraid that you would expect us to tell you what happened to Bohloko. The details may be foggy, and I only have a pale picture of what transpired. I know it was not a car accident, as they claim. I can say that your brother was assassinated – brutally executed, for that matter. He reached his grisly end at the hands of his so-called comrades. It is clear

that Madi ordered that act of savagery. Bohloko's blood lies in Madi's hands. He provided the information to his handlers, and they assassinated him."

A sombre look had come over Ngoho's features. Vumani reflected on what Ngoho had just told him. Her version seemed to corroborate the accounts of most comrades he had spoken to about Bohloko's gruesome murder. They all concluded that it must have been Madi who ordered the killing. He stared at his plate and tried to eat, but his heart was heavy. He rested his chin on his hand and remained silent.

Susan interpreted his speechlessness accurately. She said cautiously, her eyes filled with empathy, "The agent provocateurs within the ANC treated Bohloko's body as if it were a carcass. They should have been decent enough to tell the family the truth. None of the authorities officially informed the family what happened, notwithstanding that a senior member of the organisation, including the national executive members, spoke at his funeral. Those who spoke lied, claiming the cause of his death was a car accident. Now they call him a traitor to the cause. Not Bohloko! No way! An ant would swallow a cow if that were true... they act as if he never existed. They deleted him from history!"

"Spare a thought, Susan" Ngoho interrupted. "Many of us know that the real traitor is not the apparent traitor, although some comrades believe these claims when they are clearly spurious. Things may not always be as they seem. They should have considered multiple perspectives before making judgments or assumptions."

She continued, "The accident story and the spy story are nothing but smokescreens to cover up for Madi's deception. They fabricated everything. Spies brand others spies to divert attention from themselves. They waged a smear campaign that demonised those they were meant to kill. It is the strategy of agent provocateurs. Didn't they label RS, Boxer, and many others spies before they murdered them? There was no evidence linking Bohloko to spying and these other comrades. They peddled fabricated stories about them to justify their assassinations to other comrades. Their strategy is the same: exonerate the

provocateurs, and blame the genuine freedom fighters. They make heroes out of villains and antiheroes out of heroes."

"You are dead right, Ngoho. Their decision to lie was, for all intents and purposes, cruel. Madi is sadistic. He has no contrition. He lacks accountability and thrives on lies. That is why our country is the way it is today. It would have been a fitting tribute to the Mzondekis if Madi had expressed empathy instead of antipathy."

Vumani looked at Susan, his eyebrows raised. He was keen to hear more, but would not dare ask them questions or nudge them to speak.

Ngoho stared at Vumani intently, her features giving away nothing about what she thought. She said, "Bohloko was a veritable giant, even though he was young. He was a man of mettle who neither surrendered under torture nor quailed in the hour of death. He was the bravest person I ever knew. I know few cadres who matched his grit. He betrayed no one. The double agents may peddle lies about him, but he will remain the bravest cadre of our liberation."

"Ngoho is correct," agreed Susan. "Your brother was the edge of the sword. He inflicted so much damage on the enemy. I know his death left you bereft, but he left you with a great legacy. The current government of puppets of the apartheid regime is still not what we have been fighting for. Vumani, you have to continue his task. This country attained democracy because of him, and many like him. The level of his pedigree is just too high for words. He may have died in excruciating pain and being severely tortured, but I know he was proud to die in the manner he did, because he protected his department and, by extension, the ANC. He opted to die under severe torture rather than to divulge sensitive information about his comrades, which they desperately needed. He once said to me, 'Even if I die, I don't want to be remembered as a victim, because I will not die in submission. I want you to remember me as a fighter, a soldier who died locking horns with the enemy. My fight would have been worth it if I am remembered in that fashion.' I miss his steadfast loyalty and his unwavering conviction. The country would have become truly honourable if he and people like him had returned home alive."

Vumani looked sadly first at Susan and then at Ngoho. He swallowed hard, blinking back his tears. It affirmed and healed him to hear that these two ladies loved and respected Bohloko. It came as a relief to him to know that they both harboured the same aversion towards his brother's killers. He imagined Bohloko's final hours and wondered how it would have been for him if those he thought were his comrades and friends – who had fetched him from his home – had led him into the hands of the enemy.

"He was my anchor in the struggle," Ngoho pronounced. "No matter his age, I looked up to him for guidance and inspiration. It was a serious loss for me. They did not only kill him, but they also killed all of us and perhaps the struggle as well. I wonder why those traitors did not force themselves to stop a moment and think – not as the regime's agents, but as human beings – before they did what they did?"

She leant back in her chair and sighed. "That is why they will make it a point that–"

She suddenly stopped her sentence midway and said something else: "Madi and his stooges are authors of destruction. A terrible reckoning awaits them. Their boundless malevolence is the sword on which they will fall. They poisoned the well of the revolution. But I fear for their fate, particularly Madi's. He has defiled the gods. He knows in his heart of hearts that he is evil and has done so much damage to the struggle. He may think that he got away with murder, and he may relish his moment of glory now, but he forgets that there is nothing as tenacious and unrelenting as karma. It does not care whether one believes in it or not. It responds in kind when it is time for it to return. And karma, which has neither friends nor enemies, shall surely return."

She paused before continuing: "A bird perches on a branch of a tree with the knowledge that it can rely on its wings, should the branch fall. I wonder what he and his stooges will rely on, should their branches fall, because they have no wings. In Greek mythology, Zeus had his protective aegis. Who will protect them when karma returns? Who is their protective armour? I wonder who they will run to when their turns come?"

She put down her empty plate and said sternly, "The one who carries a spear will use it against himself one day. Even witches bewitch themselves in the process of casting spells on others. They will be nothing but bees that sting themselves to death."

"Oh, yes you are right, Ngoho," Susan assented. "Karma cannot be wiped out. The soul gets the return, whether good or bad." She seemed to mull over her words. She stood slowly, still thinking, and cleared the plates. Then she spoke light-heartedly, her voice becoming more playful, hiding her hurt. "The sad truth about Bohloko and many of us is that we joined the struggle thinking that we were central characters. We only learned later that we were peripheral actors, if not irrelevant sideshow performers in a poorly conceived script. That is why they sacrificed us and dumped us like dirt. Unfortunately, many of those who sacrificed us are hailed as heroes today. If only people knew the truth. Madi's failure to hold those who murdered your brother accountable is proof enough of his complicity. Now they have stonewalled everything about Bohloko's assassination." She exited to the kitchen, leaving Vumani sitting motionless and absorbed in thoughts.

He stiffened in the uneasy silence left by Susan's departure. He found it difficult to carry on the conversation. He picked up the copy of his book, which Ngoho had placed on the coffee table, and paged through it slowly while stealing glances at Ngoho, who sat with her face in her hands and her head bent.

After some time, Ngoho raised her head and said musingly, "Many good soldiers fell. They fell for the truth, but it is a virtue to die for the truth. I guess you have included Bohloko's story in your book," she said, without even looking at Vumani. He put the book back on the table, looked at her desperately, and mumbled a response.

"I wanted to devote the entire book to him" he replied, "but the information I have about him is scant. I was nine years old when he left, and I reconnected with him when I was about 18. I tried to ask some comrades in his exile home about his life there, but they did not budge. I don't blame them, though. They

may have thought it was my clandestine way of trying to solicit information about his mysterious death. So, I opted to write my story instead, and designated only a few pages to him, even though I dedicate the entire book to his memory."

She listened, feeling pity for Vumani, while at the same time rejoicing in the fact that he had finally taken the bull by the horns. Bohloko would be accorded an honour he rightfully deserved. Although she felt that Bohloko and many other comrades like him had had a raw deal, she was happy that Vumani had written something to immortalise his name. Her face flared with excitement.

"You have thrown down the gauntlet, Vumani. This is the best form of revenge. You have beaten them at their own game. Your words will be swords to them. Truth is bitter, but it must come out, no matter its flavour. These backstabbing, power-hungry hypocrites thought they would suppress his story forever. The Heavens will thank you for honouring Bohloko's memory."

She regarded Vumani thoughtfully. She felt sorry that many who knew Bohloko's story and had died without talking. "There is no way they would have let him live. He discovered secrets about them. I am happy that you are exposing their lies. No one will stop your story. It is out there now. They think they can whitewash the disgraceful chapters of the liberation struggle. Never! I am glad if it contributes to the truth that has been buried for so long. Maybe this is what should have been the focus of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. I wish everybody would write their stories, especially those families who endured betrayal and pain during the liberation struggle. The TRC tried, but it did not cover enough ground. One cannot ignite fire with one stick. It takes stacks of wood to fuel it. The fire is ignited now. No one can extinguish it."

She tipped her head to the side and continued in a calm, solemn, tone, as if hushing a crying child: "Don't worry much about Bohloko, Vumani. His full story will be told one day, and it is this story that will speak of betrayals and power struggles when narrated. It will shed light on the many so-called comrades who sold out their comrades. Whatever you have written is a great

start and worth telling. What I grieve for most…" she sighed, "is that these conscienceless and shameless individuals, who have no moral sense of right and wrong, who smeared Bohloko and many like him, now enjoy the fruits of Bohloko's labour. Isn't it ironic? Some plant trees; others enjoy the shade. Some build the wells, and others drink from those wells."

Vumani nodded and rested his gaze on Ngoho. She continued her conversation, looking at Vumani with pitying eyes. "Everything that was previously obscured is in plain sight now. They thought they would hide their deceitfulness and mislead us into believing that the murder of sincere revolutionaries was justified. Now we know a piece of the truth. Bohloko was one of the many dedicated cadres who served this country with honour and distinction. He deserves exaltation. Think of the many dead letter boxes and other crucial structures that supported the liberation struggle. He smuggled into the country most of the weapons that were used to destroy the enemy. He set up those DLBs. Unfortunately, he was persecuted when he was alive. Now he is persecuted in death. His story parallels the many unheard stories of parents who lost their children in mysterious circumstances in exile and here at home… Madi and his minions are evil. They want to be above everyone and everything. The desire to be above all is a work of evil – the devil wanted to be above everyone, including God."

She was correct. Bohloko's record spoke for itself. The arms and ammunition he smuggled into the country from 1978 to 1990 resulted in the most successful guerrillas strikes since the adoption of the armed struggle in South Africa. These included the Grad-P rocket launcher, which was used in the shelling of the Sasol Oil Refinery in June 1980, the Voortrekkerhoogte military base in August 1981, the Koeberg Nuclear Station in December 1981, the Sasol 2 and 3 oil plants in November 1985, and many others. At some stage, his education in Europe was interrupted as he was forced to return to the trenches because no one was able to successfully smuggle the necessary arms as he did. Indeed, he had served with distinction, Vumani thought. He also thought of the many others who equally served the country and

died mysteriously, inside and outside the borders. He nodded thoughtfully, motioning Ngoho to proceed.

"Yes, many heroes fell," she ruminated. "What is worse is that many of these comrades who contributed significantly to the liberation struggle of the country are not even accorded footnote status in history. Sadly, their contributions are erased daily from the pages of history. This is because some of the traitors have accorded themselves inequitable hero status, while true heroes are left unsung. I wonder why they do this. Sometimes I ask myself what is it that they see that we do not see, or what it is that we see that they fail to see."

Vumani felt a tightness in his throat as he listened to Ngoho. She continued without looking at him. "It is a shame to treat someone who paid the ultimate price in this manner. Whether we like it or not, he was a successful guerrilla operative and he transcended manifold barriers on gruelling and dangerous terrains. But what can we say? Villains conquer heroes – if only in treachery – and make themselves heroes."

Vumani emitted a small, involuntary whimper. Ngoho stood and reached out to him, patting him consolingly on his shoulder. She went on in a calm voice, as if still deep in thought: "We have all suffered. You know, I have also not been spared the misery of seeing what I sacrificed my entire life for turn to nought. My husband disappeared and everything I owned was burnt to ashes in this very house, because of my involvement in the struggle. I was lucky to escape unharmed. I know very well that Madi was highly likely responsible for this. That man... That man is wired for destruction. He corrodes every good thing he sees or touches. He cannot, by any account, be regarded as human. I don't think he is capable of loving."

She clapped her hands in exasperation. "It is inconceivable for him to have a wife and children. I am sure your book addresses the ocean of betrayals and killings of good people, and the many spies who infiltrated the ANC. The country and the front-line states are littered with mass graves of people Madi set up to be murdered. You have written your own version of history, rather than cry foul over an unjust treatment by unscrupulous

individuals in the ANC. As a matter of fact, you have not written this book. It is the work of the universe. The gods have worked with you to write it. You have furthered the will of the gods." She paused and gave Vumani a look laden with sympathy.

Vumani shook his head and fought back tears. "Publishing this book has been a cathartic release for me. It has given me a sense of peace I can hardly explain. I lived almost my entire adult life with a nagging discomfort and guilt of having betrayed Bohloko by failing to find out the truth about his death. I thought the TRC would help, but they betrayed the truth and ignored the family. Now I am at peace with what I have written in as much as I am at peace and prepared to face the consequences of writing this book."

"Justice is the only word that knows no justice in this country," said Ngoho. "Don't worry, this moment is connected to eternity. The gods will protect you. These crooks who sold with the blood of others may think that they will defeat you, but they won't defeat God."

Just then, Susan came back from the kitchen with dessert and a bottle of whisky, endearingly beaming her debonair smile. "This life! One tongue sings when another tongue sobs. We will never know the purpose of life until we learn that it is an allegory. Vumani, I know you are a teetotaller with a sweet tooth, so please indulge. There is plenty for you. Ngoho and I will gratify ourselves with this whisky," she said humorously, trying to diffuse the palpable tension in the room. She placed the tray on the coffee table.

Vumani chuckled. Susan's buoyant mood and carefree attitude reminded him of Bohloko. "Let us toast," said Susan, once she had poured two glasses of whisky. "To Madi – may he continue to live in interesting times! I wish him a long life, so he can suffer long enough."

The two women each took a mouthful of whisky with relish, while Vumani enjoyed his dessert. He watched them and was filled with amazement at how they appeared to enjoy life despite their setbacks.

They reminisced over drinks and dessert, and exchanged cellphone numbers. No sooner had the two ladies finished their whisky, than Vumani rose and prepared himself to leave, feeling somewhat better that Ngoho and Susan had endorsed his project.

Ngoho stood. "So much for the struggle we fought! Don't worry, we shall overcome. Providence has willed it so, and in its decrees, we should acquiesce. *Vumani bo*!" Her words seemed to revitalise him.

Vumani was not certain whether Ngoho was in a trance or inebriated – or both. She came closer to him and took his arm. They both laughed.

"Thank you for your visit, Vumani," she said serenely, in that voice that enigmatised him. "Please feel free to visit anytime. I will also invite you when I make traditional feasts, now that I know we dance to the same dance. I am glad you are unlike Susan, who has turned disbelief into her religion."

Susan stood, laughing, and went towards Vumani. They looked at each other and embraced warmly. A sudden sense of grief overcame him. A *sangoma* can feel the future, and so it was that he experienced a premonition of her death as he lingered on his way out.

Ngoho ushered him to the door. "Go well, Vumani, and may the gods brighten your path. The wrongdoers will meet their arbiters one day, whether they believe it or not."

She took a few steps back and waved a fond farewell to him. Her heart went cold. The spiritual messages she had received throughout Vumani's visit made her anxious. Vumani stepped out into the darkness as the wind groaned after him.

He remembered that, once again, he had not asked Ngoho about the death of his twin brother. Just the same, he did not worry much. He would ask her the next time he saw her.

Seventeen

Madi – Blood Money

Comrade Judas Madi, the venerated commissar of the revolutionary struggle, slouched in his favourite chair, alone in his guest room, clutching a book in his hand. He sat unmoving, his eyes fixed vacantly on page 16. He glanced at the calendar on the wall, as if assuring himself that the date was indeed 10 April 2025. How could this foolish youngster rise above the dead legends of the 1980s, he wondered. Birds twittered in the trees outside. He gazed, unhearing and unseeing, as a stiff breeze blew across the room. Downstairs, Comrade Qadi, who had brought Madi the book, sat wondering what he would think when he read his section. *I wonder how many people will read this book*, Madi found himself thinking. He sighed.

He was so enraged that he had failed to notice that his wife put his favourite ice-cold beetroot juice on the table. Dark thoughts raced through his mind. They took him to cemeteries across the world, laden with bodies that he was responsible for killing. A persistent voice echoed in his mind: "Will anyone find out about the number of comrades that you had executed?"

Vivid images of Bohloko flashed in his mind. They popped up one after another, pointing fingers at him as if condemning him. He closed his eyes, trying to block the film that played in front of him. He sat, chin in hand, with his eyes still closed. The dim light in his guest room gave his face a ghoulish appearance. He felt his chest tighten. Something was suffocating him. He opened his eyes and leaned weakly against the chair, his heart pounding. He shook his body but an urge to scream overwhelmed him. He threw the book onto the coffee table as if it had burnt his hands.

Just then, he caught sight of the juice on the table. He settled down, poured himself a glass, breathed out heavily, and took a gulp. At least the juice managed to soothe his nerves At least for the moment...

He shook his head. "*Nx*!" he clicked his tongue in frustration. "This boy! I've traded in my iron fist for velvet gloves, but now this stupid boy wants me to go back to my old ways." Beads of perspiration trickled down his forehead as he contemplated the number of people who would buy the book, let alone read it.

Although he had not read it – save for the two extracts that related to him – he knew the book would be damning to his reputation because it was a narration of his past and present life. He had much to lose. This exposure could not happen at a time when he thought he had literally gotten away with murder.

He was now a highly respected senior member of the ANC and enjoyed a huge support base. Most of those who knew of his past were either dead or afraid to talk. Now this boy arrived with this book! "*Nx*," he clicked again. He scrolled for a name and number on his cellphone. His mind was still focussed on the two paragraphs as he impatiently waited for Alephirimi to answer. Madi was quivering with rage and terror. The room seemed to echo with the words: "The blood of your comrade, which you sold for six pieces of silver, cries out for justice from the earth. It wants you to tell the truth. Today is your day of reckoning."

"I am not my brother's keeper, nor my comrade's keeper!" Madi shouted, the phone still ringing.

"Hello," Alephirimi's voice answered.

"I want you here immediately," Madi said in a distressed tone. He hung up on Alephirimi as soon as he was satisfied that he had heard him. He paced around the room and glanced at his wristwatch. He called Alephirimi again, instructing him to bring Manyonyoba along. They arrived within minutes. Alephirimi felt Madi's forbidding presence as soon as he saw him. Like many others, Alephirimi was an innocent dupe in Madi's hands, and the only assassin Madi still trusted. Those who worked with Madi know that he neither kept nor recycled his contract killers. Madi had them killed after using them and then recruited new ones. In this way, he was assured that his exploits were kept secret from the public.

Madi met his two minions in his guest room, his face distorted with fury. The two knew Madi as indifferent to criticism and someone who would swallow any insult. Seeing Madi beside himself with rage made the two wonder what had ruffled his feathers. They knew him as one who ingratiated himself with the most roguish soldiers in exile. He ordered the lives of innocent comrades to wither in a wink of an eye. Madi – the conscienceless, devil-may-care comrade – did not look himself that day. There were no pleasantries when he saw Alephirimi and Manyonyoba.

"Look," Madi thrust the bookmarked paperback into Alephirimi's hands, opening the page and showing him an extract highlighted in red. "Read for yourself and tell me what you think," he said, and fixed him with a malevolent glare.

Alephirimi's eyes went through the highlighted passage:

> *He was there from the beginning, faceless and nameless as he was. Now many refer to him as Comrade Judas Madi – a devil with a veneer of civility. Madi, a man who harbours secrets somewhere deep inside of him. His comrades trust him with their lives and paint him as upstanding man, and yet his charming smile hides his despicable nature. The expression "When all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail" applies to Madi. He is a man who personifies evil, a man without moral sinews, who derives macabre pleasure from inflicting pain on others. Those who know him well describe him as a hurricane who performs tricks with the lives of his comrades. In the past, Madi orchestrated a wave of assassinations that finished off his comrades. He loathes goodness and is an enemy of progress. Madi's forte has always been betrayal. The lines between truth and fiction are blurred in Madi's mind. A well-educated and successful businessman who got rich on the blood and souls of his comrades, his thirst for human blood is never sated. He disguises himself behind many masks. Madi – a man in conflict with his limitations. He's comfortable with his double life, as if it is normal. A man of deceitful bent who gained leadership positions by devious routes, who knew only his abilities and often ignored his inabilities. Madi, a cruel and*

a ruthless man, leads the coalition of the rotten. His calloused hands will always drip with blood.

Alephirimi looked at Madi, too stunned to speak. Now that he had read the extract, he knew exactly what Madi wanted him to do. The only problem was that he had taken a vow never to murder again, not even for Madi. This decision had come after he began to hear the recurrent scream of someone he had murdered in exile, echoing in his mind. It was only thanks to a Zambian healer that he was able to get rid of that scream.

Madi rose from his chair and went towards the door. He returned midway and snatched the book from the assassin. Alephirimi observed him. He knew Madi quite well, but he had never seen Madi so enraged. Madi tried to speak to Alephirimi, but his mouth went dry. A sound resembling a dog's bark escaped his mouth as he nodded his head.

Alephirimi appeared daunted by Madi's unspoken assignment. He gazed at Manyonyoba, who sat trembling, and almost imperceptibly shrugged his shoulders. He nervously appealed to Madi, "But, Comrade..."

"Don't 'but' me!" Madi barked and stared at Alephirimi with his piercing eyes. "Your name may not appear in here, but you are implicated because you did the killings. If I go down, I will take you down with me."

Both Alephirimi and Manyonyoba remained silent. They seemed totally unimpressed by Madi's explicit threat.

Madi took a deep breath, and forced himself to relax somewhat. He offered his henchmen whisky, while he drank his juice. He exuded hatred from every pore, making the room smell putrid.

Downstairs, the children sang a birthday song to his son, who had turned 15. Alephirimi drank an inordinate amount of whisky, and pondered how he would break free from Madi. The atmosphere was tense and foreboding.

"I don't fight any battle where my victory is not guaranteed," Madi said derisively, forcing a smile, His large

Adam's apple moving swiftly. "But I must fight this one. I will not let this little shit expose me."

He glared at them. "We must teach this boy a lesson. No one dares pass judgement on me and live to tell the tale. He must suffer. He must not see the setting of the sun. If he, by any chance, sees the sunset, he must never see the sun rise again." A look of dull-witted resentment came into his face. "This boy wants to mess up my life. He has a voice now, and he could destroy me. Many of those people I did things with are dead now. I refuse to face the music alone."

Madi observed Alephirimi and Manyonyoba again and wondered why they were silent. They both gulped the whisky frantically.

Madi's face darkened and his eyes flashed ominously. He motioned them to leave. He was surprised at their resistance.

"You will do what I command you to do," he said tepidly to the two men.

The words, "The blood of your comrade, which you sold for six pieces of silver, cries out to you. It wants to pay revenge," kept ringing in his head.

Alephirimi and Manyonyoba cowered and staggered towards the door.

Bloodthirsty snake. *This man is more animal than human*, thought Alephirimi as the two of them left Madi's premises.

~

The weather could not have been more awful. On that frosty Thursday morning, Lunga had requested Daphney to take out his easel, canvas, oils, and a cassette player to his favourite place under the mulberry tree. He braved the bone-chilling day to complete a painting that he had started three days ago. He finished it in time, before Vumani's arrival.

It was an oil painting depicting a young girl with a halo over her head, standing on a hill covered with lush vegetation. In the painting, the girl stared in awe at a s*ankofa* bird fluttering its

wings, an egg in its mouth. The red shroud in which the girl was wrapped flapped in the painted wind. Although her face conveyed awe, she peered at the bird with a perplexed look as it flew unsteadily in a cloudless sky. She seemed unsure as to whether the bird was advancing towards her or flying away from her. Not far behind her, a fiery phoenix rose from its ashes in a barren field next to a laurel. A ragged boy tried to rescue the plumage from the flames. Lunga had used a palette of natural, earthy colours for his painting, and titled it, 'Echoes of Pain'. His sweeping brushstrokes evoked a sense of yearning.

Lunga smiled, contented, feeling proud of himself. He was lost in the moment and, once again, he did not notice that Vumani inspected him as he inspected his painting. Vumani stood for a long time behind Lunga. Vumani interrupted his friend and drew his attention by singing along with 'The Last Train Home', which blared from the speakers of the cassette player that Lunga had placed on a box next to his wheelchair.

"They say madness and creativity spring from the same source," Vumani remarked, admiring the oil painting.

Lunga had always been modest about his talents. He ignored Vumani's comment and said, "You are always punctual. You arrived exactly at 4 pm, as per your promise. You never change, *neh*! Even when your form changes, your substance remains the same," he smiled.

The sight of Lunga's glowing face filled Vumani with pleasure. Lunga was back in his element. His painting and quick-witted comment were evidence enough that the old Lunga had been resurrected. Vumani wondered what had brought about his cousin's transformation.

"So, you still paint? I thought you sold your easel and palettes ages ago. This is a beautiful painting. I like the natural colours you have used. Now explain the painting to me. These birds are a bit strange."

"Don't be silly, Vumani," Lunga replied, laughing. "Why do you expect me to interpret my art? Do you expect someone who tells a joke to explain it? And you, when did you forget your art

language? You used to interpret my artworks for me intelligently. I know you love and understand art as much as I do. That's why I did two paintings for you. I have just completed this one, and the other one is in the house. You are free to interpret them any way you want. As you can see, there are many birds around here. They inspire me."

"Oh, wow, is this for me? I will certainly do my own analysis, if that is the price I must pay for this breathtaking artwork," Vumani said, smiling.

"Sure. It is so cold here. Please help me take these back to the house."

A wonderful buffet was laid out on the table when they entered the lounge-cum-dining room. The smell of freshly baked cake filled the room and the coal stove in the kitchen area cosied the house, making it warm and homely. Vumani placed the easel and the painting against the wall and glanced around the house. It was an original two-room township house, elegantly renovated with wallpapers and large windows ornamented with beautiful curtains and lace drapes. The interior was neatly arranged with red cushions on white sofas, and the floors shone like a freshly laundered nurse's uniform. Despite its compact size, the room accommodated both a dining suite and a TV stand with a sound system underneath.

Lunga motioned Vumani to take a seat next to him while they prepared themselves to eat. Vumani belched continuously, as is customary for *sangomas*. Lunga gave him a look of repugnance.

Daphney observed the two men. For some strange reason, they reminded her of the words of her psychiatry professor, who had claimed that everyone is mad, but since most people are somewhere along the continuum, madness is perceived as normal. It is only those on the extreme of the continuum who are considered mad. *Did this mean that South Africa was a huge psychiatric ward?* she thought.

Lunga gave a loud, idiotic laugh and said, "This is no laughing matter. I laugh because I cannot cry right now.

Our country was cruel. No one emerged out of our ghastly past unscathed."

Daphney looked at Lunga as if he had just answered her unspoken thoughts.

"Indeed," Lunga said, looking at Vumani, "apartheid set us on a different path, a traumatic one for that matter, and it changed the course of our lives," he chuckled and continued. "Call us the wrecks of apartheid, if you like. We are damaged beyond repair. We are not even fit for the scrapyard. Frankly, you may think you escaped unharmed, but you are a symptom of what apartheid did to the mind and soul of a black child in South Africa. You are in denial, my brother. Look at you! You are a *sangoma* now. First, you were placed in a grave as a child during Vumile's funeral, and then you became a thug, then a soldier, and now a *sangoma*.

Lunga looked at Daphney and said, "He should have gone for counselling. This has got nothing to do with the ancestral calling, whoever those ancestors are. These are the most common side effects of our past. Apartheid made us psychotic; their psychotic behaviour nearly contaminated the entire country. Do you remember the madness and the violence in the 1980s? Sadly, this new country makes us neurotic. I will leave it to your imagination to figure out what the combination of psychosis and neurosis does to a person." He laughed and wheeled himself to the other room. He came back so shortly, it appeared that he had not done whatever he had wanted to do there.

"Ah, Lunga, you are very spiteful," Daphney said warm-heartedly, giving Vumani a hug. "Please don't be so insensitive. Your cousin is a published author!" Daphney turned to Vumani. "I am happy to see you again, Vumani. Please make yourself comfortable. I will bring you something for you to wash your hands before you eat."

"He eats everything except thorns and fire, for obvious reasons," Lunga said, laughing joyfully, contentment written all over his face. As they sat at the table, Vumani watched Lunga rewind the tape on the cassette and play 'The Last Train Home' again. The more the song played, the more Lunga's face softened. Vumani was keenly aware of how fragile his cousin was; it seemed

he could break at any time. He opted to not react to Lunga's rant. He took out a copy of his book from his bag and gave it to Daphney.

"As promised, here's your autographed copy."

"Oh, thank you. I started reading it two days ago, and I must say it is an excellent book, albeit sad. I have not finished it, but I like the way the story pans out. I cannot wait to see how it ends."

Daphney waited for Lunga to move out of earshot and whispered to Vumani, "I want to thank you. He was at death's door before you came here last week. But since that visit, he is a changed man. He is the Lunga I knew before his injuries. Look at his latest painting." She pointed to the painting on the easel.

"Lunga was brittle before you came. We did everything to help him, but we failed. He had given up on life. But you have brought him back to life with just one visit. You know, he never slept after you left. He read your book from cover to cover, taking copious notes, and he wrote out a response, which he said he would present to you today. And he started painting the day after your visit, which he hasn't done in years. I heard long ago that he was something of an artist, but I'd never witnessed him paint anything. He no longer has fits of rage, and he sleeps well at night. He has become a loving husband once more. You truly are a magic bullet."

Daphney's unexpected compliment made Vumani feel awkward. He smiled shyly, and put his hand on his head.

Lunga returned and his face beamed with delight. He reached for Daphney's hand and caressed it. "I agree with you, my dear. My life was a mess before Vumani came. Vumani's book is exactly what I needed. It has given me a new lease on life." He paused, tapping his fingers on the table, and smiled at Daphney, his eyes mocking her. "You are forward, my dear. When did you become my official spokesperson? I was going to tell Vumani all of this."

He winked an eye at her. "I bought the ingredients today as I wanted you to cook a special meal, not just for Vumani, but for yourself as well." He took Daphney's hand and stared at her as if completely transfixed by the sudden beauty he just discovered. "I

never understood why you, a well brought up lady, chose to marry a thug like me. Surely, I am getting more than what I put into this relationship. I don't deserve you, my love. You are not only a nurse by profession, but also by disposition. Thank you, my queen."

Daphney blushed and glanced coyly at Lunga. She wondered what had triggered this sudden outburst of passion from him. She knew Lunga could be melodramatic, but had not expected this. "How could you do this to me, Lunga?" she said, laughing self-consciously. Lunga also laughed, dragged Daphney to his wheelchair, smothered her in a long embrace, and kissed her until she was short of breath. Vumani couldn't help but stare in wonder at Lunga's sudden display of emotion.

Releasing Daphney, Lunga said, "Let us fill our glasses, please. I want us to make a toast."

There was such a look of uncanny resignation on his face. He reached for his glass on the table and glanced up at Vumani and Daphney. They filled their glasses. Lunga raised his glass, steadied himself and said introspectively, "We walked the tightrope between life and death. We have lived, we have existed, we have loved, and we have hated. We lived where evil had the upper hand. We faced the greatest of odds, yet we live to tell the tale. We have now come full circle. I want to honour you, and our lost friends. This may well be our last supper. We've had the greatest of times even though we shared the greatest of hardships. We missed the gravy train, and we also missed the Gautrain. The Gethsemane train is the only train that's left for us. Who knows when we will board it. Maybe this will be a one-way trip, from which we shall never return. And if we are lucky to return, we surely shall return as compost..."

Lunga raised his glass again and clinked it against Vumani's and Daphney's.

"To *amor fati*. God forbid that anyone should live the life that we lived, or this world will overflow with the walking wounded."

Vumani and Daphney observed Lunga and reluctantly raised their glasses in a toast. Lunga's speech was grim. Somehow

it reminded Vumani of the song he sang during his *sangoma* initiation:

Ke boela hole maoatleng
Ke boela hole liphuleng
Moo ke tsoaloang teng,
Ha u sa tla mpona hape,
Ke tla khutla ka mokhoa o sele

I am going to the seas
I am going to the valleys
Where I originate
You will never see me again.

Lunga made himself comfortable and said, "If truth be told, I had no urge to live. I was a living corpse. Your book revived me from my death sentence, Vumani. It made me reflect on my past and appreciate that I've been fortunate, despite my misfortunes." He giggled, struggling to conceal his excitement.

They ate the rest of their meal in atypical silence. Daphney excused herself as soon as they had finished, explaining that she needed to prepare her uniform because her shift started at 7 am the next day.

Lunga took out his handkerchief, mopped his brow, and started from the beginning. "Your book triggered memories of my long-buried past, Vumani. Thanks for invoking these memories. It gives me a new purpose. Now I understand what you meant when you were here last week."

"I'm glad if that is the case. I knew you would love it," said Vumani.

Lunga cleared phlegm from his throat and continued, "This is my second chance. I am going to use it even if it is for a fleeting moment. Our friends' talents died with them. We were spared for a reason. But I'm concerned that we wooed death when we were supposed to live. Now death may be courting us because we resolved to live. You gave the country the gift of your writing. I will

do the same with my art. It will be testimony that there once lived people like us. You have made us eternal, Vumani. Thank you."

Lunga clutched the book to his chest. "Just as you have written our story here, I have also captured our lives on this canvas. You can frame it if you want. Here the phoenix immolates itself in the fire and rises from its ashes. Wait here, I am coming." He wheeled himself to the bedroom and came back with a rolled canvas and opened it. It was a resplendent oil painting depicting a bird moulting on a tree under the rising sun that shone gaily over a clear blue sky. Spectacular mountain vistas provided a beautiful backdrop for a snake rubbing its skin on a rock, also moulting. The painting was entitled 'Vumani'.

The bird sheds her old feathers to make way for a new growth. This also applies to the snake shedding its skin, Vumani thought.

"This is also yours," Lunga told him. "We must look back in order to look forward, and look forward in order to look back. Who knows – we may yet rise from the ashes." Lunga nodded to himself. "Please frame both these canvasses. You can use a black frame for this one and a brown frame for the other." He gave the pieces to Vumani and said, "No prize for guessing why I titled this painting 'Vumani'. Obviously, your name inspired the title. As you know, *'vumani'* means to agree, yield, or surrender. Vumile agreed to go. He surrendered his life and sacrificed for you to live. You make people agree to their purpose in life?"

Vumani was too dazzled by the art to respond to what he considered to be Lunga's rhetorical question. He cleared his throat. He felt put on the spot, but he volunteered out of courtesy to analyse the works. "Okay, let me tell you my impression of the two paintings. I have not had sufficient time to apply my mind to these masterpieces, notwithstanding the fact that I feel obliged to say something about them. This is just my hasty, knee-jerk response. I..."

Lunga interrupted Vumani. "No, no, no – I am not finished, my friend. The platform is still mine. You will get your chance. The night is still young."

Here it comes again, Vumani thought. *Better remain silent and let him indulge himself.*

"Thanks again for this amazing book. What a tale! It is liberating and oppressing at the same time. To think that we spent our entire lives chasing our own tails! What did we achieve in the end? We tried to live normally in an abnormal country. I think that you romanticised Oupa. Even though he was intelligent and a victim of apartheid, he also had an insatiable appetite for human blood. You failed to highlight this. In any case, I am glad he died. He was a liability for the country."

Vumani nodded, vaguely shocked by Lunga's statement. He hadn't expected him to say that about their late friend.

"Secondly," Lunga continued. "You mentioned violence, but did not nuance it. Apartheid started in the 1500s with the first invasion, although it was only officially hatched in 1948. You should have mentioned that the architects of apartheid were psychopaths who turned South Africa into a schizophrenic and a sociopathic country. We are afflicted with a fathomless social malaise. Unfortunately, it is a disease with no remedy. This is an omission in your book. Anyway, this oversight does not compromise your brilliant work. You succeeded to make people consider the horrors of what it was like to live under siege. Perhaps your sequel will address my concerns."

Vumani concurred with Lunga's assertion, since everything Lunga said made sense. Vumani's face beamed with pride at Lunga's praise. It was the first critique he had received about his book, and he found it refreshing.

"My body remembered the pain I felt on the day that Oupa shot me. That is the power of your book. But here's the caveat: You seem to have forgotten that the guilty are always afraid. You have exposed Madi. This is a grave matter – pardon the pun. I believe Madi is dangerous. Maybe you have dug your own grave by writing this book. You must never expect to come out dry when you dive into the river."

Vumani tried to speak.

"Shh." Lunga placed a finger before pursed lips to silence Vumani. "Also, you scoffed at the spy story as mere hearsay early in the book, but I think you belaboured the point. It was of no use for you to keep harping on about the obvious. Bohloko was not a spy, period. The onus is on Bohloko's killers to prove their allegations. He who alleges must prove, as the lawyers say in court."

An expression of deep sorrow suddenly dimmed the beam on Vumani's face. He did not like Lunga's tone, let alone his misunderstanding about his emphasis on the spy story in his book. Moreover, he understood precisely how propaganda worked. He thought about Hitler's and Goebbels's disinformation strategy, which relied on constructing reality around false claims, and how they would constantly repeat and spread those false claims until people believed them to be the truth. He felt that Lunga did not understand his rationale for spotlighting Bohloko's plight in his book.

"I know, I don't care, and I am not worried," Vumani snapped. "Why should I fear something that will eventually happen to me? I am going to die at some stage. I cannot fear the inevitable." He continued: "They refused to accept culpability for Bohloko's murder. Now the story is out. They can kill me, but they will not be able to kill the story. Besides, they cannot scare me with death. I've lived most of my life amidst death. Over and above this, these murderers should not forget that death does not discriminate. It kills even the killers. They may kill me, but they too will die. We are all passengers on the same horse-drawn omnibus of death."

Lunga grinned. "The platform is still mine, Mr Mzondeki. I will tell you when it is time for you to speak. You are correct, many a time death stared us in the face, but the Angel of Death pitied us. Maybe our fortunes are entirely exhausted now. In any case, you did very well to write this book. It is our history.

"Thanks for immortalising us. This story will outlive us. Our voices will continue to speak, even long after our deaths. This is the story of many. At least the coming generations will know that we existed, and learn how the past regime treated its children.

This book is a weapon for mass awakening! Maybe the so-called liberation fighters will treat their own differently, should they go back to the trenches. The authorities say, 'lest we remember', but through this book we say, 'lest we forget'."

Vumani simply nodded, allowing Lunga to continue.

"Ours was a harrowing tale that should only happen in the movies. It could have been you who was killed by a stray bullet. I knew we were spared for some reason. Our lives were not in vain. You have contributed significantly to peace. Many readers of this book will never want to kill another human being. Some people will not believe you when you share our story. They will think that this is fiction, but my lame body is evidence that all this happened. Although our lives read like a plot of a tragic novel, I hope that this book will help us close the chapter of our suffering forever."

"Thanks, brother," Vumani said, feeling overwhelmed. Lunga's remarkable composure in the face of his own suffering deeply touched Vumani's heart. He recognised Lunga's innate goodness, which had unfortunately been tainted by the toxic influences and challenging circumstances he had encountered.

Yet, Vumani found himself grappling with the perplexing question of how Lunga's life had ended up the way it was. Was it a result of karmic retribution, implying a form of punishment, or perhaps a testament to Lunga's inner strength? Was he being tested to the limits of his resilience in order to emerge as someone who had transcended the confines of ego, fully embracing wisdom and self-awareness?

Lunga sat properly in his wheelchair and looked piercingly at Vumani. He sensed that Vumani was agonising about him and remarked, "All wars have martyrs, but the question is, was it worth it? Was the sacrifice you made worth it? Look at you, look at me, look at Bohloko, look at many others who perish in senseless wars. Yes, we now have liberation, but weigh this against the price we paid. Was it worth it, or was it a Pyrrhic victory?"

Vumani nodded and forced his face to remain emotionless.

Lunga swept his hand over his paralysed body in his wheelchair and said, "Vumani, you behave like someone who

wants to cut off his hand because it is wounded, or – worse still – swear at your wound when you should heal it. What is the antidote of pain?" His eyes widened as he asked Vumani this question. He leaned back in his wheelchair and shot a glance at him. "I hope what I said put some blood in your pen instead of ink. Perhaps you will let your pain write the next book. You did not suffer for suffering's own sake. You suffered for the world to stop making others suffer."

Lunga's attention was grabbed by a young boy who ran excitedly into the house, followed shortly by a gentleman and a lady. The boy pointed at Lunga, then stared at the woman expectantly. She dug around for some coins in her purse and gave them to the young boy. He took the coins and dashed out of the house, thrilled.

"Are you Lunga Mafakude?" the lady asked, looking through the file she carried in her hand.

"Yes, this is Lunga."

The two strangers looked at each other and smiled. "Oh, we are so happy to finally find you, Mr Mafakude. We have searched all over for you," the lady said. "We are from the Palepale Attorneys. This is my colleague, Mvelo, and I am Okuhle." The woman shook Lunga's and Vumani's hands.

"Do you know a Mrs Chand?"

Lunga nodded and called Daphney as soon as he heard the lady ask about Mrs Chand. Daphney joined him, greeting the two strangers. Vumani exited the little house to give them privacy. The man signalled to the lady to speak.

"We have good news and bad news for you. We are sorry to inform you that Mrs Chand passed away almost 18 months ago. The good news is that you are, according to her will, the sole heir to her estate," said the lady.

"We are carrying out the deceased's wishes as laid out in her will," the man added. "We would like you to come at your earliest convenience to our offices so that we may wrap everything up. It is a substantial fortune that you have inherited."

Lunga was speechless. He remembered how Mrs Chand had cared for him when he was a child, but he had never imagined that she would bequeath her estate to him. The lady and the gentleman gave Lunga their business cards and departed. Vumani saw the two leave and went back into the house. He was about to take a seat when his cellphone rang.

"It is Ngoho," he told Lunga and remained standing. He was supposed to meet with Ngoho in a few hours. She had called him to say that she had read his book and was ready to give him feedback, which Vumani eagerly waited to hear. He answered the phone excitedly. It was not Ngoho calling; it was someone else using Ngoho's phone.

Lunga watched Vumani's expression of excitement suddenly become sad. Vumani's eyes opened wide with shock. "What? Oh no!" he exclaimed. He listened further, shuddered, sank into the chair, and dropped the cellphone on the table.

"What happened, Vumani?"

Vumani sat in stunned silence, too devastated to speak. He drew a deep breath and said in a muffled voice, "Ngoho is no more." He sat on edge of the chair, his body shaking.

Lunga looked flustered in his wheelchair. "Ngoho? The same Ngoho you met with just last week? How come? What happened?"

"I don't know. I will hear when I get there," Vumani said, his heart aching. He was too shattered to speak more. Daphney returned to where both men were seated to offer comfort to Vumani. She had read about Ngoho in Vumani's book and knew the significant role that she had played in Vumani's life. Although she had not yet finished the book, she wondered whether Ngoho's death was related to the book. She felt nervous for Vumani and Lunga and wondered what lay ahead of them.

"Let us go and pay homage to Ngoho," said Lunga, as he positioned his wheelchair to move.

Vumani did not reply. He stood up silently and trudged out of the house, wheeling Lunga towards the car, too emotionally drained even to pay attention to where he was going. Daphney

stood at the door of the house and watched them go through the gate.

Lunga pulled up the brake of his wheelchair when they were out of the gate. He called out to Daphney. She came immediately. He wore a calm look of surrender. He observed her for a moment and wrapped his arms around her neck, kissed her cheek and said, "Thank you for everything, my angel. I love you more than words can say. I'll be home by 10."

He wheeled himself to the car without looking back. Nearing the vehicle, the cousins both observed a raven watching itself in the driver's side mirror, fluttering its wings and pecking the mirror with its beak. It made a croaking call when it saw them approach, and flew above them in panic before disappearing into the dim expanse.

Vumani looked up and followed the raven with his eyes. He observed the last vestiges of the day and the few stars in the early night sky as he stepped with leaden feet towards the car.

Daphney watched them, feeling happy and sad for both. She took a few steps towards the house and stood on the veranda, from where she could observe the happenings on the street. She noticed the group of young boys who stood singing by the large fire whose flames were shooting skywards. Unexpectedly, a figure silhouetted against the darkening street came out from amongst the trees outside the community hall. It passed the group of boys and walked briskly towards the car that was parked two houses away from Lunga's.

Vumani and Lunga passed the boys by the fire without looking. They barely noticed their surroundings; their thoughts were elsewhere. Vumani fished his car keys out of his pocket, opened the passenger door, and helped Lunga into the car. He was oblivious to the car parked on the pavement behind him with its lights off. He took his seat, switched on the engine, and engaged first gear. He fiddled with his cellphone for a few seconds, then pressed his indicator while casting his eyes to the side mirror, checking if it was safe to move.

He caught sight of a car hurtling towards him with a passenger pointing a gun in his direction. His expression shifted from shock to panic and, for a moment, he was transfixed by the scene before him. Then, with a jolt, he slammed the accelerator to the floor. But it was too late. A deafening blast tore through the dark street, leaving an eerie silence in its wake.

And the predictions of revered seers of old came to pass... When you disregard your ancient origins, you will be destroyed.

Epilogue

The Voice of Pain in the Cemetery

The dead are not dead. They speak and sing in songs. I speak for death. Death sings and speaks in songs. Songs die and speak in death. I am many songs.

You concealed your execution well, but a silent witness watched as you thrust a dagger into my heart, lungs, stomach, eyes, legs, all over my body. You murdered me and, satisfied that I was dead, you faded into that small dot, and said it was a job well done. They condemned me and instructed you to assassinate me – my executioner who tortures and kills to conceal the secrets of monarchs and presidents who desire wealth and power.

I speak to you, my executioner, as my spirit leaves my mangled body and I lie in my unmarked grave. Wash your bloodstained hands and cover your tracks well. A silent witness watches as you murder. You execute me, knowing you too will die, a mortal like any other human, unconcerned that my loved ones will bow their heads in heartache, keep vigil to bid me goodbye, endure life without me, and fall to the ground in grief, lamenting. My executioner, this bludgeoned body narrates my story.

The dead are not dead. They speak and sing in songs. I speak for the death. Death sings and speaks in songs. Songs die and speak in death. I am but many songs.

My oppressor, I speak to you of bigotry, which gives wings to mayhem and anarchy. As a child, I sought happiness, was buoyant, anticipating a fulfilled life. My childhood, youth, life, world, and my words were stolen and silenced. My skin compelled me to be dehumanised and discriminated against in my own land. Your laws made me an inconvenience, vermin that you determined to control. My playground was a minefield. Death stalked everywhere under your laws. I hankered for death. I lived waiting for my death. Death promised better than life here on earth.

I lived in interminable terror. I walked this land on eggshells as a penitent child, an object of derision, my movements controlled, my living conditions like animals in the wild. I knew violence, poverty, and homelessness. I endured atrocities. I saw my peers die young, was hated and avoided. I withered as rivers and the sky turned red. My crushed dreams and bones lie buried here.

I speak of the clanking chains, the clangourous melody of pain, and the rattling bones.

I hold pain like heavy chains on my shoulders. Pain ripped out the hearts of promising young stars. The same pain cradled me when I threw rocks at your police and soldiers. Pain talked to me, walked with me, and stalked me. Pain persecuted and assaulted me. I became a conduit – a spillway through which buried pain flowed into every room I occupied. Pain carries my message, speaks my words, and delivers me to a transcendent state. Listen to my pain and my chains, their chains, and their pain. Tear the clamouring pain. Hear the clanking chains. Pain persists in the tears of their eyes. It murmurs in cemeteries and valleys that echo the voice of pain.

Wooden crosses mark the graves, and those who live bear scars, cast down, ripped by their past, carrying the voices of those who died screaming. They haul the inherited chains and pains, scars and wounds of their forebears.

I have a scarred skeleton. I speak to you in songs of unsung heroines. My pages in blood ink are cast into the dustbin, but the songs linger. I speak of the unsayable, the hurt.

I cried my last cry and smiled my last smile. Now I walk to my final exit, and when the dust is ash and ash is dust, I will fly without the burden carried to my grave, though my body lies there, the tales of bloodshed quiet, I continue my work for a better world: awareness is rising.

The dead are not dead. They speak and sing in songs. I speak for the dead. Death sings and speaks in songs. Songs die and speak in death. I am but many songs.

Vumani bo!

Hoopoe Press

It was always the case. Vumani Mzondeki verily believed he would not live beyond adolescence. He accepted this possibility and made peace with it. His age notwithstanding, he secretly went to the cemetery to identify his grave. As luck would have it, or perhaps unluckily so, he did not die when he expected to. He lived long enough to see adulthood, with a solid career as a private school teacher. Despite his vocational success, Vumani too was once caught up in the tidal currents of his times, which made his life read like a script of a horror movie. Like his entire generation of black children, he lived in the shadow of his painful childhood memories, which he concealed well behind his calm exterior.

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