

NIQ MHLONGO

After Tears

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ONE

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That was it. I had had enough of Cape Town. The cold Atlantic Ocean, the white sand beaches, Table Mountain, the Waterfront, everything I had once found so beautiful about the city, had suddenly turned ugly. I decided right there, in front of the notice board, to go and pack my belongings and leave for good. The compass in my mind was pointing north, back to Johannesburg, my landlocked city, and Soweto. I was sure that if I stayed in Cape Town for one more day I would go mad. The four years that I had spent there, shuttling between the university lecture theatres and libraries, had come to nil. My fate had been decided. I wasn't fit to become an advocate the following year. I was a failure.

* * *

My eyes were burning as the morning started to break. My muscles were stiff and my neck was aching. I knew that I had to be awake at every single station the train came to a halt at as my lady friend Vee had warned me of the dangers of falling asleep along the way. She had advised me that some passengers, especially around the diamond town of Kimberley, don't have ubuntu and steal other people's luggage when getting off the train. She had experienced this misfortune on her way home to Zimbabwe via Johannesburg.

We passed the Klerksdorp station at about nine in the morning and, as I stood up to stretch, my stomach started to rumble, from hunger, I suspected.

Inside the plastic bag that I had hidden under my seat there was some left-over chicken from KFC. I could have eaten it, but as soon as I tried to open my bag the woman next to me stared at me with nightmarish suspicion. It was as if I were one of those uncivilised bastards she had always warned her daughters not to dare go out on a date with. So I left it in the bag under my seat.

After the train had passed Klerksdorp Station, I decided to go and brush my teeth in the toilet. As I walked down the aisle, with my toothbrush in my hand, I felt my cellphone vibrating inside my Nike sweatpants. The small screen on it registered *Mama*. A shiver ran through me as I answered the phone.

“Hi, Mama . . .”

“Hey, my laaitie, it’s your uncle talking on your Mama’s cell here. Where are you now?” It was Uncle Nyawana at the other end. “Your ouledi said I should find out.”

“Sure, Uncle. We are between Klerksdorp and Potchefstroom and we should be arriving at Park Station around one this afternoon. It’s almost an hour behind schedule,” I shouted over the noise of the train.

“Sharp, Advo. I’m sure you came with nice things from Cape Town for your uncle. Don’t forget my J&B whisky that you promised. A beloŧte is a beloŧte, my laaitie.”

“Ah . . . Uncle, I only have a UCT T-shirt for you. It’s from our law school and has the university logo on it,” I struggled, trying to describe the T-shirt. “I’m sure you’ll love it, Uncle.”

“That sounds nice, my Advo, but I still want my whisky that you promised,” he insisted. “Don’t worry if you forgot to buy for me in Cape Town, there are lots of bottle stores where we can buy. There

are the Lagos and Kinshasa bottle stores in Hillbrow that operate twenty-four hours a day. There is also a nice new bottle store here next to Park Station called Dakar. Or, if you like, we can go to Zak Zak in Diepkloof. That's the cheapest place in the whole of Jozi."

"That's fine, Uncle. We'll see when I get there."

"Good, my laaitie. I'm sure you got an A in your law school report. I know that you're slim."

"We'll talk about that, Uncle. My battery is low and my cell can cut out at any time."

"Sharp, Advo. We'll be waiting for you at Park Station."

My thoughts raced as the feeling of failure and guilt seized me for the first time that morning.

Ever since I had started doing law at the University of Cape Town, my uncle had stopped calling me by my real name, which is Bafana, and started calling me Advo, short for advocate.

Mama also had her expectations. According to her, 1999 was my final year at university and, the following year, I would be starting work as an advocate. Her simple calculation was that a law degree only takes four years to complete, hence I was already doing my final year. She had completely ruled out the possibility that I might fail, which I'm afraid is exactly what had happened.

I'm not sure if this denial by Mama was due to her limited Western education or her excitement. She had left school in standard seven because she'd fallen pregnant with me, but her ambition, as she always told me, had been to become a lawyer. Ever since I started doing law she had boasted to her friend sis Zinhle that I was going to be the youngest advocate to come out of Chi.

I negotiated my way to the next carriage in search of a toilet with

a sink. The door to the first one read *Engaged* and I waited outside, looking at the fields through the window.

A few seconds later a lady came out and I went in and locked the door behind me, and started brushing my teeth. I clearly recalled the morning when everything had fallen apart. The morning I went to check the provisional results that were posted on the notice board of the law school. It's not that I'd expected much, but I couldn't believe my eyes when I realised that I had failed everything except for Criminal Law.

TWO

Tuesday, November 23

The concourse of Johannesburg Park Station was busy as always that Tuesday afternoon, but as I emerged from the stairs that led down to platform 15 I couldn't help but see Uncle Nyawana, next to the Greyhound bus counter, flashing his dirty teeth at me. Standing next to him were three people, but I only recognised Dilika and Pelepele, his childhood friends.

Dilika had been my teacher at Progress High School. He couldn't seem to bring himself to begin a sentence without saying "read my lips", a phrase that had quickly become his nickname.

PP was a notorious carjacker in Soweto and his name alone carried terror in the township. His neck and both his arms were covered with grotesque tattoos of a praying mantis, a lion and a gun. He got them during his time in Sun City. He once served a seven-year stretch there and he always boasted that he was the leader of the feared prison gang the 26s. His story convinced a lot of people in the township as he had some big marks or scars on his cheeks, like awkward birthmarks, and he never told anyone how he got them.

As soon as he saw me, my uncle tucked his wooden crutches under his arms and limped towards me with a smile.

"I'm glad you finally arrived, my Advo. Good to see you, and welcome to Jozi maboneng, the place of lights," he said, trying to hug me.

He smelled of a combination of sweat, booze and cigarettes.

"Look at you!" my uncle continued excitedly, "the Mother City has

bathed you. You have gained complexion by spending all that time with the ngamlas and dushis. Yeah, you look handsome, my laaitie. All the girls ekasi will be yours.”

After twenty-seven gruelling hours trapped inside the crammed third-class carriage of the Shosholoza Meyl, I was exhausted and couldn't say anything. All I could do was smile.

“Come on, meet my bra's,” he pointed at his friends with his left crutch. “You know PP and Dilika already, but meet Zero here,” he said, pointing at the third guy with widely spaced teeth. “He lives in our back yard. He has erected a zozo there. It's been about three months now. He's a very nice guy.”

I immediately dropped one of my bags to shake the damp hand that Zero extended towards me. He wore a traditional Rolex.

“Nice meeting you, Zero,” I said, shaking hands with him. His squeeze was very hard, as if he were punishing me for something I had done wrong.

“We've been waiting for you since eleven, Advu,” started PP, as we walked to the parking lot along Rissik Street, “and for that you owe us a bottle of J&B.”

Very few people remembered or knew PP's real name. I didn't know it either, but it was easy to pick him out of a crowd because of the way he walked. Because of his gout, he stuck his chest out as if it were an arse and walked slowly without his heels touching the ground.

“Read my lips! That's right, PP,” added Dilika unnecessarily, “we should be attending a stokvel party at Ndofaya. Advu must buy us ugologo so that we can get there already tipsy.”

“Hey, madoda! I told you that my laaitie was a student at the Uni-

versity of Cape Town, and not working there. Perhaps we can ask him for a case of J&B next year when he is already the biggest advocate in Msawawa,” said Uncle Nyawana protectively.

“Hey, bra Nyawana, read my lips! You must not underestimate the financial power of the students. They have big money from their bursaries and the National Student Financial Aid Scheme,” said Dilika with confidence. “When I was a student at Soweto College, there in Pimville in the early eighties, I used to save a lot of money from my Council of Churches bursary. Besides, Advu was my student at Progress High School and he has to pay me because I’m his good ex-thiza who taught him until he got a university exemption. If it wasn’t for me, he would have been isibotho, drinking mba-mba, or a tsotsi, robbing people here ekasi.”

To stop them from arguing I bought a bottle of J&B whisky at the Dakar bottle store next to the parking lot.

* * *

As soon as Zero inserted the key into the ignition of PP’s BMW, “Shibobo” by TKZee blasted out from the giant speakers in the boot of the car. As the BMW sped away in the direction of Soweto, my uncle immediately opened the whisky bottle, poured a tot into the cap and swallowed.

“Ahhhh!” Uncle Nyawana opened his mouth wide and looked at the roof of the car as if to allow fresh air into his lungs. “One nine nine nine was a bit of a rough year, Advu, but this coming year of two gees belongs to us, me and you, Advu,” he whispered into my ear. His eyes were bloodshot. “We’ll be fucking rich. You’ll be an advocate and together we’ll sue Transnet for my lost leg, my laaitie.

I'm telling you that we'll win the case, as it was all because of their negligence that I lost it. I tell you, we'll be rich, my Advo. Our days as part of the poor walking class of Mzansi will soon be over. We're about to join the driving class, with stomachs made large by the Black Economic Empowerment. Yeah, we'll be fucking rich. Stinking rich, Advo," he repeated over and over again, as if the topic had somehow become trapped in his brain.

"I think so too, Uncle," I said, without meaning it.

"Yeah. We'll buy all the houses in our street and put up boom gates, like they do in the northern suburbs, so the thieves can fuck off," he said, pointing randomly at the mine dump along the M1 South freeway. "But, no," he corrected himself, "I'll buy you a house in the posh suburb of Houghton because ngiyak'ncanywa, ntwana. I love you, my laaitie, and I want you to be Mandela's neighbour and own a mansion with very high walls like all the rich people do. Then you can go around your house naked and your neighbours won't complain or think you're mad, like they would in the township, because they won't be able to see you. We'll also join the cigar club and all Mandela's nieces will fight over you because you'll be stinking rich. You'll be the manager of my businesses and when I die you'll take over, my Advo. We'll buy a funeral parlour and make huge profits from the tenders we'll get from the Department of Aids because people in Msawawa die of those worms every day."

Everyone in the car laughed at my uncle's dreams, but Zero's laughter was derisive.

"If you're black and you failed to get rich in the first year of our democracy, when Tata Mandela came to power, you must forget it, my bra," said Zero. "The gravy train has already passed you by and,

like me, you'll live in poverty until your beard turns grey. The bridge between the stinking rich and the poor has been demolished. That is the harsh reality of our democracy."

"Don't listen to him, Advo. He wants you to lose hope. There are opportunities waiting for us in the township," said PP, twisting his neck so that he could look in my direction. I was sitting with my uncle and Dilika in the back seat.

My uncle refilled the whisky cap and passed it over to Zero who was driving. My eyes kept shutting because I was tired, but no one seemed to notice as they were enjoying their whisky.

Dilika pulled my arm so that I could give him my attention.

"Read my lips, Advo, I'm glad that you have finished your law degree. Congratulations!"

"Thanks," I said, tiredly.

"Good! But I want you to advise me on something very serious tomorrow, Advo. It concerns your law. I went to see this majiyane in town and he tells me that I have to pay him four clipa as a consultation fee. Bloody lawyer!" Dilika clicked his tongue in manufactured anger. "I wonder where he thinks I'll raise four hundred bucks, because that's huge zak. Read my lips, Advo, the cost of living has seriously become higher after these tears of apartheid. We teachers are still paid peanuts by our own black ANC government. That's why I can't even afford proper shoes," he said, pointing at his izimbatata sandals. They were handmade from car tyres.

"Hey, my bra," interrupted PP from the passenger seat, where he was smoking a cigarette. "Don't say 'we teachers' because you were fired in August, remember? You're unemployed just like me. You hear that? You and I are both abomahlalela."

Dilika made no effort to defend himself. Instead, he creased his forehead and drank a tot of whisky straight from the bottle as Zero was still holding the cap.

“Arggh, bleksem! Don’t worry, nkalakatha, you’ll work again,” said Uncle Nyawana in a consolatory voice. “Advo will sort that one out for free when he becomes an advocate next year. Is that not so, my laaitie?” asked Uncle Nyawana, but he wasn’t expecting an answer from me.

“You’re right. That must be his first test as an advocate,” said Zero.

Everyone in the township knew Dilika had been dismissed from his teaching job because of his drinking problem. It had all started when I was at home during the winter break in June. Due to his laziness he’d asked me and two of his students that he had chosen from his standard ten class, to help him mark both his standard eight and nine mid-year biology exam scripts. Dilika had promised us a dozen ngudus if we finished the job in time.

The deal was concluded in a shebeen that we called The White House. Some of the scripts got lost in the tavern, but Dilika gave marks to the students nonetheless. This only became a problem when marks had been allocated, by mistake, to a student who had passed away before the exams were even written.

When the private investigators came to Dilika’s house, he was drunk and failed to provide an explanation why marks had been given to students whose papers hadn’t been marked, including the student that had passed away.

Dilika blamed his misfortune on the students he had selected from his class to help me mark the papers. He believed that since he hadn’t paid them for the job they might have alerted the authorities.

Although I had also not been paid for the job, I escaped the blame because I was still in Cape Town when the investigations started.

As the BMW passed the new Gold Reef Casino, PP turned and looked at my uncle. “My bra, your mshana is fucking gifted upstairs,” he called out loudly, while drunkenly knocking his own head. “Yes, your nephew’s upstairs is sharp as a razor.”

“He inherited it from me,” said Uncle Nyawana. “Remember, I got position one in our standard two class esgele. It was 1971. There were no computers then, only typewriters.”

“Read my lips, my bra! I think you’re suffering from what intelligent whites call false memory syndrome, you’ve never been esgele,” teased Dilika. “How could this brilliant young man, who has conquered UCT, the great white man’s institution, be like you? If there is a person amongst us that should share his success, it’s me. I was his teacher.”

Dilika was right about my uncle. He had dropped out of school before I was even born. He had sworn to everyone at home that he would never work for white people and therefore there was no reason for him to be educated, but in actual fact we all knew that he was just too lazy to look for a real job.

“Don’t listen to Dilika, my Advo!” Uncle Nyawana said, smiling. “Let me tell you a secret. In our time we were only educated to speak Kaffirkaans. That’s the reason I was at the forefront of the 1976 Soweto uprising with Tsietsi Mashinini and others.”

We all laughed, but PP’s deep-throated laughter drowned everybody else’s. We knew that my uncle wasn’t telling the truth. I guess he was probably out in the township robbing people when the uprising occurred.

“Read my lips, these kids of today are lucky,” interrupted Dilika. “Just look at Advo! Young as he is, he’s already going to be an advocate.”

A wide smile spread to every corner of my uncle’s light-skinned face.

We were now in Chi and Zero turned into our street. We passed the Tsakani meat market which, as usual, was crowded with people roasting their meat, washing their expensive cars and drinking alcohol. From the open window of the BMW I could smell the appetising scent of braai in the air.

Next to the meat market was a beautiful pink house that, some five months earlier, had been an ordinary four-roomed township house belonging to a woman we called maMshangaan. It had been extended while I’d been away, and in addition to the high walls and the paved driveway, the house also had a satellite dish on its tiled roof. I concluded, without asking my uncle, that the owner had become a serious businesswoman, who no longer sold smiley and amanqina.

My uncle’s dog, Verwoerd, was sleeping under the apricot tree as the BMW entered our small, dusty driveway. Uncle Nyawana got out of the car first and immediately the dog jumped towards him and nuzzled his hand. But Verwoerd wasn’t impressed by my presence. As soon as I climbed out of the car to off-load my luggage, he gazed at me once with his jewelled eyes, then wrinkled his black lips up to show his fangs before he started barking.

“Hey, voetsek, Verwoerd! Uyabandlulula! You discriminate! This is my laaitie, you no longer remember him?” my uncle said, trying to silence his dog.

THREE

Wednesday, November 24, Soweto

I was still in my boxers, the first cigarette of the morning between my fingers, when I heard someone approaching the house. I knew that it was Mama because she walked very slowly with a heavy tread. I hadn't expected her to visit us so early in the morning as a few months earlier she had moved in with her lover, Uncle Thulani, in Naturena. In fact, she was three-and-a-half months pregnant with his child.

When I heard Mama's keys jingling at the door, I immediately pressed the burning tip of my cigarette with my fingers to extinguish it. Only my uncle suspected that I smoked and I didn't want Mama to find out.

"Hau, hau, hau! Now that I live in Naturena, Jabu has turned this house into a breeding ground for cockroaches," Mama protested loudly, using Uncle Nyawana's real name. "Sies, man!" she said to herself. "Where are the men of this house? Is anybody home?"

I didn't answer. I could hear some kwaito coming from inside my uncle's room and I thought that he would answer, but he didn't. I guess he was still in the toilet outside.

My uncle would lock himself inside the toilet for about an hour every morning. Inside he performed a strange ritual which involved syringing himself with warm water mixed with Jeyes Fluid. He was convinced that by doing his ukupeyta he would clear his mind and be able to focus on his business as a fruit-and-vegetable vendor at the back of our house. He also believed that ukupeyta and ukupha-

laza were the only ways to get rid of bad luck and township witchcraft. In a way I regretted ignoring his advice. Maybe I would have passed my law exams if I had listened to him, but, unfortunately, I just found his morning practice of ukupeyta and ukuphalaza very funny as he would repeatedly curse every time he drove the hollow needle into his arse.

In the kitchen I heard plastic bags rustling and then, a few seconds later, Mama burst into a personal rendition of a kwaito song by Bongo Muffin that was coming from my uncle's radio.

Thathi's sgubu usfak'ezozweni. (Take the drum and put it in
the shack.)

Ufak'amspeks uzobuzwa . . . (Put on your glasses and you'll
feel . . .)

Ubumnandi obulapho. (The joy that is there.)

I laughed inside my room as I imagined the meaning of the song and my overweight mother singing it. She paused and called my name again.

"Bafana! Are you still in bed in there, my son?" she shouted.

"I'm here, Mama."

"I haven't seen you for ages. Wake up and come have breakfast with me while we chat. I want you to tell me everything about Cape Town, and I mean, everything. I bought you a newspaper as well. They're looking for a legal advisor in this advert."

"I'm coming, Mama."

"Sheshisa! Hurry up! I'm dying to see how my boy looks. Five months is a very long time for a mother not to see her son. And Yuri's here too."

Yuri was my ten-year-old cousin whose mother, Aunt Thandi, had died of Aids-related diseases at the age of twenty-seven. Aunt Thandi was Mama's younger sister. On her death certificate it said that she had died of tuberculosis, chronic diarrhoea and pneumonia.

Two days before she passed away, my sickly Aunt Thandi had called me into her bedroom with a feeble wave of her thin hand and asked me to help her remove a big rock from her chest. She had been coughing badly; coughing up slime and blood.

I still wish I could have helped Aunt Thandi to remove the rock she was talking about, but I didn't see any such thing when I got there. When I tried to tell her about the rock she asked me to help her turn over, but I was afraid of touching her. She was so thin and weak that I was sure that if I touched her, I would catch her disease.

My family had chosen to believe Aunt Thandi's infection was a result of negligence by the hospital. It was said that some time back, before Yuri's birth, Aunt Thandi had been involved in a car accident and had lost a lot of blood. At the hospital she was given a blood transfusion and that was how she had contracted HIV.

"Wow, look at you! I like that complexion," said Mama as soon as I walked into the kitchen, wearing my fur-lined slippers. "Come here and give Mama a big hug."

She squeezed me hard against her enormous pear-shaped breasts as if I had been lost for a decade.

"You look fine too, Mama."

"So, tell me about your university results," she said, as soon as she let go of me. "I know that my boy has done well. I can't wait to see you in a suit with that black gown that lawyers and advocates wear in court!"

“Eeee-eh . . .” my reply was slow to come, “that’s what I was hoping to discuss with you, Mama.”

“What happened? Do you want to take me to the graduation ceremony? I don’t mind going to Cape Town with you even though I’m like this . . .” She rubbed her belly. “It would be a great opportunity because I’ve never been to the Mother City. I was talking about it with Zinhle when we saw a nice dress at Southgate Mall the other day. I wanted to buy it specially for your big day.”

“No, Mama. The university has withheld my results because I owe them money,” I lied. “So, until I’ve paid them, they won’t give me the results.”

“That university is very greedy! How do they think you’ll become an advocate without your results, huh?” she asked crossly. “Tell them that you’ll settle your debts when you’re working as an advocate next year. I’m sure they can give you an extension?”

“I tried that, Mama, but they wouldn’t listen to me.”

“Ag, shame, my baby! Don’t stress . . .” She tried to comfort me by hugging me again. “I’m sure we can make a plan.”

I shrugged and looked at Mama.

“But how, Mama?” I asked, my voice devoid of interest. “I owe them R22 000. How can you afford to pay the university?”

“Just leave everything up to Mama, okay? In the meantime you can apply for this job,” she said, pointing at the newspaper on the kitchen table.

“No, Mama,” I shook my head, “I don’t want you to go to the abomashonisa again. You know how those loan sharks are, they’ll take all your money if you fail to pay on time.”

“Actually, I wasn’t even thinking about them.”

“Am I missing something here?” I asked as I saw her smile. “Does this mean that the supermarket is paying you well these days?”

“Are you trying to be funny, Bafana?” she asked, the smile vanishing from her face. “What can I do with R21 an hour, huh? You tell me.”

“Why don’t you join the workers’ union, Mama?” I asked.

Mama raised her eyebrows and gave me a sour look. She was sweating a bit above her upper lip.

“Iyhoo! Do you want them to fire me like they did with the others? Ask Zinhle what they did to her before she completed her nursing course. I can’t risk that! Where will I get the money to put the food on the table if I join the union, huh? Those rich bastards don’t care about us South Africans because of the illegal immigrants. That’s why they were so quick to fire Zinhle in the first place, they know it’s easy to get these amakwere-kwere and underpay them. No, I’ve joined a stokvel society and it’ll be my turn next month. I think I’ll make a good profit. It’ll be way too short to pay for your results, but it’ll be something.”

By that time Yuri had entered the kitchen, followed by my uncle’s dog, Verwoerd. Every time that I looked at Yuri, he reminded me of the slow, painful death of his mother.

“Stop that!” Mama shouted at Yuri angrily as he started scratching at his little hand until his skin broke. Then she looked at me and said, “He always does that when he’s hungry. I left his food at home in Naturena.”

“I don’t mind running to the shop and buying him a kota with cheese and a Vienna,” I offered.

“No, his sickness requires that I feed him a special diet,” said

Mama. "He's only allowed the chicken stew I make with onion, garlic, potatoes, carrots, pumpkin and green beans. I'll have to leave for Naturena now," she said, standing up. "You'll have to make your own breakfast. I'll see you tomorrow morning."

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