

Human Capital and Other Stories

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My collection of short stories is set mostly in Gauteng and revolves around mainly the lives of the urban, black elite almost three decades after the first non-racial elections in South Africa. It captures emerging trends and fault lines and enquires into whether South Africa can continue on a different path from that of the rest of the continent. Themes covered in the collection, which still espouses idealism, include the acquisition of power, status and money, the use and abuse of these, as well as the psychosocial effects of money on this group. My writing is inspired by the courageous, inventive and introspective writings of the *Drum* generation of writers William Bloke Modisane, Nat Nakasa and Can Themba, as well as the use of language and the experimental form of writing as embodied in the work of Lidia Yuknavitch to deal with similarly pressing social issues of the day.

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Human Capital

Lerato, the personal assistant to the chief executive officer, was her usual bubbly self. She had neatly packed the day's newspapers for her boss and Gladwell's cup of Earl Grey tea and slice of lemon stood next to the newspapers. And Gift, his lead bodyguard, had just wheeled his briefcase up to the top floor of the ten-story office building, downtown Johannesburg. The three other guards were still lurking around Lerato's working area but Gladwell ignored them. He was in a good mood, whilst waiting for Mlungisi, his chief of staff, to arrive to take him through his day.

Then a text message arrived: "Morning Glad, Trust all's well your end. We need an urgent meeting at the usual. CR."

"Lerato! I thought I'm not seeing the chairman until next week?"

"Correct. It's not in your diary. Why?"

"He's just smsd me about a meeting at *Mom's Kitchen*. I told him the last time that the place is being renovated this month so our next meeting will have to be somewhere else. He's going senile!"

"Do you want me to check with his office?"

"Yes please," said Gladwell, as he settled in his spacious office with its en-suite bathroom, television screen and Reuter's monitor.

Since becoming CEO of a commercially-oriented state-owned trade and logistics company, Gladwell and the chairman Christopher Ratshitanga, or Chris as he liked to be called, had established a father-and-son rapport. Chris, a seventy-one-year-old veteran of an American multinational, promised his board and government, the only shareholder, that he would only serve one three-year term to ease in and help settle the new CEO he had just hired for the company. As much as possible, their meetings, unless there were other participants, were held off-site at a small Jewish coffee shop, *Mom's*. The owner knew their favourite table and their meals of choice. In fact, the new menu contained Gladwell's lamb pie. Typically, as part of his mentorship of the young CEO, the old man would meet him prior to a board meeting or that of a sub-committee of the board's to go through issues. Social interactions

were too infrequent. Chris valued his private time, which was reserved for his thirty-three-year-old new wife. Still, he made time to attend two of the monthly CEO Appreciation Awards as a sign of moral support or air cover, as he put it, for his new recruit.

As Mlungisi sat down, Gladwell remembered that his other mission in life was to groom junior colleagues for leadership.

“Mlungisi, let this be the last time I remind you. I need my briefing in three formats – a Word document, PowerPoint and in bullet form. That way I know that the people preparing them actually know what they’re talking about.”

He paused.

“No doubt it’s the head office issue today? I must say I’m getting a little impatient about this,” said Gladwell.

Since he joined, he banned the use of PowerPoint presentations at his executive meetings, saying ‘that’s not a way of keeping records of our decisions.’

“My apologies, sir, but yes I’m here to discuss the head-office. I fully understand your frustrations while we’re trying to find a building that fits our...sorry, er...your, specifications here in downtown, however, we do have a few options that the team has put together for your consideration. If you go to slide three of your pack Option A ... we move out of here to rent just for the CEO’s office and your support staff which, once the organogram is populated, is a total of thirty people,” said Mlungisi.

“Thirty people!”

“Yes, sir, that’s what the organogram provides for – ten are for the protocol office.”

“Unbelievable. Go on.”

“Leaving the rest of the executive committee will not only seem bad, it will also cut you off from them. Now with option B, we move out and rent a building for the rest of Exco. However, again we think this will communicate a wrong message as it isolates the leadership team from ordinary employees and our other partners. And so...”

By this time Gladwell was more than irritated. None of the options met what he wanted – a veneer of being in downtown Johannesburg, with the trappings of the upmarket north. But there was no choice. All he could do was wait for Mlungisi to spell out yet another one.

Option C entailed one of the largest commercial banks moving to Rosebank in five months. It would vacate one floor first. So the idea would be to take over that lease and accommodate the CEO and Exco.

“The bank is also willing to let us take three other floors if we agree to a minimum of a five-year lease, subject to renewal or complete takeover of all the ten floors in five years,” said Mlungisi.

By now Gladwell was completely bored and fiddling with his pen. Another meeting. More options. No decision.

“And lastly, this is really out of the box thinking. As part of our rebranding campaign, which is one of your flagship projects and has been approved by the board, we propose that we buy land and build our own head office. This will be your legacy project. Imagine this. The team has done some more thinking around this,” said Mlungisi, as he handed his boss some sketches.

His boss appeared less animated. But, quietly, his heart was jumping with joy. At last, something he could work with.

“First, we will have the CEO’s office right at the top of the office block. The floor can accommodate up to eighty people. So, over and above your office staff, you can bring in the Deutsche Consulting team. This makes sense from a security point of view as well. Access to that floor will be via biometric technology instead of a card key. And, wait for this, we can then have a dedicated lift from parking straight to your floor without you having to greet everyone on every floor or being door-stepped by serial wingers like unpaid suppliers and employees,” said Mlungisi who was in full flight now.

In terms of his elaborate plan, which included a private running track on the top floor, the company’s Exco would have their offices on the second last floor.

“This will make it easier for them to come see you when you need them without having to wait for elevators forever. The Exco team and divisional leadership can have the other top floors separated by a floor of meeting rooms. The idea

around a floor of meeting rooms is to instill a bit of discipline around meetings. Only necessary meetings will be organized. Only important decisions need to be taken via meetings... ”

Gladwell stepped in.

“I read somewhere that Donald Rumsfeld, you know who he is, right?”

“Yes, the American guy who spoke about unknown unknowns or something --” Mlungisi ventured.

“He hated useless meetings and for this reason he had a standing desk in his office to encourage shorter meetings. You could walk in, have a two-minute conversation, a decision would be agreed upon, and you would walk out. I like that. I’d like to try it here. It will keep people fit,” continued Gladwell.

“You mean, we organize such a desk for you now or in your new office,” asked Mlungisi.

“Yes even here. I actually hate the antique desk I found here. It’s such a telling metaphor for how backward this organization is. We need to implement change now, not tomorrow,” Gladwell added.

He detested the concrete building and lack of theme in its décor but liked its expensive paintings especially the collection of Pierneefs and black-and-white pictures of South Africa’s violent past.

“Good man! Where’s the chairman’s office going to be situated?”

“You choose, sir.”

“He’s been good to me, and, besides, he is the only one I trust in this place. Of course, I trust you, Lira and the bodyguards. Let’s have him on my floor.”

Personal loyalty was everything to Gladwell. He spent the bulk of his time working out in his head who to trust. And this was a moving target.

“Talking about trust – how’s the investigation into Exco members going? I need a team I can trust,” he said, looking at Mlungisi.

“Fair enough. We will be getting a preliminary report before the end of the week sir. If it’s alright with you?”

“What are your recommendations, and how much will your option D cost,” Gladwell said, changing the subject.

“We are looking at over three-hundred million, sir, if we build and own the building. There’s another option, which is to commission the construction and then lease for, say, twenty years with an option to buy later?”

Lerato popped her head in to announce that the meeting with Mlungisi had overrun into the next one.

“What do you recommend, I can’t wait for five months for a building we don’t own?”

It was clear to Mlungisi which option was preferred.

“Good then, I will get the team to draw up a memorandum for Exco, and then the board...”

Gladwell interrupted him.

“What memo, what for?”

“Er... three-hundred million is in excess of your delegated authority. Building a new office park is like acquiring a new asset – you’ll have to take this to Exco, the board, and then the minister for approval in terms of section 54 of the PFMA. And, we will have to go out on tender,” Mlungisi tried to explain the legal implications arising from the Public Finance Management Act.

“I’m the bloody CEO in this place. Why can’t I just make decisions? I left government long time ago because I hated the bureaucracy, and now I’m finding it here.”

After returning from Harvard with an MBA in finance, Gladwell, who wore tailor-made shirts and cufflinks with his GD initials, joined government for a year, which he called a wasted year. He then left to join the private sector before being persuaded by Chris to join one of the state-owned corporations as CEO.

A sheepish Mlungisi, a gifted, unassuming public finance specialist, tried to explain.

“You have to have a proper process followed to comply with the Constitution which requires a fair and transparent process of buying goods and services. But there’s a way...”

“What way, I need solutions. I’m here to fix the place, not to tick boxes,” fumed Gladwell.

Another peep by Lerato, signaling that the diary was now getting out of hand.

“One, we can change the delegations of authority framework to allow you to approve contracts worth over three-hundred million. Or we can confine the tender, which means we just approach one supplier. The downside is that both options require that we get the board’s approval. What do you think?”

With his voice raised, Gladwell shot back.

“I think I’m in the wrong place. I need power to make decisions. And your job as my chief of staff is to make my job easier. Right now you’re failing in this simple task!”

Lerato stood at the doorway again. Mlungisi felt brutalized as he left the office. At least a decision was taken on the other bugbear.

A few days later, Gladwell retreated to his study once his daughter and wife, a banking executive, had gone to sleep, and invited his twelve-year-old friend, a bottle of Caolila and two glasses, one with ice cubes and the other empty. He poured himself something approximating a triple shot, and tossed in two cubes to chill it.

After two sips he opened his trolley brief case, where he found a copy of his hundred-day plan. He knew exactly what was in it, but still decided to reread it. Fuck, he was losing time! The Exco was still thirteen people strong, the same size it was when he joined. Only one meeting had taken place with the trade unions about his restructuring plans, and they made their intentions very clear to him. Since joining he had only hired his assistant, bodyguards and chief of staff, and his army of German management consultants. Depressing stuff! He took a gulp of whiskey, and switched on his laptop to trawl through emails. And his fingers followed his eyes to one message from Mlungisi, marked “Exco Strategy Workshop.”

‘Greetings Sir,

‘I’ve received the agenda for the three working days from Deutsche. I hope they’ve run it by you?

‘I need your guidance on the spouses: first, will the company be paying for them; and second, should we, or the Deutsche team, draw up a programme of activities for them for the duration of the trip?

‘Thanks in advance for your response.

'Kind regards, Mlungisi, Chief of Staff, Office of the CEO'

Does anyone ever think here, Gladwell thought to himself, before replying:

1. Yes.

2. Yes, and yes, work with Deutsche. Rgds. G.

It would be months before Mlungisi and the company secretary realized that Gladwell had dropped the O in his title to be just chief executive or CE. The company secretary ordered all stationery to be changed to reflect this change.

He topped his glass again before reading another email, also from Mlungisi, titled "Memo to Amend Delegations of Authority Framework." Straight forward, but something in it made him angry!

He, Gladwell, is the bloody CEO of a multibillion rand company, but he can't sign a three-hundred million cheque! This is insane. Worse, now he has to ask his enemies in Exco for powers to be able to sign a three-hundred million cheque and go, cap in hand, to the board for approval of the same thing. And then go on an open tender, as if he doesn't know who could build such an office park on time within budget. Madness!

Did he make the right decision in taking this job?

Before he knew it, it was well past two in the morning. He turned off the laptop, capped the Montblanc pen bearing his name and timed a text message to be delivered to Mlungisi at six that morning.

Mlungisi was already waiting, chatting to Lerato when Gladwell arrived just before eight in the morning.

"Morning everyone", Gladwell said, as he walked into his office through Lerato's work area. His cup of Earl Grey was waiting.

"Lira, can you find out a bit more details about the meeting with the director-general of the Bureau, please!"

The Bureau of Public Enterprises was a quasi-government department that styled itself as a holding company for some seven hundred state-owned utilities as well as profit-oriented corporations. To all intents and purposes, it was a state department like any, headed by a politician and run by a bureaucrat, Velaphi, who liked to gloat about commanding the 'biggest balance sheet in the country.' True, on

paper at least. Reality was that most of these entities were heavily indebted and suffered from a legacy of poor management.

“Will that be all before you see Mlungisi,” enquired Lerato, with a notebook in hand.

“Also, can you schedule a meeting with Andrew? Sort of urgent, to discuss Exco?”

“Got it,” Lerato said, returning to her desk.

“Mlungisi, what’s good in the world,” he said.

“We are still breathing sir,” said Mlungisi, the smartly dressed eternal optimist.

“Okay, let’s get to work. If I can travel with my partner on company business, so should Exco,” he said, reminding Mlungisi of the clarificatory pre-dawn email.

“Please fit in one game of golf, will you?”

“Yes sir, anything else,” enquired Mlungisi.

“No, that’s Mauritius, done and dusted. What have the investigators found on Exco?”

“Nothing of substance sir. Their performance scores are good. They’ve been A-rated, and rewarded with bonuses over the years. Except for the CAE...”

“What’s a CAE,” asked Gladwell.

“Chief Audit Executive, sir.”

“The Malinga chap, what about him?”

“He’s been accused of sexual harassment, hiring a relative and blackmailing other executives with bogus investigations.”

As well as being in charge of internal audit, the CAE, a chain-smoking fifteen-year veteran of the company, was also responsible for forensic investigations and the independently managed, anti-corruption toll-free line which was used by whistleblowers to report fraud and maladministration. The line normally handled tender fraud and complaints of corruption. In terms of protocols, complaints against ordinary employees were handed over to their immediate bosses for action and those against executives were handed to the CEO and in instances where there was a complaint against the CEO, this was reported to the chairman of the board.

Gladwell's Exco inquiry, conducted by an investigations company headed by a former police commissioner, was not on the books.

"Why's he still in the job," asked Gladwell.

At last, he thought, he could now exercise his power to fire. He smelled blood.

"He was suspended, and then brought back to the job after a year, before you joined."

"What happened to the investigation? Were there ever any charges brought against him?"

"No. Nobody knows what happened to the case. But Human Capital would know."

"And the sexual harassment victim and CA's, whatever, relative?"

"The relative now works for one of our suppliers, and the complainant left without pursuing the matter further."

"Was she paid out?"

"Again, only HC can tell you that," said Mlungisi, referring to the matronly head of personnel, Siphokazi, another lifer at the organization.

"So, it seems to me that the only man with everyone's 'secrets' shouldn't really be in the job," Gladwell said, cynically.

Gladwell was frustrated that he couldn't just wield his axe to send a message of a new sheriff in town.

"As you know I don't trust HC. Her handling of the trade unions is a sackable offence in a well-run organization," he told Mlungisi.

"I need an Exco that is mine ASAP, one that shares my vision and passion. I'd rather fail with my own athletes than with someone else's team," he continued, battling to stay calm.

Mlungisi nodded – not in agreement, but to show that he understood what was required.

"Mlungisi, here's what I need you to do for me: please get information on the victim of sexual harassment, and how and why she left. Let me be clear, I'm asking you to do your own digging, and not rely on what you're told. Right?"

Gladwell's phone rang. He looked at his Tag Heuer watch before dismissing Mlungisi.

"We've run out of time. But I need a progress report on the car. I cannot be running a multibillion rand company and be driven in a vehicle with hundred thousand kilometres on the clock. Also, we need a proper head of security for the company. Someone with military or intelligence experience, not police. You get me?"

On his way to Pretoria, Gladwell kept asking himself why Velaphi would want to see him at an upmarket restaurant, after hours nogal. The two weren't friends. In fact, if anything, word in the Bureau was that the DG didn't support his appointment as CEO. The other version, of course, was that the DG wanted the job for himself, and even made the three-man shortlist that was sent to cabinet for consideration and approval. If he was inviting him to a fancy restaurant, rumour that the bureaucrat showed up to the job interview smelling of alcohol must then be true, speculated Gladwell as his BMW X5 made its way to Pretoria.

"Gift, let's take a bet. The DG wants a tender," Gladwell broke his thought process.

"You think so, CEO."

"I know so. This is how the government types roll."

"Eish, we will know in another two hours, CEO."

"We will. Here's my other thought though..."

"What?"

Gladwell cleared his throat before adding:

"Some supplier friend of his has been complaining to him about non-payment for services rendered or wants help in securing a tender."

"Really, they both make sense, CEO. But maybe he just wants to build a relationship with you," the former spy ventured.

It was almost dark in Pretoria when the black BMW X5 arrived at Massimo, an exclusive Italian restaurant in the Waterkloof suburb – an enclave predominantly populated by foreign diplomats and civil servants. Gift, dressed in a smart black suit, opened the door and ushered Gladwell to a dimly lit restaurant. The receptionist at

the restaurant took them to the underground level where their host was awaiting them. Velaphi, a short bureaucrat with fifteen years experience including a stint as South Africa's ambassador in Paris, was wearing a dark Armani suit with no tie. He stood up as Gladwell, who was wearing a dark-blue, tailor-made Viyella suit, a light blue shirt and a red Dunhill tie, walked in.

"Ah, DG, I apologize if I'm late," said Gladwell, trying to break the ice.

"No, you're not. I'm just twelve minutes early for our appointment," said Velaphi, as he hugged Gladwell.

Hug? That was strange. The two were not friends. He remembered the smell of his freshly sprayed perfume as unmistakably DKNY, which was one of the many gifts his wife had given him for their fifth wedding anniversary.

"DKNY," he said to the bureaucrat.

"You're a man of fine taste... I've ordered a shot of brandy to warm myself up, if you don't mind," Velaphi responded.

"Yes, not a problem DG. I might need one myself to calm down my nerves for our dinner," said Gladwell, exposing his fears.

The pair laughed, but this failed to completely dispel the mistrust between them.

"Can I start with double shot of Glenmorange, twelve years. We are gonna have wine, right DG?"

"Yes, please."

"Well, having served our Republic so well in Paris, you must be a connoisseur, so you must choose the wine."

"That's a big misconception. The French are only good with champagne. Not wine. We're not celebrating, are we?"

"This is the DG's meeting?"

"Relax, it's nothing hectic or anything you can't handle. Let's have Hamilton Russell," Velaphi suggested, ignoring the waitress' offer of a recommendation.

"That sounds good. So, how's the Bureau of State Enterprises treating you?"

"Same old... but the Minister says I'm working hard and underpaid and underappreciated by politicians! One day, we'll be fine I guess."

“Yes, one day, we will all be fine. How’s family,” asked Gladwell, trying to follow his lead to be informal.

“They are fine. But remember, unlike you, family is only my mother in the village. The kids are in the States with their mother.”

“Oh, I didn’t realize...” Gladwell added, awkwardly sipping his whiskey.

“No, it’s fine. She never liked the country anyway. So, the divorce was a good excuse.”

The small talk was interrupted when the waitress arrived with the bottle of Hamilton Russell with a price tag of seven-hundred-and-ninety rand according to the wine list.

“Great, it looks good. I won’t taste, just pour,” said Velaphi, looking at the waitress.

The men then switched their focus onto the tedious task of ordering food. Gladwell ordered cob and stir-fried vegetables, and the DG settled for a Peking duck breast and mashed potatoes. No starters.

“So, DG, why am I here?”

“Ah, Glad, please relax. We are hearing positive noises from your clients. I hope you’re liking the job?”

“DG, as you know, I like the job, but I hate the salary and the bureaucracy,” said Gladwell, as he buttered a fresh complimentary bread roll.

“Yes, I know. But Mlungisi is good with process and the PFMA, which is your bible. You must utilize him.”

Gladwell was surprised that the civil servant knew so much about his staff and the goings-on in his office. Was he spying on him, he wondered.

“Glad, this meeting never took place, right? You know what I mean?”

“Yes, maybe next time we shouldn’t involve our offices if it’s just between us and the lamppost,” said Gladwell, as he took a sip at his wine after a toast he couldn’t recall.

The DG continued.

“You’ve our full support. I mean the Minister, and the whole Bureau. We will go to the end of the world for you. We support all your plans. But here’s the thing. We are nervous about the restructuring plan. The party is going to elections in a few

months' time and we cannot be shedding jobs before an election. The opposition will have us for lunch. They've already eaten our breakfast in the last elections. The Minister is quite clear about this."

Ah, the penny dropped at last.

"So, DG, what would you have me do? I promised the board to deliver on five thousand of those jobs as part of rightsizing the organization. If I can't do this, not only is my bonus at stake, so is my credibility!"

"Nobody is saying it shouldn't be done. We are just saying, maybe timing is everything, if you get what I mean," said the government man.

"Frankly, DG, I'm being stymied every angle. Since I came, I'm just hobbled by a stampede of people who say what I can't do, instead of what I can do and how. This is crap, forgive my vernacular."

Gladwell's host was getting anxious, and took a large sip of the white wine.

"No, it's alright. Just don't raise your voice. I'm glad we've had this chat. You see, your job is to watch numbers. Mine is monitoring the weather, political temperature out there," Velaphi added, trying to sound philosophical.

"I'm not raising my voice."

"Chief, calm down. Like I said, this meeting didn't happen."

The food arrived, forcing them to be quiet. They returned to the heated argument over the culling of personnel. Instead of dessert, Gladwell ordered double espresso, and Velaphi had mint tea.

"I must be the most over-managed person in South Africa," said Gladwell cynically as they parted. Velaphi laughed and lumbered off to his car, as Gladwell's back passenger door was opened for him.

As Gladwell was being driven home, he looked out of the window in the semi-deserted N1 freeway to his Sandton home.

Dancing around politicians' egos wasn't the reason he went to Harvard. In fact, he went there to avoid politics. Also, he was no product of affirmative action or beneficiary of the ruling party's cadre deployment policy. More concerning was the thought that Chris also wanted to lean on him, on behalf of politicians.

Andrew Mitchell was the local head of Deutsche Consulting, a group of management consultants focusing on headcount reduction. Gladwell met him between two jobs, and worked for the consultancy briefly until his current job came. They became close friends, and Andrew, whose grandfather was Nelson Mandela's optometrist in prison, was helpful in preparing Gladwell for his job interviews. The appointment of the firm to assist him with his proposed restructuring of the parastatal was one of the first major decisions Gladwell made. In so many ways, Andrew embodied what Gladwell meant when he said he preferred to fail with his own athletes. He had asked Lerato to schedule Andrew's as the last meeting of the day, and out of the office so they wouldn't be interrupted.

They arrived at *Mom's*, a ten-table café, minutes apart – Andy first. He was drinking water when Gladwell, iPad in hand, joined him.

"So, big man, how's the big job treating you these days," asked Andrew.

"Rough and frustrating. I hate politicians," said Gladwell.

For once he meant it.

"Tell me about it. What's up?"

"It turns out I can't reduce headcount this year. So, I should move fast in reducing my over-achievers in Exco, and appointing my own people," he told Andrew, recounting the meeting with the DG.

"Politics again?"

"So, how do I reduce Exco without causing much drama Andy?"

"Two ways. One's expensive, but easier. And the other is tough, but cheap."

Deutsche was good at this. Its consultants flew around the globe with templates on how to cut jobs and sell assets to fatten profits.

"First option: everyone in Exco is on a fixed-term contract. Look at their contract, and pay out those who aren't in your future plans out. I'm sure you'll need the board's approval for this. I'm not sure about whether the Bureau needs to be consulted. And, of course, they might legitimately ask for incentives of the remainder of their contracts on top of their salaries. That's negotiable."

Gladwell, who was on his second double gin and tonic, nodded, as if to suggest that he was in agreement.

Andrew, who ordered double eighteen-year old Macallan, explained the second option, and a hybrid solution. The second entailed a new structure and advertising all jobs in it. Unsuccessful applicants would have to leave the company taking only their pension benefits.

“A tweak of the second option is to have an Exco of five, as we discussed the last time, and make the rest report to these five. In all likelihood, this will piss off most, and the good ones will leave without you having to pay them. We did that at the bank for Thulani,” he told Gladwell.

How could he forget this bank restructuring? It was reported all over the media after a fifty-three-year-old woman, who had spent all her working life at the bank, committed suicide at the bank’s headquarters after being served with a notice that she was being let go. Gladwell now appeared to like both options, before Andrew pointed out the downsides.

“The first option is bold and shows decisiveness, and will make it easier for the headcount reduction later. Still, you’ll have to battle public perceptions over the payouts,” he said, before they were disturbed by a waitress who wanted to take their orders.

Gladwell proposed a large green salad to share. Andrew ordered a small steak tartare as his main meal, and Gladwell settled for Thai chicken curry. For more drinks, Gladwell asked for a cold saki and Andrew stayed with the whiskey.

Gladwell continued.

“I like the first option for its speed and clinical nature. And it’s more honest. But it narrows my options to the existing pool, and I’ll be taking them into the future with me. I’ll take the second option. Because if I can’t find who I want internally, which is a high probability, then I’ll go out and headhunt, right?”

The saki arrived.

“I know this isn’t my business, but you need to stop the media blitz by your Exco. Every day we wake up to another launch of this or that initiative. If you don’t, it will make it harder to exit any of them,” Andrew said.

“I know. I really look forward to doing stuff, instead of talking about doing stuff, Andy, you know?”

The salad arrived.

“I’ll get you a new structure in two days. In reality what you need is chief financial officer, chief operations officer to whom all the managing directors will report, CAE, business development executive and company secretary who’s a board employee, and you’ve got your five-man Exco! And when the climate improves, you can then move on the five thousand.”

“Good man, that’s why I pay you big bucks. The cull begins.”

Meetings with Andy were rejuvenating for Gladwell. He left most of them feeling upbeat. Deutsche, which wasn’t shy to charge for its services, was a results-driven and solutions-oriented outfit, Gladwell thought.

Chris was bereaved. His only son, a biker, met his maker in a gruesome crash on his way from a weekend away on the south coast. All his appointments were cancelled whilst he mourned his son. He did, however, insist that he wouldn’t delegate the meeting with Gladwell to his deputy who acted in his position during the extended compassionate leave. Though anxious, Gladwell felt it would be inappropriate to raise the issue of the long-standing meeting with him during his visits to the old man’s house. When they finally did meet, he was still fragile, looking slightly older than his age. The agenda-less meeting took place at their refurbished café. Gladwell arrived after Chris who was sitting on the new furniture, but same spot.

“I’m sorry about dragging this on forever,” said Chris, wearing a grey shirt with stripes and matching pants.

“No, not a problem Mr Chairman. You’ve had quite a bit to deal with, especially on the personal front. I do hope, though, time will help you heal, a bit, at least,” said Gladwell, trying and failing to find profound words of comfort.

“I’m fine, but my ex-wife isn’t taking it well at all.”

“Again, I’m so sorry for your loss,” said Gladwell, still in a black Canali suit with a white T.M. Lewin shirt and schoolboy black and white tie.

He was wearing a Cartier wristwatch with a silver chain. The expensive taste of Gladwell’s clothes was always a source of embarrassment for his mentor. But he never spoke about it.

“Enough about me, how’s the job,” asked Chris, redirecting the conversation.

He wasn't that big on the personal stuff. He called himself an input-output guy, referring to his inclination toward business. The rest was fluff to him.

"It's good, it's got its own frustrations. I'm sure you saw the monthly dashboard – the reds are uncomfortably too much for my liking, and then the culture of ticking boxes instead of getting things done continues to be pervasive alongside self-promotion," said Gladwell.

"The deputy chairman told me about your frustrations. But that's not why I called you to an unscheduled meeting."

Gladwell leaned forward on to the table, as if to urge Chris to get to the point. He stirred his black coffee aimlessly.

"Let me preface what I'm about to say with the fact that we, that is the board, likes you, and, more importantly, we want you to succeed. As you know, I'm in this job to ensure that you not only settle down, but succeed in it."

"I know, and I appreciate that very much, Mr Chairman. Your guidance has been invaluable to me."

"There are two things that worry us, and hopefully, we can get through them."

Now Gladwell felt anxious.

"No, it's not the retrenchments. First, whilst the board has approved the rebranding exercise, we are concerned about the new building. The cost isn't so much an issue. We hear, and I don't believe this, that the new building will have a lift that comes straight into your office from the garage? And that, as CEO, you'll never mix with ordinary employees. This company belongs to South African taxpayers," said Chris.

As Chris moved to the second point, Gladwell was scribbling notes. The second issue was his new car.

"A top of the range G 63 is way too excessive. I'm told that the basic price for this vehicle is on the other side of two million rand. Really now? I hope we can find imaginative ways of dealing with these issues. We really want you to succeed," Chris said.

"Bloody snakes," said Gladwell.

Chris seemed shocked at the outburst. They were interrupted by Jennifer, the owner of the restaurant, who came to offer her condolences to Chris for his loss.

The main meal arrived this point. Chris had ordered a spicy chicken pasta and a glass of Thelema chardonnay, and Gladwell regretted not ordering something with a life like beef or game to take out his anger on. His Greek salad seemed inappropriate.

Sensing his discomfort, Chris asked Gladwell to enjoy his lunch and prepare a response for the board's social, ethics and governance committee on how he planned to deal with their concerns.

"I've to see this first," Chris said in a sterner tone, as he continued struggling with his spicy spaghetti vongole.

After lunch Gladwell directed to be driven straight home after ordering the rest of his diary to be cleared for the day. His briefcase was delivered later.

On his way home, he felt angry, betrayed, challenged and under-appreciated. As the gravity of the issues raised by Chris sank in, Gladwell couldn't help but feel he had let down his mentor. Was this survivable? Though he never believed in superstition, other than annual ancestral grave cleaning, he missed his mom at that moment and wanted to visit her grave.

He then switched his thoughts back to the 'snakes' he worked with. He knew he had made a mistake. He had waited too long. The status quo was fighting back. He knew exactly who the culprits were. He could visualize them. He needed to regain the initiative. Otherwise he would be history.

Later the same evening, he retreated to his study where he had a long telephone conversation with his personal lawyer. The subject matter was the earlier discussion with Chris. The men concluded that the matter wasn't a criminal one, but required someone with corporate ethics experience. They agreed to pick up a day later to make Chris's one-week deadline.

He would later tell his wife about the building and car issue.

Although difficult, the previous night's sleep had helped him clarify his thoughts and what needed to be done. The focus and certainty defined his walk to the office. He hardly looked like a man facing a crisis. Instead, there was a slight spring in Gladwell's walk. Mlungisi was already waiting. The normally half-hour meeting was made an hour long.

"Two things Mlungisi," Gladwell said, "the Exco investigations report, and I need you to prepare two suspension letters."

Even though Gladwell looked in good spirits, there was a very serious tone to his voice.

"With respect sir, I know little about HR –"

"Work with Andy and your investigator guy. I need the CAE and HC out of this business," he said, still soft but firm.

"Your guys must let me know who authorized the out-of-court settlement with Malinga's victim. I want the entire three-million-rand paid back to the company by the end of the month including the tax portion," he said, looking at the report from the Exco investigations.

The Geldenhuys & Associates report into Exco found that the CAE victim was strong-armed into discontinuing a sexual harassment complaint and a civil action against the company in exchange for a two-million-rand settlement and, without requisite board or Exco authority, the HC and CAE added a million rand into the payout. In a damning paragraph, the report added in part, 'Although the scope of this inquiry is limited (to the CAE's previous suspension involving one victim), the investigators would be remiss if they failed to point out that a prima facie case exists that the said executive (CAE) might be implicated in other such practices (past and present). It is the view of these investigators that the Company would be criminally negligent if it didn't verify the allegations we raise herein.'

"But this happened so long ago..." Mlungisi tried to reason.

"A wrong is a wrong. Period. These are taxpayers' funds Mlungisi."

Mlungisi was writing all the instructions between trying to talk some sense into his boss. In terms of Gladwell's grand cleanup plan, Mlungisi would act as head of Human Capital and 'get Andy to find me someone to act as interim CAE.'

"Actually I'll call Andy myself," he said, "you focus on the letters."

Lerato popped in to replenish the teapot. She could tell something serious was underway from the posture of the two men. The mood in the room was unusually tense.

As she left, the men continued.

“Mlungisi, leadership is about balls. This is your test to prove whether my trust and confidence in you is misplaced,” said Gladwell, eyes glued to his chief of staff.

“I’m up to the task – don’t get me wrong. I just need us...”

“You need us to?”

“To follow process, sir,” said Mlungisi, arguing that the CAE and HC needed to be invited to make representations on why they shouldn’t be suspended.

“Mlungisi this is process. Years ago the company failed to protect a victim of sexual harassment, I’m not going to allow the same under my watch.”

This time the decibels in his voice were rising slightly to emphasize the point.

“Two more things,” Gladwell went on, reading from his iPad, “I need a special Exco meeting this afternoon and a staff communiqué announcing the suspensions afterwards.”

“Should the CAE and HC both be invited,” he asked.

“By this afternoon they’ll be with their lawyers,” Gladwell said with uncustomary bravado, “which means that you and I are done so you can prepare the letters.”

Mlungisi picked up his papers as he stood up to leave. He was struck by what appeared to be decisiveness on the surface, and sheer cruelty and disregard of process beneath it. He couldn’t really figure out where it all came from. On his way out, he ran into Andrew with his trademark AirMac laptop.

Andrew, an athletic South African-born English man, was obsessed with white slim-fit shirts. And he liked clipping his pens on them alongside his Moleskin notepad and backpack. He was called by Gladwell to an unscheduled meeting to discuss “Exco restructure.”

Lerato ushered him into Gladwell’s office.

“We announce today,” said Gladwell, “this afternoon.”

Andrew pulled out a bottle of fizzy water from his backpack.

"The unions," he asked.

"Exco isn't unionized. I've a special meeting this afternoon."

Andrew looked a little taken aback.

"Why the rush?"

"This is as good a time...am I the only one with a watch in this place?"

"I've the structure, but we need an announcement spelling out the rationale," he explained.

"No need, I've always made my intentions of a slimmer Exco clear," said Gladwell.

"Do I have to attend?"

"No, I need you to get me an interim CAE – my one is on suspension."

Andrew hesitated before saying.

"Can't this wait?"

"No, Andy I've passed my hundred days!"

There was an uneasy silence before the consultant continued.

"I'll give you two CVs – the structure is ready."

"One please! Thank you very much."

Andrew stood up and looked back at a friend he couldn't recognize.

When he returned from the bathroom, Gladwell switched on his phone. One of the messages was from his lawyer, 'Meeting with senior counsel this afternoon.'

'Cool, make it 6 pm,' Gladwell responded.

The mood in Exco was tense. Perhaps it was because of the two absentees to what was billed a special, compulsory Exco. There were three agenda items other than the standard any-other-business (AOB). First, governance announcements/new appointments; second, a fit-and-proper-leadership for the future; and third, a new communications protocol.

After the first item, the head of one the major divisions asked why the announcement regarding the suspensions of the CAE and HC was on social media before being communicated to the rest of the organization, as was the practice.

A rather emboldened CEO responded: “You lot leak like a sieve.”

With the dissolution of the Executive Committee, it meant only one person was in charge – the chief executive. With a single stroke of a pen, the thirteen-men Exco was now reduced to five.

During AOB someone asked if there were voluntary severance packages available for those who didn’t consider themselves part of the future.

“This will be considered on a case-by-case basis,” Gladwell answered, “if the company needs one’s skills – unlikely we’ll let you go, but like I said -- ”

Gladwell organized the pre-board meeting with Chris at *Mom’s*. It was a breakfast meeting to familiarize Chris with the report for the social, ethics and governance committee meeting of the board. Gladwell was early.

Although the meeting was ostensibly about his response to the issues, he felt it would be appropriate to take Chris through the changes of the last few days – the suspensions, a new organogram and the interim leadership arrangements.

As Chris took the first sip of his green tea, Gladwell offered his mea culpa for being so inconsiderate about the taxpayers’ money. Chris, the white-haired man, interrupted him and cut straight into the matter.

“Glad, we’ve received a disturbing report from the anti-corruption line that suggests that during the Exco strategy workshop in Mauritius your ‘partner was your niece’, and you insisted on sharing a room with her. I really hope this isn’t true or that it’s not what it seems,” said Chris, looking for words to avoid being inelegant.

“What,” Gladwell asked, sounding shocked and agitated.

“Glad, I understand lapses of judgment, from which we all learn a lesson or two. What’s alleged here is not – it goes straight to the core of what ethical leadership is about,” Chris continued, “what example are we setting to those we lead?”

“Mr Chairman, can’t you see these snakes are sabotaging me,” he tried to push back.

“Either this is true or not,” Chris said, “leadership is about accountability, period.”

The mood between the two men was tense.

“I can’t not do anything about this,” Chris said, “either you do the honourable thing or you leave me no option.”

Gladwell couldn’t believe his ears. He was shaking with anger. He couldn’t even hear Chris asking him if he was alright. Could this be the beginning of the end? How did he forget about the so-called independent anti-corruption line during his cleanup of the CAE and HC? Independent, my foot, he thought to himself.

Mbali was disoriented. She was confused. The pain she felt was mild compared to the trauma she had gone through. Still in a dream-like state, she could hear two or three voices arguing.

“Mam, please don’t touch her,” said one voice, “or I’ll have to ask you to leave the ward again.”

“I beg you my child. I need to speak with her. It’s important I speak with her,” said the other, from a slightly more mature woman.

The second voice sounded familiar to Mbali. Still, she couldn’t readily place it. She slipped back to sleep. The two voices continued their argument, without noticing her.

“Mam, I’ll have to ask you to leave now. The patient has been through a lot...” said the nurse, as she dragged the visitor out of the ward.

“Can I just sit outside again?”

“With respect, please!”

Outside the ward of a newly built state-of-the-art private hospital at a golf estate with its own cemetery, which had been her makeshift home for weeks, MaDlamini felt cheated. This period had been emotionally grueling to her. In her eighty-three years of living, she had yet to come across something like this. She prayed every day for guidance from the Lord about how to handle this ordeal. The answers, if any, didn’t seem to come through in crisper terms. Why was God putting her through this, she wondered. She remembered her pastor’s words, ‘God answers our prayers, in His own time, we need to be patient.’ Perhaps the affidavit in her bag was God’s guidance to her.

When Mandla, MaDlamini’s son, returned from exile, he made a promise to himself: he would work so hard that his new family – Mbali and Simphiwe, their daughter – would never have to go through what he went through in foreign camps. His daughter, from his current wife, gave him all the joy in the world after the collapse of his first marriage to his Zimbabwean wife, with whom he had three boys. When the liberation armies were demobilized in the early nineties, he grudgingly

gave up his AK-47, and displayed its two pieces in his study where he spent years finishing a B Comm degree part-time. The qualification would be a ticket to his life as a civilian. The study, he felt, aptly symbolized the two worlds he was straddling – his past as a guerilla fighter and a post-apartheid businessman. After years spent as a glorified trainee manager in a large company, his break finally came when he and a friend partnered with a white businessman to set up a company supplying machinery to mining companies in South Africa. When the commodities cycle bounced back from a slump, mining companies spent like there was no business cycle. Mandela and his partners made a fortune. He paid off his mortgage, and asked his young wife, a corporate law specialist in a major law firm, to give up her career to raise their daughter. Mbali reluctantly agreed, and to cope with her new occupation as a stay-at-home mum she registered for part-time classes. In the process, she picked up French and an MBA. Mandela, who had trimmed his working week to three days, kept minimal contact with his comrades. His main point of contact came via funerals of destitute comrades, which he generously funded, or at his favourite upmarket watering hole which also doubled up as an office for informal meetings. When he walked in at the bar, patrons would be heard gossiping about how much money he had made. The famous quote was, ‘this is a man who’s made enough money to last this and the next lifetime.’ This was his public life and persona.

MaDlamini considered Mbali her own daughter, despite the differences between their families. And there were many between her and her son. The age crevasse for a start. Class. Tribal affiliation. These didn’t seem to stop their love. In fact, it glued them together. Now, she found herself torn between two people she loved dearly. Argh, there’s right and wrong, she concluded. She felt she had chosen right over wrong when the nurse disturbed her again.

“Please don’t stay long,” the nurse said, inviting her into the ward.

“Kulungile mntanam,” said MaDlamini, as she entered the ward.

Connected to a drip, the bondages around her body covered her gorgeous frame and stunning beauty. Her tiny body, a product of years of a strict gym regime, had shrunk during the weeks she spent in hospital, largely in a medically induced coma to ease her pain whilst doctors treated her wounds. When awake, she would

struggle to keep her eyes open, thanks to the heavy medication. She tried, but failed, to open her eyes to the visitor.

‘My child’ were the only two words MaDlamini could muster, before breaking down in tears. The nurse barged in to eject her again.

“It’s okay. Let her stay,” a weak voice intervened from the bed.

“Please go compose yourself outside the room,” ordered the nurse.

Their conversation was strained. There was so much to say. But Mbali was in no condition to engage, despite her curiosity to know what had happened to her.

“Mntanam it’ll be fine. God is alive,” MaDlamini sought to reassure her, before remembering the pact with the medical team to not traumatize their patient with the gory details of what had brought her to hospital.

Soon after making his money, Mandla built a large double-storey mostly-glass and steel property surrounded by a driveway. The swimming pool at the back, which formed part of the house, made the top floor appear to float above it like a boat. Guests to the house could just walk straight from the front entrance, through the reception area into the patio (another entertainment area), to the pool. The house décor smelled opulence. The only two simple items, which carried precious sentiment, were a painting of Jesus Christ’s last supper and a framed Lord’s prayer. Mandla bought them to remind himself of his upbringing at his home in the Transkei. The two items adorned his mother’s tiny kitchen.

The mood at his house was tense. For a start, Mandla was home most of the time during the day – a rarity. Ordinarily staff, especially the armed gate guards, saw Mandla only late at night or at dawn when he drove in, chipping the edges or front bumper of his luxurious car before staggering into his mansion in Sandhurst. The domestic help – made up of a chef, two cleaners, Simphiwe’s minder and a Malawian butler – only saw him briefly as he left the property. He rarely took meals at home. He only had dinner when he came back from work. Mbali had taken to liking the Malawian butler. He was handy, reliable and no work was too menial for him. Apart from the duties he performed, the quality that Mbali liked the most in Banda was his cooking skills. She tried to get the chef to work with – or learn from – Banda, and the result was resentment from the chef who felt this was commentary

on her skills. So, Banda would only assist on weekends, which were special occasions for Mbali to cook for her family. According to Mbali, Banda was like a musician, who took an old song and reinterpreted it into a masterpiece. He used the recipes from cooking books as mere guides toward the creation of culinary masterpieces. Of course, he also brought indigenous Malawian cuisine to the household for sampling. Mandla, not a big eater, was quite indifferent. Still, he knew food to be avoided – all that reminded him of poverty in exile.

Mandla was bemused. Bewildered. Bewildered at the reaction to the latest incident. All previous incidents were handled appropriately, according to him. There were no third parties. It was just family, and during the incident preceding the current one, Mbali's family was also involved – to provide counseling. His biggest concern this time was his own family. His mother. He was least surprised by his brother's rush to involve third parties. Besides, he felt his elder brother, Zakhele, a university lecturer, was jealous of his business success.

"Our strategy is to say 'I don't know' Mandla, right," said his lawyer, Mark Kahn, during one of their many meetings at his house.

"I want this to go away."

"This is way too serious. 'I don't know' is the same as I don't remember. And this is the only way out," Kahn tried to reason with Mandla.

Mandla felt insulted by the direction this conversation was going. He couldn't imagine himself being let off the hook on temporary insanity. That would have implications for his business career as well.

"No it's not. I want no court, no cops," he fired back.

"There are no charges remember?"

"So why did I get served with a protection order against my wife?"

"For now, this means you can't visit or talk to her, we will deal with it later. Now," said the lawyer before being interrupted again.

"There's no later. I want this sorted."

Kahn left Mandla's mansion, and considered the comfort of his wealthy client as he was waved out of the gate by the guards.

MaDlamini's next visit to Mbali was different. She was awake, but still confused. Thank God the nurses and doctor had prepared her for this slight change of her condition. In turn, she had assured them she wouldn't break their pact.

"You look better," she said, trying to hug a frail and tired-looking Mbali.

"Mama, what happened to me," enquired Mbali.

"That's not important makoti. We need you to recover first. That's far more important right now."

"But I need to know..."

"In good time you'll know. How do you feel?"

"I don't know..."

"Listen to me. I've got an affidavit here," she whispered to Mbali, awkwardly trying not to hurt her and not to be overheard by the nurse.

According to the doctor, the wounds would take a few weeks to stabilize and a lot longer to begin healing. Major surgery to her skin was necessary to restore her to her natural beauty. What would this do to Mbali's esteem, MaDlamini wondered in sadness.

Mbali came to Johannesburg from Stanger after her matric. She never returned to KwaZulu Natal after her law degree. Upon completing her candidate attorney stint, she branched out to corporate law, which she found less depressing than criminal law. She was on her way to being made a name partner at the firm when 'Mandla happened to me', as she put it at her wedding and her fifth anniversary celebrations. In so many ways, it was an unlikely match. Born towards the end of apartheid, Mbali had no recollection of the brutal system of racial segregation. She also read about the so-called black on black violence in her native KwaZulu Natal in the nineties. Mandla, on the other hand, had lived through apartheid before skipping the country, only to infiltrate it for campaigns, mostly around the Transkei in the Eastern Cape, his home province. Just before the end of apartheid, whilst on a mission, his platoon's cover was blown. Faced with the prospect of either arrest or death at the hands of security forces, he chose death. Together with three other guerilla fighters, they shot their way through a military road block which had been specifically set up for them. They fled back to Lusaka. The

fourth member of the gang, who had gone to visit his family, was arrested, and sent to Robben Island for ten years on terrorism charges. Of all his campaigns, including torching fuel stations belonging to collaborators, Mandela liked to regale his guests with the road block story.

‘People died there,’ Mbali would often interrupt him, trying to inject a bit of humanity.

‘Apartheid’s dogs died,’ he would shoot back.

Behind his back, one of Mbali’s best friends would call him daddy, an affectionate reference to the age difference between the pair. She didn’t mind this. They were in love. What she did mind, albeit slightly, was Mandela’s insistence that she should give up law, especially when she was just a heartbeat away from making partner at the firm. Still, his reasons were sound – Mandela wanted the best life for Simphiwe. As he ferociously built his wealth, Mbali would ensure that Simphiwe grew up surrounded by love, so went the logic. Because there was full-time childcare support, she found time to study – a mechanism she used to cope with Mandela’s late nights.

Mbali’s health was generally good. She ate well. However, the same couldn’t be said of her emotional health. Her psychiatrist was concerned about what her marriage was doing to her health. This got worse after their fifth marriage anniversary. She became a frequent guest at the hospital. Once she came with a fractured rib cage. Mandela drove her to hospital.

“I’m really sorry,” he said, as they were driving to hospital.

She said nothing during the fifteen-minute drive, which seemed like an eternity without music. She couldn’t quite work out what pained her the most: the sharp pain from a broken rib or listening to his words which sounded hollow!

“I love you,” he added, as if to break her train of thought.

What kind of love was this, she wondered, as the car screeched into the emergency unit of the hospital.

Once she had recovered, doctors insisted on keeping her for a few more days to observe the wounds all over her body. One night, she muted the TV in the ward

and her mind went on overdrive. Surrounded by beautiful, sweet smelling flowers, all from Mandla, she wondered:

Is there still love in her marriage?

Shouldn't she just call it quits and return to practice, as suggested by her brother-in-law?

What would become of Simphiwe?

Were her friends right about Mandla's nature and that he needed help to deal with the struggle demons?

Did she still love him?

Her heavy thoughts were interrupted by a flashing breaking news logo on the channel with a headline, 'Osama bin-Laden killed.'

MaDlamini couldn't believe that her own blood was capable of such cruelty. She had heard of incidents at Mandla's house involving Mbali. Her source was her elder son, Zakhele, who had fallen out with Mandla over these incidents and his brother's refusal to repent. Zakhele's only contact with his brother was through his grown-up nephews and, sometimes, funerals of relatives. Unsurprisingly, he never set foot in his brother's mansion. Previous incidents were largely hearsay, and Mbali refused to speak about them. When asked by friends, she would break down and cry. The broken rib incident had a profound effect on Mbali's relationship with the world. She became withdrawn and slipped into episodes of depression. She was on medication. She stopped her gym routine, and stopped going to church.

'If there's God, this is the time for Him to show up,' she told her pastor one day.

The man of God had come to beseech her to return to church, and give God a chance.

'He answers our prayers,' he told her, as they sat drinking tea at a nearby coffee shop. These remarks merely made her even angrier and despondent.

This episode was different from previous ones. For a start, there were witnesses. His mother heard the screams before Mbali passed out in the Jacuzzi. Simphiwe saw her mother being carried away by Banda on the night in question.

Still, she was too young to work out what had happened. And then there was the protection order, which meant that a record of the incident existed. But there was nothing more shocking than the call Mandla received from a detective.

“What’s this about? My lawyers are handling this,” he told the officer on the line, before ending the call.

And, as he paced around his study, he dialed his lawyer immediately.

“I thought we had handled the police,” he said in an aggravated voice to his lawyer.

“We have,” Kahn replied, “the protection order, you’ve not...”

“I’ve not what...”

“You’ve not been to hospital to see her, have you,” enquired the lawyer.

“No I’ve not. They want to see me. What do I pay you for?”

Mandla was agitated by the conversation – another one to be abruptly terminated. It was bad enough he couldn’t see his wife for weeks in keeping with the protection order. Now the police wanted to see him. He called the police minister.

“Justice, I’ve just received a call from your boys in Sandton. What do they want? I thought you said you had handled the protection shit,” he said, addressing the minister of police.

“Mindlos, let me come back to you,” Justice, the police minister, told his friend, using his nickname.

What sort of friends did he have, wondered Mandla. He had always been there – financially, so to speak – for Justice and his family. Justice’s children were partly supported by Mandla when he was just a backbencher MP with an unaffordable lavish lifestyle. Now he couldn’t be relied on to make the protection order go away. Well-paid lawyers could also not assist, he thought, before being interrupted by his mobile ringing. It was Justice on the line.

“Mindlos I spoke with the chaps in Sandton. Let’s meet. We can’t talk on the phone. Let’s huddle at the usual.”

“Now?”

“Yes, I’m finishing a meeting here.”

Still dressed in his tracksuit, Mandla reached for his car keys and headed for the usual – a VIP lounge area, part of a five-star hotel that he and Justice often used

to exchange favours. And there had been plenty of these over the years. If only the walls could see, hear and speak. The hotel staff was as courteous as ever. Even though drinks were free for the VIPs – politicians, diplomats, business people and celebrities – tips were allowed. And these often ran into thousands of rand by the patrons. This didn't apply to politicians who were often guests of the rich.

"Justice iintoni le mfondini, you're making me nervous maan," an anxious-looking Mandela said, as he hugged the politician.

"I'm sure we can handle this too. My guys say a case of assault and attempted murder has been opened," the politician answered, trying to reassure his friend, "I've asked for details. Don't panic."

"By who?"

"I only know that the case was opened yesterday."

"Gee Justice. You said you had handled this shit!"

As they parted, all that was on Mandela's mind was on how this whole thing was running away with him. He still couldn't connect the dots between the criminal case and the protection order. Was there a connection at all, he wondered. The order thing had gone on for weeks.

Upon her release from hospital, it was agreed Mbali wouldn't return to her marital home for some time. Instead, she booked herself in a hotel for a few days before moving into one of the apartments the couple owned as an investment in one of Sandton's mixed-use property developments. The place was lonely and cold. But it was better than the hotel. Simphiwe would later join her still frail mother. Once she switched on her mobile, she found a barrage of 'I love you' SMSes and WhatsApps from her husband. They abruptly stopped on a certain date, and an unknown number conveyed the same message for days. The only frequent visitor was MaDlamini who sometimes slept over. The old woman was keen to take her through what she knew of that evening.

"Here you go," she said, as she handed out a copy of the affidavit.

It was as though she wanted to avoid having to narrate the gory details of that evening.

The affidavit was the main basis of the protection order. Zakhele suggested it be procured. Mbali's response was tears, as she leafed through the three-page document. Now the wounds made brutal sense to her.

"The police have also taken statements of the house staff," she told Mbali.

"They saw all of this," Mbali demanded to know, looking worried.

"I don't think so," said MaDlamini, trying to reassure her daughter.

Mbali asked to be left alone to digest her ordeal of the past few weeks at the hands of the man she loved.

"I'll be in the other bedroom if you need me," MaDlamini said, as she stood up.

Mandla's problems were piling up. It was a miracle that none of the tabloids had picked up a whiff of the order or the charges. The prospect of this leaking was stressing him more. He had seen how the feral press shattered innocent careers. Once, he tried to talk a newspaper editor out of publishing a story of a friend who had been accused of sexual harassment at work.

'Why don't you wait for the disciplinary process to run its course and see if you still have a story,' he pleaded with the editor.

'I don't want to be scooped,' the newspaperman told him, before terminating the call.

His friend was cleared by the inquiry, and resigned soon thereafter. But the story kept him unemployed for a while, as no one wanted to touch a sex pest.

How would his own story play out in the media, Mandla sat, pondering. Who could have laid the charges – his brother, his wife or his mother?

Mbali was still traumatized by the contents of the affidavit. She appreciated the support of her mother-in-law, although she didn't fully appreciate what the long-term strategy entailed. She couldn't live in the apartment forever. She needed to deal with her feelings towards her husband. She needed to decide the future of her marriage.

After Simphiwe had gone to school, she wondered: if she did follow her brother-in-law's advice and ended her marriage, which law firm would have the guts

to represent her against such a well-connected man as her husband? If she opened criminal charges, who would believe her side of the story? Would the cops investigate the case? Would the minister of justice, a Mike Tyson of note in his house, interfere? What about the previous incidents, which went, unreported? Who would be the witnesses? Would her mother-in-law take the stand against her own son? A knock on the door interrupted these questions.

"It's the police madam, we are looking for Mrs Jiyane," a voice came from behind the door as she stood up to attend to it.

What could this be about? She opened the door.

"Mrs Jiyane?" a bulky man in private clothes asked, "I'm detective Mabasa from Sandton Police and this is my colleague, detective..."

"What's this about detectives," asked Mbali, interrupting Mabasa.

"We are here to take a statement about a case we are investigating about your husband -- "

"What about Mandla?"

"We have a complaint of assault with intent to do grievous bodily harm and attempted murder..."

"Who's the complainant and who did he attempt to murder," she enquired. She was annoyed at this intrusion.

The wounds, though less painful, still embarrassed her.

"The victim listed here is you madam, we were hoping you could assist us..."

"Not without my lawyer," she said, betraying her shock at the sudden turn of events.

Even though she was no expert in criminal law, she knew enough of the basics. She knew that her mother-in-law would have told her if she had opened a criminal case against her son. Also, a protection order couldn't just mutate into a full-scale criminal investigation. Neither she nor her mother-in-law had asked for the order to be made permanent. This would require a different process altogether.

Only MaDlamini could help shed light on this.

The initial police visits to Mandla's house were about the protection order. To Mandla's irritation, he learned from the guard on duty at the residence's gate

that he had been interviewed about the criminal investigation. He knew what he had to do. He was annoyed about the amount of time he was spending on this matter alone. The next few hours would be a hive of activity. Soon, though, every one of the house staff – from the guard to the cleaner – was on message. A productive day, he thought to himself, after aligning everyone's story.

There was one loop to be closed.

Justice pulled in at the usual place. He wasn't his cheerful self. If criminals saw him, they would not reconcile his bellicose anti-crime fighting rhetoric with this subdued figure.

"This is complicated. The docket has been sent to the director of prosecutions," he told Mandla, as he ordered his Warwick First Lady Chardonnay.

"What the fuck Justice!"

"This happened so fast. I couldn't stop it."

"You're making me upset. What sort of friend are you?"

"I've asked that the boys shouldn't pick you up. You'll get a free bail on your own recognizance. We need to invest in managing the court proceedings, if you know what I mean?"

"After all I've done for you," Mandla said, as he stood up to leave, "fucking unbelievable!"

On his way home, he remembered that he still didn't know who the complainant was. After all the money he had spent, the results were pathetic!

A surprising text message came to Mbali's mobile phone. It was from Banda.

"Greetings madam, tks 4 de opportunity 2 serve u & yr household all this yrs. Rgds, Banda"

What the hell, she thought. Who else was leaving the household? Why would he leave with an SMS, instead of seeing her in person? Where would he find her if he tried to look for her? Did he come to the hospital? Did any of the staff visit her in hospital?

MaDlamini, her only adult companion, was away for a greater part of the day.

Well, it wasn't long before MaDlamini returned. Eager, she just rushed into the subject.

“Mama I thought you only asked for a protection order against Mandla?”

“Yes I did. Your brother-in-law and I felt it was the right thing to do.”

“And then why are police questioning me about attempted murder,” she said, before being interrupted by a flashing thought.

The boiling Jacuzzi water could have killed her.

“Who laid the charge of attempted murder?”

“I don’t know. Does Mandla know about this,” asked the old woman.

“I don’t speak to Mandla, remember?”

MaDlamini was troubled by this turn of events. Whilst she didn’t have a long-term plan beyond the recovery of her daughter-in-law and protection from her son, she hadn’t thought about what followed. A criminal charge against her son was definitely not on the cards. Could this be sibling rivalry at work again, she wondered. Mbali, too, had not figured this out. She was getting sick at the thought of what laid ahead for her and her family. She thought about calling her lawyer. What would she say? Her pastor? He would recommend more prayers. Her brother-in-law? That would spark off the third world war.

Mbali decided to call her house staff to check out what they knew. Secretly, she was calling out of embarrassment about how much of that evening they knew about, and whether they knew about the protection order. One at a time, she thought. One by one, they knew nothing. Always nosy and chatty, the guard at the gate couldn’t help himself.

“Sisi, bhut’ Mandla has really been good to us,” he blurted out, “the Shangaan has missed out.”

This exuberance, which contrasted sharply with the guarded conduct of the other staff, didn’t make sense to Mbali. But she remembered ‘the Shangaan’ as a derogatory reference to Banda by the local staff, especially the security guard and the chef.

“Thank you”.

She ended the call.

A new text landed on her phone.

10:33: ‘Mbali, hope all’s well. Coffee soon? Love always, Alastair.’

Wow, Alastair! She smiled. Alastair Harris was managing partner of the law firm Mbali worked at prior to her break to be a stay-home-mum. He sponsored her career at the firm, and was broken when she chose her family over becoming the firm's first black female partner. Subsequent to her departure, without fail, he made an annual call to check whether she hadn't changed her mind about law. Alastair, a Briton who had made South Africa his home after the end of apartheid, was impressed with her educational achievements. What could the call be about? No ways would she see him in this state, she concluded.

10:58: 'Hey Alastair, good to hear from you. Can we speak on the phone rather, lots of balls in the air right now? Regards, Mbali.'

11:00: 'Cool. Will ring in an hour. Many thanks. A.'

She still couldn't figure out what this proposed meeting or chat was about.

The cops returned the next day to wring out a statement from Mbali. She was slightly more composed this time. She even offered them coffee, which the lead detective gladly accepted. She switched on the air-con to lessen the cigarette smell. The junior partner asked for water.

"Do you know a Mr Emmerson Banda," asked the lead cop, reading from his notes.

His partner was scribbling notes and checking the posh apartment out.

"He is or was our butler... not anymore," Mbali answered, taking a sip from her green tea, "what about Banda? We just call him Banda."

"He opened a case of assault with intent to do grievous bodily harm and attempted murder against your husband in relation to what happened to you."

"What?"

Mbali was shocked, but tried to hide her feelings with another sip before managing, "I doubt I can be of much help. I remember very little other than what I've been told."

"Anything madam will help. Anything," prompted the elderly cop.

"I remember the start of the fight. It had to do with what I'd served my husband for dinner. It upset him so much..."

“What was it,” chipped in the lead, not wanting to lose these fragments of her memory.

“He said it reminded him of his poverty. What did my mother-in-law say to you?”

“We’ve got her affidavit. But this is a different case. We are investigating attempted murder and assault. We will get her statement on this.”

“Well, I read her affidavit, and I remember waking up in hospital...I cannot help much detective. What did Banda say,” she asked.

“All we can say is that he is the one who laid the charges. I’m sorry.”

Well, her main question was answered. After seeing out the detectives, she returned to the living room where she had just been interviewed. Okay, Banda opened the case. Who asked him to? Clearly, it was not her mother-in-law? Could it be her brother-in-law? Why not say anything? Did they visit her in hospital? She only remembered her mother-in-law. Why open the case and then leave? When did he leave? She switched on her phone to read Banda’s message again. And then she went to his WhatsApp profile. Ah, his status. There he was, with his friendly smile, spotting a colourful Malawian shirt, with these words, ‘May God through His angels fight all our battles even the unseen ones.’ That brought a smile to Mbali’s face. She needed a lawyer, she concluded.

News that Banda was behind the charges distressed MaDlamini. She considered it an ultimate act of betrayal by the Malawian. Mandla and his wife deserved loyalty, she felt. After all, they supported him when he lost his wife in Blantyre. Apart from the money, they gave him two-month grieving leave. This was beyond generous. She recalled that Mbali even attended the burial.

“I only asked him to assist with driving you to the hospital,” she barked at Mbali, “no one asked him to poke his nose in the household’s affairs.”

Mbali was glad her daughter was too young to understand what was being discussed. Being reunited with her mother was a source of joy for her.

“We need to think this through mama,” Mbali said, trying to calm the old woman down. And she could sense she was even losing her appetite over the discovery.

“We need to stand together as family now more than ever makoti,” she said in a tone that was half command and plea.

MaDlamini was the first to leave the dinner table to retire in the guest bedroom.

Mbali followed. As she retired that night, Mbali was conflicted. She resented her powerlessness: Banda, not her, was the complainant. She was frustrated that she remembered very little about the events of that evening. Banda did the right thing in opening a criminal case, as did MaDlamini with the protection order. In her frail state in hospital, she was in no position to make such calls. A recurring thought was that her marriage had run its course. The only question was: how does it all end?

Mandla was hopping mad. Fuck, how could he be so careless, he fumed. How did he miss the signs about the butler? He had always driven his wife to the hospital after each of the last six incidents. That’s why there never were any comebacks. Banda’s absence meant that he couldn’t be bought, like the others. And Justice was useless to make the case disappear, let alone to track Banda. For Mandla, everything and everyone had a price. All his problems were solved through money.

He summoned Justice for a strategy session at Hell’s Bar. The coffee shop, which was a five-minute drive from his house, was for his breakfast meetings. Staff knew his table, which was just next to the kitchen. It was strategically positioned to be the only table in the vicinity. Other tables were too close to each other, allowing guests to eavesdrop on each other’s conversations. The kitchen noise was an important background noise, shrouding Mandla’s conversations in secrecy.

He ordered a bowl of oats with hot milk on the side, whilst Justice ordered scrambled egg salmon breakfast with freshly squeezed orange juice. Mandla had double espresso and sparkling water.

“I like what the lawyers are saying,” Justice broke the ice, “if you did remember, wouldn’t you have driven her to hospital?”

“Justice, I asked you to make this disappear. You’ve failed me. Now there’s a court date.”

“My boys have ensured this doesn’t leak.”

“Your boys should have ensured no court.”

“That’s prosecution, not us.”

“Banda saw nothing. Only mum could be a credible witness ... have your useless fuckers interviewed her?”

“I’ll check, but we’ve her affidavit for the protection order.”

“Justice, is my brother involved in this,” he asked with visible resentment.

Over time, any mishap in his life was attributable to his brother. Every time he was caught speeding or driving under the influence, Mandla suspected his brother’s hand. And all of Mandla’s friends knew that his brother was a source of all evil, never to be invited to any gathering.

“Mindlos, I swear to you. I’ll get you everyone’s statements,” said Justice, as he continued pandering to his friend’s interests.

The men left the shop after breakfast.

Mbali thought about Alastair’s offer. It was kind and thoughtful. Whilst the prospects of returning to practising law excited her, she felt it would be inappropriate to accept a partnership readily. Seven years is a long time. Whilst she now possessed an MBA, this had very little to do with law. She also knew that returning to full-time employment meant the end of her marriage. She texted her brother-in-law:

‘Hi bhuti, thanks for always looking out for me. I’ve spoken with Alastair. Mbali.’

Earlier, she felt she couldn’t avoid Alastair anymore.

“But Alastair, I need at least six months to deal with the drama in my personal life,” she told him on the phone, “you also need to keep your options open in case this blows up.”

“I understand. But I’m unlikely to change my mind, as you know,” Alastair told Mbali.

He genuinely hoped she would not back off. Apart from shoring up the firm’s diversity credentials, Mbali would be a great hire. He would hate to lose her to a rival firm.

Mandla was angry, but tried to keep his cool. He was angry his money couldn't stop the matter going to court. The public relations company he hired to handle the crisis failed to stop a contingent of photojournalists from converging in court. They mobbed him as he made his way to court. The last time he was the centre of media's attention was when he launched his charitable foundation, which would be a vehicle for giving back to less fortunate South Africans. He was the toast of the town.

The drizzle failed to dampen the media spectacle that would unfold that day. This was the first time in months that he saw his wife. He hadn't seen the butler during this period either. Their eyes met, but neither he nor his wife said anything. There was a lot of emotion in the encounter. She hugged the butler.

"Thank you Mr B," she said before taking her seat.

MaDlamini sat with the defence team, just behind her son, and didn't look at her daughter-in-law. Mandla's elder brother was not in court. The proceedings got underway. After entering a not guilty plea, Mandla returned to his seat.

Kahn stood up to address the judge.

"My Lord, the defence moves to have the matter struck off the honourable court's roll," Kahn said.

"Objection, your honour," advocate Malan, appearing for the prosecution, shot back.

"Please approach," ordered Judge Davis.

After a few minutes of consultation, a visibly irate judge ordered a thirty-minute adjournment.

"In my chambers both of you," he commanded the lawyers like schoolboys.

Heavy sighs of surprise could be heard from those attending the court.

Until this bombshell, it was all systems go – both counsel were ready to proceed with the trial.

In the judge's chamber, the defence team presented 'new evidence', which set off a new course for the matter.

"What's your new evidence counsel," Judge Davis asked, with his eyes trained on Kahn, "my court has some standards to maintain. We don't just spring surprises on each other."

Kahn handed out copies of an affidavit from his new witness.

“Is she not your witness,” Davis asked Malan, after noting that the affidavit came from MaDlamini.

“Not anymore,” quipped an emboldened Kahn.

Malan’s eyes were on the affidavit.

“Mr Malan, do you have a new witness,” asked the judge with a tone of mischief.

In the new affidavit, MaDlamini, the only adult eyewitness to the assault, wasn’t only changing sides, but she was withdrawing her earlier affidavit. The relevant paragraph read in part, ‘owing to my advanced age, I sometimes see things that are at variance with reality. The events of the night in question are a case in point...’

The prosecution’s only witness was Banda.

“We will argue that his account should be dismissed as hearsay and speculative as he didn’t witness the alleged assault and attempted murder,” Kahn addressed the judge.

An embarrassed Malan walked back into the courtroom. He huddled with Mbali and Banda, before being interrupted by the orderly’s voice announcing Judge Davis’s return. Sighs of disbelief greeted his announcement that the matter was being struck off the roll. Justice was the first to leave the court.

Social media was abuzz with the outcome. Most condemned the decision. One Twitter user posted, ‘businessman boils wife, charges dropped,’ another posted in indignation, ‘justice for rich.’ The afternoon edition of the *Daily Gazette* screamed, ‘Outrage as tycoon escapes murder rap.’

As Mbali was preparing to turn in that night, her mobile rang.

“I heard,” Zakhele said with a dejected voice.

“Thanks for everything bhuti,” answered Mbali.

Mbali felt horribly sick after the call. A multiplicity of thoughts ran through her mind. Who did she marry? What did she marry? Her mother-in-law of all people? Thirteen years of her life down the drain!

Work Hard, Play Harder

It was just after four in the morning when the high commissioner's mobile phone rang. The number carried a local 207 pre-fix digit code. It couldn't be any of the high commission's office personnel on the line. Was it a South African in trouble, he wondered. In terms of the embassy's internal protocols, the first port of call for South Africans who needed emergency consular services was his deputy, a career diplomat, unlike him. The call was on his mobile, and not from his deputy. After a few rings, he answered, calmly, trying to conceal his annoyance, "Hello".

"Is this high commissioner Gu-me-de," asked the voice with a British accent on the other end of the line.

"Yes, this is him, who's this," Che answered.

"I'm calling from the London General Hospital. It's about a patient, called M-du-du-zi. He's been involved in a vehicle accident, and emergency services found your card clipped on the back of his mobile phone. We need to operate on him urgently, and there is no next-of-kin except you. We require someone's consent," the hospital official continued.

"Alright then, I'm on my way," Che said, before dropping the phone.

As a political appointee and former premier, Che Gumede didn't trust career diplomats as a matter of principle. He felt they harboured resentment against political appointments that were frustrating their career progression. Once, during an annual foreign affairs diplomats' summit, he overheard two career diplomats taking a dig at the clueless political appointees. The plump one offloaded his frustration to his colleague, an ex-Ciskei ambassador to Pretoria, that political appointees were lazy and just loved their booze. They didn't care about bilateral relations, trade and helping South Africans abroad. All they cared about was the once-in-four years state visit by the president to their country, and using the tour of duty to set themselves up financially for retirement. Che never forgot this conversation. It stayed with him throughout his two tours of duty. It irked him, but he felt that, having served his country in neighbouring Swaziland, which he

considered a hardship mission for its size, London was a well-deserved recognition of his patriotism. Besides, unlike his other comrades who did one diplomatic posting after falling out of grace with the party leaders, he stayed the course, taking his demotion like a man. That's what party loyalty was all about, he would rationalize to himself during low moments of the job.

Stuff the career diplomats! A South African needed help. Period. He dialed his deputy.

"Good morning," Steven answered his mobile, after noticing that it was the high commissioner on the line.

"We've a situation. Mduduzi, my friend, has been involved in a car accident. He's unconscious. That's all we know. I need you to find out what happened," said Che, in an awkward tone that was half-instruction and half-appeal.

Perhaps, the anxiety in his voice came from his deep fear about what could have led to the accident.

Mdu and Che met in high school in Northern KwaZulu Natal where they grew up. They stayed friends for the rest of their lives, save for the six years in the eighties that Che spent in Tanzania in exile. After an Oxford degree, Mdu worked his way up the corporate ladder. A few years on, he was asked by his employer to lead a consortium of black shareholders who would be gifted a third of the insurance company's stocks. Mdu and Che resumed their friendship in the nineties when apartheid ended. To Mdu, Che was Manzo or Manzolwandle, not Che. When Che was fired from his job as premier, Mdu looked after him and his family. Mdu was also there after Che's messy divorce, which financially ruined him.

Zola, Che's new wife, who was sleeping at the residence's guest room downstairs, could sense something was wrong. But she waited for her husband to finish the phone calls. As usual, Che came home late the night before. He was attending a Commonwealth high commissioners' dinner. And Zola couldn't stand the smell of cigars. As a coping mechanism, she would protect herself from those cigar nights by sleeping in the guest bedroom, which was situated alongside the entertainment area, kitchen and the reception areas. The family's bedrooms were all

on the first floor. The residency, a palatial home with four garages and a large garden, was allegedly bought from an apartheid-era army general by South Africa's first post-apartheid government. After one knock, Che opened the door.

"Hey, are you sleeping?"

"What's wrong? What time is it," she said.

"I'm not sure yet, it's very late – just after four."

She switched on the bedside light. Che put his phone, which was the source of light, in his pocket.

"Well, I'm up now."

"I'm on my way to hospital. Mdu was involved in an accident."

"Oh no, is he fine?"

"No, baby. I don't know. He's unconscious. The hospital needs to operate on him urgently. I've to give consent."

"But you're not family."

"I'm all he has in this city... I'm all he has right now. When was the last time he talked to the boys?"

She remembered that Mdu was not in contact with his boys.

"Ugogo will just have a heart attack if we told her..."

"This is serious. It's as serious as a heart attack, in fact. All these people are so far away. The hospital needs a signature, not a phone consent from a person who may or may not be a blood relation."

"I hear you Qwabe. What do you want me to do? Shall I call his partner," she asked, leaning against a pillow.

"No, not until we know what we are dealing with here. Let me be on my way. I'll call you from the hospital."

At the garage, Che changed his mind. A cab would be quicker than waiting for the embassy driver, and safer than him driving himself, risking a diplomatic incident for being caught still reeking whiskey from the previous night's dinner. The cab gave him an opportunity to think. It was always a bad idea to allow visiting South Africans to drive themselves in the UK. That's why the embassy advised against it. What could have happened to Mdu? Was it the usual? Whatever it was, he hoped there were no third parties involved. As the cab was making its way to the hospital entrance, he

reached for his mobile phone, which was half charged. To his official chauffeur, he wrote, 'Greetings! I'm at the London General Hospital. Pse fetch me at 8.'

To his assistant, he typed, 'Hi there. Pse clear my day. Have an emergency.'

Zola couldn't fall asleep afterwards. She rose from bed and made herself tea.

Even before Che's posting to the Court of St James, as the embassy was known, Mdu came to London without fail every year for his two loves: Arsenal games and tennis at Wimbledon. The blue chip insurance firm he worked for knew that those were non-negotiable indulgences. He was, however, prepared to trade off the Grand Prix, his other passion, for soccer and tennis as long as he could still fit in a few days at the Old Course at St Andrews in Scotland. The trips became more regular once he bought a lock-up-and-go apartment in London.

Che, a simple man save for his love of fine whiskey and Cuban cigars, was irritated that he couldn't see Mdu before surgery even though he had just consented to major surgery on him. In what capacity was he signing the consent form: as a friend or as South Africa's high commissioner to the UK? Whatever, Mdu needed the surgery. Desperately.

"Sir, you won't hear anything from us for a few hours. You can go home, and return in another two hours instead of waiting," said one of the doctors in a brash, business-like tone.

The two cups of coffee had sobered him up. He called his chauffeur to come earlier. A shower would do his body some good as he whiled away time before his return to the hospital.

Zola, an MBA graduate, had just seen off their only daughter to school when Che's car drove in.

"How did it go? I didn't expect you back so soon."

"The doctors told me the operation would last a few hours. There's no point in me waiting there. I can go back in an hour or so or just sit in the waiting room with those anxious people," said Che, as he hugged and kissed his beautiful wife.

"Did you see him? Did he see you? Is he awake?"

“No. He’s still unconscious. They didn’t allow me to see him. I’m actually annoyed at this,” said Che.

“Maybe they didn’t want you to see him before the surgery. Perhaps he’s in a bad state.”

“I think those bastards had already cut him open by the time I got there. They didn’t want me to see him just in case I changed my mind about the consent thing...”

“No Qwabe don’t be negative, let’s be positive. How bad is it?”

Despite her education and sophistication, Zola remained a traditionalist at heart. Nowhere was this more evident than in her relationship with her husband who was constantly referred to by his clan name, Qwabe.

“I don’t know. He has broken one leg, fractured his rib cage, and sustained body and head injuries.”

“So, what are they operating?”

“Both the head and body injuries to stop internal bleeding,” he said.

“What’s the prognosis, will he make it,” an anxious-looking Zola asked, sensing the impact of the news on her husband.

“Fifty-fifty, they say,” he said.

After freshening up, he felt new and switched on his iPad as he ate his breakfast – a rare exercise because most of his breakfasts were taken up by meetings with British politicians and other diplomats, especially those from southern Africa. His iPad was better than his phone for reading emails. This was also an opportunity to charge his phone. His eye ran straight to the daily news bulletin, which is a chronicle of all news from South Africa. There was nothing of note. Two items did catch his attention though. Dada, South Africa’s unpopular president, was in hospital again.

‘The president is recuperating from exhaustion. He’s receiving the best care possible from the military. In compliance with his doctors’ orders, he has decided to rest and work from hospital,’ the pro-government paper *The New Era* read, quoting a presidential spokesman.

The other piece was about public hospitals running out of antiretroviral drug therapy.

‘Rubbish,’ commented the health minister.

Dada's failing health, on-and-off hospital stays, including one in Moscow organized by Petrov, the Russian president, was a growing concern and a talking point at diplomatic receptions Che hosted. He had, over time, rehearsed his response well enough that he had no worries about being confronted with it. The anti-Aids drugs issue was new, and more concerning.

'Pse, find out a bit more about the Aids thing – see today's news clippings,' he fired a text message to his deputy Steven.

While his fork was fiddling with a piece of crispy bacon, his eyes rolled onto the stack of British papers on his table. His right hand followed, leafing through them. The usual domestic Westminster politics: aftermath of the proposed withdrawal of Britain from the European common market and royal family gossip about the younger members' private lives.

Che got to the hospital just after ten in the morning.

He sat down outside the ward, sipping his sugarless coffee from a paper cup. His eyes rose to the label at the door of the ward, 'Recuperation Ward'. This was where his friend was lying after the surgery. Promising, he thought.

"Ah, ambassador, err, sorry high commissioner, can we move to this small office," said Dr Singh, a tiny man with dark hair.

He appeared warmer than the Englishman he met earlier whose only concern appeared to be his signature for consent.

"I'm the lead surgeon. I led the team that operated on Masingwane..."

Che chipped in.

"It's Masingwane, but don't worry about it. He will teach you how to pronounce his surname when he's recovered."

"I'm sorry."

"No, no worries. His recovery is much more important than his surname. How did it go? Your colleague said it was fifty-fifty, but that was before the operation."

"Yes, he is correct. The operation went well under the circumstances. I must however tell you that your friend's injuries are very bad. We've managed to stop the bleeding in the head. We are treating the concussion. Without him being conscious, we are not certain of the extent of the damage. We've repaired the damage on the

lung, which was damaged by broken ribs. We've plastered the one leg. He's not young. It will take time to heal. We are not dealing with the other leg yet because it's badly fractured. It's fractured in two places."

"Is he still unconscious," asked Che.

"Yes, but we've now induced the coma. We want him to rest, and recover without pain. His brain is badly swollen. We would like it to normalize before we take him out of coma."

"Thanks Dr Singh, I hear you. To return to my question – how bad or good is it?"

"We are still on fifty-fifty chances of full recovery. We won't know until a few days when he's awake and breathing on his own, and can assess his fighting spirit. Not to be inelegant, treatment is hard when the blood alcohol content is this high. I'm sorry about this," the doctor said.

"It's not your fault. Is there anything medically speaking, cost aside, that can be done to save him or, to use your language, improve the chances to sixty-forty? And can I see him?"

The doctor returned to sit.

"He's receiving the best available care. Without boasting about my team, we have given it our best shot. Moving him elsewhere would be counterproductive, if you know what I mean? The alcohol in his system is way too high, and isn't new, and has done a lot of damage to his body functions. From a medical point of view, as I said, the only injuries which haven't been treated or fixed are on his one leg, head and rib."

"Don't get me wrong. I'm not doubting your competence. I'm grateful he's here. I just want to be crystal clear I understand what we are dealing with..."

Dr Singh intervened.

"It's quite distressing I know. And yes, you can see him. But his face is still swollen. So he won't see you, nor hear you for a few days. Here, take my number and call me anytime you need clarity about anything. But most times the nursing staff is good", Dr Singh said, as he handed out his name card.

He shook Che's hand and stood up again.

Che walked into the 'Recuperation Ward' not knowing what to expect. The room was cold. There was a television set bracketed to the wall with the volume muted. It was stuck on BSkyB news channel. There were two big machines. His friend was wired into one to help him breathe. The other was like a monitor. And then there were drips. The room smelt like a hospital ward. There were two chairs on either side of the bed. He sat on one, right of his friend, and held his hand. Mdu's hand was on the cold side. Yes, the face was swollen. His lips looked dry, and were slightly open thanks to the pipe in his mouth. Back up, the eyes were awkwardly closed. There were only two other sounds in the room. They came from the ventilator. One was a beep, and the other a humming sound. Che sat there wondering how his friend got there, and whether he would make it. If he did make it, how long it would take for a full recovery. He looked around, and stopped himself from entertaining his curiosity about Mdu's other leg which was, like the rest of the body, covered in the hospital blanket. From his chair, he couldn't immediately tell which one it was. He considered talking, addressing his friend. He remembered what's often said about patients who are in a coma – their favourite music can sometimes help them regain consciousness.

Reality hit again: there really was no point in talking. This was a different type of coma. This was a medically induced one. He decided to sit back, and focus on the company of his thoughts. His friend's recuperation was more important than anything. There was nothing in the rules of the new normal that said the television couldn't be unmuted. A text message interrupted his thought process.

'Greetings HC. I've forwarded an email regarding the ARVs issue. In brief, RSA has indeed run out of funds to supply ARVs free of charge. This is because of the economic situation, discussions are underway with stakeholders to wind down the free supply. I'm told that HQ will send all missions a briefing note on this. News hasn't been well received. Regards, Steven.'

'Tks,' he wrote back to his deputy.

He returned to the features in the ward. Something caught his eye. A half opened bedside drawer. Ah, a plastic bag stuffed with Mdu's bloodstained clothes. Mark VI IWC and Chopard wristwatches. Che could never understand why anyone needed two watches at the same time. A smart white casual Gant shirt, which had

turned into white and red. A pair of black Giuseppe Zanutti sneakers, and Tommy Hilfiger black pants and DSQUARED2 briefs. Yes, a black cap from St Andrews Old Course, pullout emblem and inscription announcing the famed Scotland course on the front and the back. Even if there was no other item, the cap, a prized possession for Mdu, would immediately identify his friend. Che remembered his friend's new passions. Golf. Swiss watches. Expensive Italian sneakers. Fast sports cars. And trips around the world on a private jet in which he had time-share arrangement alongside the world tennis champion Roger Federer.

After calling his chauffeur, Che texted his assistant, 'Pse clear all my mornings these next two weeks. Tks.'

Che arrived home, feeling exhausted. His well-kept garden induced a soothing feeling. He was relieved that the young one, the only child they now called their own other than the one grandson, had a play date with a schoolmate. Only his wife was around. Still he dreaded the task ahead.

"Kunjani baba?"

"Fine," he said, lying to his wife, "I don't know what we are dealing with here."

"Okay, we can talk over dinner if you like. It's almost ready."

"No, let's talk. I need a shower before dinner."

"Kulungile, how's he?"

"He's badly injured. I sat there the whole day. I don't know. The doctors have heavily sedated him, and induced a coma so that when the medication wears off he doesn't feel pain. Here's what they are not saying: they're not saying what they plan to do with the other leg, and something about the alcohol content in his blood."

"What happened to the other leg?"

"It's badly fractured – in two places. I think they're afraid of telling me that they're considering amputating it."

"Hawu, is it that bad?"

"Yes, it's serious."

"Then it sounds like we can't not tell the kids and Zingisa? Right, wrong, maybe..." she said, looking up to her husband.

“No, no – not yet. Not until I’ve figured out what we are dealing with here. There are too many moving pieces. For a start, the reason he came here alone is because he needed timeout.”

“Oh, I didn’t know. But surely the boys would really need to know?”

“At the right time, yes, everyone ought to know. The most critical issue here is his recovery. Right now, all he has is us.”

There was much of Mdu’s colourful life that Che tried to keep away from strangers, including his wife. This was to protect everyone, he reasoned.

“Let me know if there’s anything I can do to ease the burden on you,” she said, as she made her way to a spacious and highly automated kitchen.

“Be the high commissioner for two weeks. I’m kidding.”

“Ah, you still have a sense of humour.”

“We can do with a bit of humour even under these circumstances.”

“Can I see him tomorrow?”

“I think it’s too soon.”

The couple had a quiet dinner where they continued the conversation about their friend. They had a lobster salad, and veal chops, and a bottle of Springfield sauvignon blanc.

Che walked into his three-story office building to find two officials – his deputy and political attaché – waiting for him in the afternoon. This was his first day in the office in almost a week since Mdu’s accident.

“I’m sorry HC, Pretoria really would like you to be in this meeting,” said Steven.

“No, it’s not a problem Steven. What I don’t understand is why Tanzania is so greedy. They’ve mining, agriculture and Zanzibar for tourism. Why can’t they just let go of Lake Nyasa to poor Malawi? Is it too much to ask for?”

“I know where you’re coming from. But remember how or what started the First World War? It wasn’t a major dispute. It was a stupid assassination of some Austrian prince!”

“Yes, what was his name again?”

“Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife Sophie, and how many people died as a result of this? More than fifteen million!”

“Steven, you know you owe me. It’s almost a week since I gave you an assignment that’s simpler than resolving the fight between Tanzania and Malawi over some lake. Do I have to start a world war with you?”

Che was now settled although his briefcase was still on the table.

“No, HC I’ve got some information for you. Can we huddle in your office after this meeting?”

Che took a sip from his black coffee.

“Well, President Dada has been asked by the secretary-general of the UN to act as his envoy in the border dispute between Malawi and Tanzania. The foreign affairs minister has asked us, that would be you actually, to see if you cannot facilitate a peaceful resolution between the two high commissioners here, and do some ground work of all the African ambassadors ahead of the Commonwealth heads of government summit,” explained Steven.

With Che half-listening, Steven explained the proposal in detail. The UN had no appetite for a protracted arbitration process. The world body favoured a mediated solution that could be endorsed by the African Union before tabling it at the UN for ratification.

“I see. So where are we,” Che asked.

“We have scheduled a meeting of the two high commissioners. To test the waters, we are suggesting an informal dinner, preferably at your residence.”

“When for?”

“This week. You choose HC.”

“No, this week won’t work. I’m not in a good space to host anyone.”

“Understood sir”, said Steven, looking at the political attaché.

“Thanks high commissioner. The political team is quite insistent that an off-site meeting will enhance the chances of success prior to a formal meeting. We’ve three weeks for these bilaterals, and then CHOGM is another month away,” said the political attaché, a young career diplomat from Limpopo.

“What’s CHOGUM,” quipped Che.

“First secretary I told you we don’t do jargon here,” snapped Steven.

"I beg your pardon, I was referring to the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting," said the attaché.

"Okay, then let's fix a dinner at a restaurant. Not the residence," said Che.

"Thanks for your time," said Steven, looking at the attaché as if to dismiss him.

"Thanks, could you tell her to get me another cup of coffee," Che said, looking at the attaché.

The attaché nodded as he closed the door behind leaving the two senior diplomats alone.

"So what happened," enquired an anxious Che, as he continued another secret briefing with Steven.

"Three cars were involved in the accident. Mr Macingwane's Porsche Cayenne rear-ended a car at high speed, causing it to spin, hitting another one. The Porsche lost control and hit a concrete curb. The impact of the crash caused the Cayenne to be written off at the scene. I have the pictures and the police report," he said as he reached for something in his folder.

"Pictures of Mdu," asked an agitated Che.

"No, HC, pictures of the cars taken by the scene experts. Would you like to see them? Here you go," said Steven, as he handed the folder of images to Che.

"Fuck, this is bad!"

The cars, especially Mdu's, were in a bad state. All airbags had deployed in the three vehicles.

"This is serious HC. How's your friend?"

"Unconscious, but the doctors say the operation went well. What's the condition of the occupants of the other cars?"

"Not good. We have a fatality. A passenger in one of the cars died on the scene of the accident. The others are fighting for their lives. The third car's driver, who was alone, suffered whiplash," said Steven.

"Steven, what the hell do we do? I need this handled."

"HC, what do you want me to do?"

"Make it disappear. I don't know how."

"I hear you. I'll figure something out."

“This cannot go back to Pretoria, you hear me?”

Steven nodded.

The pair was speaking in low but serious voices. The eyes did much of the talking.

Che’s head started spinning with worry. If word leaked out, this would be a major scandal. The British are litigious. But that wasn’t his main concern. Money was no problem for Mdu. That is, if he were conscious. His last Godsend, recalled Che, had been his multimillion rand severance pay from the insurance company. As the firm couldn’t medically board him for his condition, which had become both a liability and an embarrassment to clients and shareholders alike, they agreed to a hefty payment for him to leave his executive position, but stay on as a shareholder. This bonanza came after a union-investment company overpaid him, by tens of millions, in a deal that saw him relinquish control of an engineering business that was run by his estranged wife, Mandisa. Selling off a few properties to raise cash for settlement of lawsuits could be an option. But cash wasn’t an issue. Cash could buy a lot of things. But it couldn’t fully restore his reputation or bring back a dead person. Related to this was the diplomatic ramifications arising from criminal prosecution which would play itself out in the front pages of the British tabloids for weeks on end. How would Steven handle this, he wondered. Was Mdu awake when the accident took place or it was one of those many episodes of blackouts that accompanied his disease?

After work, he decided to head straight to the hospital, as if in search of answers to his many questions. He asked the chauffeur to collect him in two hours. He sat there looking at his friend for signs of improvement. The swelling. Injuries on the head. The rib cage. The plastered leg. And the future of the other leg.

One morning more than a week-and-half later, Che looked at his poached eggs and baked beans. He decided to confront his fears.

“I think we need to speak with Zingisa. She needs to come over. I think it would be appropriate for Mdu to come out of coma in her presence,” he told his wife.

“But what about the kids no gogo,” Zola asked.

“The old lady is way too risky. She’s fragile. She cannot travel. And she is not in the best of health. And, we tell the boys, it’s as good as having told her too. Can we just manage one drama at a time,” he said, half-commanding his wife.

“How much should we tell Zingisa? Do you want me to handle this or will you? Will she be staying in their apartment or should we invite her to the residence?”

She stood up to refill the teapot.

“No I will tell her. Don’t worry about it. I will just tell her about the accident, and that he is in a medically induced coma. The less information she has the better. At least for now, that is. I don’t know this. I’m making it up. It’s all too much.”

“I’m sorry...”

“It’s not your fault. The fatality is giving me nightmares.”

“I can imagine. Let me know how I can help.”

“I think we should ask Zingisa to stay with us for a while. What will she be doing alone in the flat? Staring at those walls day in, day out? No. We’ve to make her feel we are there fully for them during this time. I’ll swing by the apartment before going to work to check it out,” said Che.

“I thought I was coming with you to the hospital today.”

“Yes, you are. Meet me there in an hour,” he said, standing up – leaving his food almost untouched.

It was Che’s lucky day. The conversation with Zingisa, Mdu’s life partner, was brief and cordial. He didn’t say much and she didn’t ask much. Or she was just too shocked and still had to digest the news. Still, he needed to visit the apartment. That too went well. The guard at the entrance knew him well as South Africa’s high commissioner, and Mdu’s friend, and was happy to assist in letting him through the flat with the master key. Che couldn’t remember his name. He knew him as the man from Trinidad whose knowledge of cricket put him to shame. He was relieved when he left that there were no shockers. At least, there were none in the most obvious places like bathrooms. Nor were there human ones. He found the usual things or ‘my young, but not under-age, friends,’ as Mdu liked to call them. There were the 10-

year olds; 12-year olds; 15-year olds; 16-year olds; 18-year olds; and the oldest being a 25-year old. They came from as far afield as Canada, the US, Japan, India, England and Scotland. Mdu loved his whiskey. Relieved, Che still felt that Zingisa should find the apartment inhabitable should she choose to spend time alone. He arranged for the lock-and-go to be cleaned anyway, especially for the cigar smell.

On his way to the office the next afternoon, Che received a meeting request on his calendar from Steven. He was hoping for a bit of good news from his deputy. He hadn't slept well the night before. This had nothing to do with Zingisa's trip that day. He was worried about Zola's reaction to Mdu's condition. She felt the injuries were far more serious than what she heard from her husband. Still, he felt it was a little premature to call Mdu's boys. Perhaps, he rationalized, this should be a joint decision with Zingisa – the only person who was still in Mdu's life and not fighting with him.

Having brought Steven's meeting forward, he walked into his office hoping for some good news.

"Greetings everyone! I hope your day is better than mine?"

"Good day High Commissioner. I'm sorry to hear that. Anything I can do," asked his assistant.

"Not really. One day I too will be fine. Thanks. Steven, make my day," he said, looking at his deputy.

"I'm not sure if this will improve your day HC."

"Well, can it be worse than my wife saying my friend is lifeless and I'm understating his condition? Give me some good news!"

"I'm sorry to hear that. Is he still in a coma?"

"No, but he's sleeping a lot. What's new Steven?"

Steven lowered his voice.

"Well, we have new information about the fatality on the scene. We have established that the fatality is a nine-year old girl..."

"Who's we, Steven? I made it clear to you I only want you on this. No other officials," Che said, looking sternly at his deputy.

"This comes from my source at Scotland Yard – a crime scene expert."

“No-o-o-o-o!”

“I know,” replied Steven, trying to show empathy.

“A nine-year old, Steven. How do we make this go away? How far are you?”

“I’ve managed the police side. But I’m not sure how the family plans to deal with it. My suggestion is that you, er ... your friend that is, gets professional help to manage this proactively.”

“What do you mean he gets professional help?”

“A lawyer and a professional crisis communications manager to handle the fallout.”

This was beyond Che’s imagination.

“Please come up with names for me. I need this ASAP. His partner arrives tomorrow morning. I need to have answers for her. Is that clear?”

As Steven left the office, Che began wondering what he had done to invite this on himself. His friendship? His job? Being at the wrong place at the wrong time? This weighed heavier on him than knowing, for sure, whether his friend was dead or alive or his failure to assess more accurately his prospects of making it. Implicitly, he trusted Steven. How would a lawyer and crisis communications expert make it go away? Pay the family? Deny culpability? In Mdu’s absence, so to speak, who makes all these calls? Him? Zingisa? The boys? Mandisa?

Over a South African dinner of boerewors, green salad and bread rolls and a bottle of Rupert & Rothschild blend, Che looked defeated. His body was still exhausted from a sleepless night. The priority was discussing Zingisa’s arrival. Thank God public transport worked efficiently in London.

“I’ve prepared the guest room for Zingisa,” Zola said, referring to the guest quarters with an en suite bedroom and TV room.

“I’m sure she’ll be comfortable, only if the circumstances were different,” Che said, lazily stirring his glass of wine.

“I know. But the kid sort of changes things, does it not,” she asked, referring to the young British girl who died in the accident.

“But I think we should discuss it first with Zingisa as to whether we inform the boys and other family members.”

"I'd been meaning to ask you this: is Mdu divorced or divorcing or separated from Mandisa? I've never had the courage to ask Zingisa about this," asked Zola, as she cut her boerewors.

"I think Mdu and Mandisa are as good as divorced," he said after another sip, "they've been living apart for four years now."

"But what caused it?"

This is a door he tried to never open. But it was now wide open.

"According to Mandisa, she just couldn't take it anymore. Mdu wasn't recovering. As she put it to me once, she dreaded having to tell the sons their father had died after another blackout. The last straw was when Mdu crashed his car into a police station after a blackout. He was helped out by the intervention of the police minister. He couldn't have kept his job after that. Fortunately, he paid for the damage to the station on his own. And the car was a write-off," he said, putting down his knife.

"The boys stayed, and persuaded him to seek help. Because of his seniority and need for absolute privacy, the firm was happy to pay for him to be admitted to a world-class substance abuse clinic in Karachi," continued Che.

"Did that work?"

"Well, it did for the three months he was there, and a year after. I suspect he got depressed from loneliness after Mandisa's walkout. The boys cut him off after another incident."

"Incident," Zola exclaimed, betraying surprise.

"It was all over newspapers. He went to New York, representing the company in an international insurance conference. After a hectic night, he missed his speaking slot the next morning, and then fought with the organizers when he insisted on delivering his speech. They had security to escort him out of the hall in full view of everyone. It was embarrassing," he said, looking uneasy.

Zola remembered reading the story. But she didn't know it was about Mdu.

"Yes, it was him. Painful," he said, "the injury to his reputation was irreparable. It was the beginning of the end of his corporate career."

"So he didn't resign," as she stood up to fetch malva pudding for dessert.

“No. Resignation was just corporate speak. He had to go. He tried to stay, but they wouldn’t let him, not after the monies they paid for the stay in Karachi and the New York incident.”

Che was traumatized by having to recount this story to his wife. Only he and a few common friends knew the story.

“But they paid him well to leave. He doesn’t have to work for the rest of his life,” he continued.

“What’s money without peace of mind and, worst of all, family to enjoy it with?”

“That’s the tragedy of the whole thing. I wonder what the boys’ reaction is going to be to this turn of events.”

“Clearly, Zingisa knows all of this?”

“She does. Or, at least bits of it. She’s been very supportive. Supportive as a partner, but hasn’t been successful to get him on the mend like all of us.”

Before they knew it, they had opened another bottle of the red blend.

Che reshuffled his day some more to ensure Zingisa was settled. For her benefit, he arranged that the lead doctor saw her and took her through Mdu’s evolving condition. After freshening up, Zingisa headed for the hospital with the Gumedes. On the way to the hospital, Mdu tried to prepare her for what lay ahead.

“Zi, I’ve been going to Mdu for weeks now. It’s hard to tell an improvement with my eyes. But Singh, the lead doctor, believes there are improvements. I’ve agreed with him that he should stay in that hospital for as long as he needs to and provided he’s out of pain. We can deal with other things,” Che told Zingisa, a chartered accountant by training.

“Bhut’ Che, I really appreciate what you and Zo have done for us during this time.”

“It will be difficult at first – he sleeps a lot but he’s not in pain. But I’d like you to concentrate on what the doctor says, and not necessarily what you see. I suggest we, you that is, speak to Singh first before going to see him,” Che continued.

Zingisa looked strong, composed and in charge after the doctor's briefing. The Gumedes respected her wish to see him alone. After what seemed like an hour, they decided to take their waiting to the hospital's cafeteria.

"I think it was a good idea for her not to live in the apartment alone," ventured Zola.

"We just have to think ahead – the boys, and ugogo," he said.

"And Mandisa?"

"I think Zingisa and the boys should lead on this. Even though Mdu's not divorced, we cannot ignore the obvious situation," he said, before adding, "Zingisa is the main partner and caregiver."

Che decided to use Zingisa's presence to catch up on work. But he couldn't really stay away from Mdu's accident. He tried, as much as he could, to keep the personal from the professional. He asked for coffee with Steven at a bistro near the high commission's offices. By now, his anxiety was almost visible. His growing reliance on his deputy was obvious and very concerning.

"Hey Steven, how goes it?"

"HC, I'm fine. But I'm sure that's really not your question. You want to know about the case."

"Oh, yes of course. That's my fulltime job these days," replied Che, as he took a sip from his coffee.

"Here, I've two names for a PR agency to retain, and two for a criminal lawyer to appoint. We've to appoint one," said Steven, as he handed out resumes of the cleanup experts to Che.

"I've heard of this guy," said Che, pointing at the name of one communications expert, "but I've seen his name being linked to celebrities. Mdu is not a celebrity, certainly no one knows him in this country."

"But we've to bear in mind what this is about. So far we are dealing with two issues: first and most important, the death of a nine-year old girl, and second, who's to blame for the accident and the fatality. The police report, as you saw, points fingers at the first car, Mdu's car, as the main cause of the accident."

"I see, but why a celebrity PR agency?"

A waitress interrupted them to take their order. Steven ordered soup of the day, and Che a slice of zabaglione cake. Steven resumed the briefing of the cleanup strategy.

“This is not a political story or a diplomatic incident. This is a tabloid story. You know the tabloids love a story of tragedies like this. They are cruel. They’ll go to town every day. Toss in an element of xenophobia and involvement of drugs and you’ve a deadly cocktail. So the idea is to keep this far away from the tabloids or bury it deep inside the daily headlines. The worse turn we don’t want this to take would be for it to develop a new campaign against drunken driving,” said Steven.

“I see. And the lawyers, I’ve never heard anything about any of them.”

“There’s really nothing to choose between these names. These are top-notch lawyers. Both have represented high-profile people like bankers, some of the royal family and peers.”

Che’s cake arrived. Steven took a sip from his decaffeinated double espresso. His soup came a few minutes later, allowing him to continue.

“As soon as you’ve made a decision. The earlier, the better. Also, it will depend on availability – that’s the only separator really. These guys give their all,” Steven added.

“Let’s appoint the paparazzi guy and you can choose a lawyer of your fancy. Cost?”

“Now, none of us on government pay can afford these guys’ services,” said Steven, trying to make light of the serious situation at hand.

“Let’s meet them as soon as we can,” said Che after cleaning the plate of the remainder of his cake, “we need to go and earn our civil servants peanuts.”

“Great. Am I paying or you are, I can afford coffee?”

“Oh no, I can, even with my struggle pension. Steven, I’m grateful. I want this not to make papers at all, that’s the first prize.”

On his way to the office, Che wondered if his involvement of his deputy constituted conflict of interest and/or abuse of power. This was helping a fellow South African, and neither Steven nor him had spent a single cent of South African taxpayer’s money. In fact, Mdu had his money. Problem was: in his absence, who had access to it? What if he didn’t make it?

Zingisa spent almost all day, every day, at the hospital. But the Gumedes couldn't postpone the other fronts of the crisis around Mdu's accident. They broached the subject. She was dressed in a brown understated Vivienne Westwood cardigan and a matching wool dress, her last birthday gift from Mdu.

"Zi, how are you holding up?" asked Che.

"Bhuti, as best as I can, under the circumstances. I'm glad I'm here. It makes a whole lot of difference. I've been thinking about spending some time in the flat."

"I don't think that's a good idea. In fact, we insist you stay with us for as long as you need to."

"Yes, we do. In fact, we wouldn't have it any other way," stepped in Zola.

"You and Zo can go to the flat during the day. Have you thought about the issues I raised with you?"

"Bhut' Che you've raised a lot of issues. I don't know about the money thing..."

"No, that's not an issue for now. The issue I'm more concerned about is, it's been almost a month now... er ... we've to make a call about ugogo, the boys and Mandisa..."

"Oh yes. I've thought about that. I think only gogo needs to be told. The kids and Mandisa walked out on him when Mdu needed them the most. I'm sorry. This is how I feel about it."

Her demeanour changed almost instantly as if she had just seen an enemy.

"But remember, Mandisa and Mdu are still married on paper..."

"And they haven't said a word to each other in years. Instead, she got the kids to walk out on him too. Sorry, bhut' Che, I can't allow that," she said, her voice rising.

"We don't have to make a decision today. But you know my feelings about ugogo. It will just be a disaster to tell her."

The conversation ended inconclusively.

As he retired that day, Che was hoping that Mdu would be taken out of coma to make this decision himself. In fact, instinctively, he knew what Mdu's choice would be. He had underestimated the level of animosity between Mdu's loved ones.

"This is getting more complicated than I thought," he told Zola, "suppose we do tell the old woman, who tells her? She still believes Mandisa is the wife."

"I think you'll have to be the one. I'm sure Zingisa will understand. I'll run the idea by her during the course of the day tomorrow," said Zola.

Che was woken up by a call from the hospital just before six the next day. The hospital wanted him over immediately. Che was nervous. Zingisa was panicked by the call. And Zola was the only optimist.

"Maybe the hospital wants another procedure done on Mdu, and since you're the one who authorized the first one, I'm sure they felt that he needed to sign off another one," Zola tried to reason.

"That makes sense. If it was anything else, they would have just communicated it over the phone," said Che, trying to remain calm.

Dr Singh was waiting for them in the briefing room when they arrived.

"Morning everyone," he said, "have a seat."

"Good morning Dr Singh. What's happening," enquired Che.

"We had a good night. He was progressing well. Early this morning we picked up what we thought was an infection on his liver..."

"And," Che butted in.

"It's much more than an infection. His liver is failing as a result of a prior condition. We could operate on it, but the liver is in a bad state for surgery."

"What now?"

"We continue to treat it, and escalate dosage if the failure progresses. If this doesn't succeed, then we might have to consider a transplant. I don't need to tell you the implications of going that route."

"What are those," stepped in Zingisa.

"For a start, this significantly delays the whole recovery process. It's not ideal to do a transplant after an accident or emergency surgery. Of course, we have to find a compatible donor. And that can take time."

"What now," asked Che.

“For now, we continue the treatment. But we needed to inform you of the turn of events. You don’t need to sign anything.”

There was no visible difference – either way – to Mdu’s condition that the trio could notice. So they allowed the doctors to continue. In the cafeteria, they had the come-to-Jesus conversation.

“Zingisa I think we need to make the call about informing the family,” said Che.

“Bhut’ Che, I’m his family”.

“I know, you are. I mean we need to tell his mother at least, and...”

Zingisa hesitated for what seemed like at least a minute before responding, “Okay, we can call her.”

“No, we cannot!” Che said, getting slightly agitated at Zingisa’s lack of judgment, “what I mean is that it has to be in person. She’s too old, and sickly.”

“How do you propose we do that?”

“Zola and I think I should tell her in person, maybe tomorrow, before it’s too late.”

He regretted the last bit of his sentence.

“But only her, not anyone else!”

“I’ll leave you ladies here. I have to attend to some work issues before I get to the office.”

As he left, he felt a sense of relief that Zingisa didn’t make much of his unguarded comment.

His official car drove Zingisa and Zola. In the cab he switched on his phone. A text from Steven.

‘Greetings HC. Update: lawyer, PR appointed. Let’s discuss costs later. Steven.”

Wow, some good news, at last.

Che hadn’t seen MaKhumalo, Mdu’s mom, in a long time since his posting to London. During his Swaziland tour of duty he made time to see her when time permitted. He wondered how she would receive the news he was carrying. After

freshening up at his Edenvale home, he drove to Morningside where the old lady lived, courtesy of Mdu. The house, Mdu's old home, was large and well maintained. Mdu told the guard at the gate he was there to see MaKhumalo. The old lady was happy to see him. After settling down, he got onto the subject of his trip.

"Ma, he is very sick. But he is receiving the best care in the world," he told MaKhumalo, a long-term hypertension sufferer.

"Why don't you bring him home, Manzo," she asked him.

"The doctors have advised against it. They want him to recover first," he said, assuring her he was in good hands.

They drank tea before Che left.

Che's assessment was that the old lady appeared to have taken it well. Perhaps it was because he didn't give her the uncensored version – the head injuries, a fractured leg, a pierced lung, and, now, a failing liver.

When he switched on his phone at Heathrow International Airport, the first text message that downloaded came from an unsaved number he didn't readily recognize.

'Manzo, how could you do this to me? That's my husband. I'm still married to him. No other woman will make decisions about my husband's life. M.'

What the hell had he got himself into, wondered Che. Whilst they hadn't been close after the separation, Che was staggered by the tone and content of Mandisa's message. He phoned his wife to inform her that he was on his way to the residence.

Zingisa was still in hospital when Che arrived at the residence. The couple discussed Mandisa's text message alone.

"Unbelievable, does she know about the apartment," Zola asked Che.

"I doubt. He only bought it two years ago."

"Mdu is alive. The tone of the message suggests otherwise. She walked out on him right? What claim does she have on any of these decisions," asked Zola, showing she had just taken a side in the unfolding saga.

"We have a crisis in our hands. Where's Zingisa's headspace?"

"We didn't speak about it further. Do we keep the text away from her?"

“Yes. It’s best we take it one step at a time.”

Steven was waiting for him in the office when Che arrived. Che rushed in to close the door behind his office, ensuring privacy.

“HC, I got a call from the PR guy. He says the family of the nine-year old has leaked the news of her death.”

“What does that mean Steven?”

“It means one of the tabloids has got the story. They have the name of the child, and the involvement of three cars in the accident. I’ve an assurance from him that only the death of the girl will be reported. The police aren’t commenting. The lawyer is convinced that this is handled,” he continued.

“Good Steven, thanks,” said Che, as his phone began ringing, “keep it contained, will you?”

The call was from Zingisa.

“Bhut’ Che, Mdu’s liver has failed,” she said, sobbing.

Che’s mind started racing. Could this be the end? He remembered their childhood, the happy memories of growing up in rural simplicity, and the separation during his exile years. He remembered how Mdu protected his mother from police harassment during his years in exile. And then the reunion, and the family holidays in Tanzania, Zimbabwe and Zambia to reminisce about the struggle days. His eyes became teary. He didn’t realize this until his assistant handed him a box of tissues.

Whatever It Takes

The walk up to the first floor conference rooms of his lawyers' newly completed fifteen-story Sandton offices was normally a must. It supported the running regime he adopted to deal both with his age and, lately, his rising stress and depression. Walking up the stairs was also a security measure. It was safer than opening an elevator's door to an assassin's bullet. His long-standing bodyguard, a former police officer, often told him never to turn around to strangers calling out his name. Assassins, the bodyguard would say, 'always carry a picture of the target and their clue that they have found their man or woman is when the target responds to their given name.' That's what Janus Waluszc did to Chris Hani on April 10 1993 before pulling his trigger. On this day, late as it was, Mziwabantu asked his three bodyguards if they could take a lift instead. Grudgingly they obliged, only after ensuring that the danger to their principal was minimal.

As the door swung open to the reception area, Mzi, dressed in The Movement's tracksuit and running shoes, gave a military salute to his lawyer's assistant as he made his way through the conference room. His criminal lawyer, David Marcus, was waiting for him.

"Mzi, have a sit; anything to drink," said his criminal lawyer who was standing alongside Mzi's wife, "you look like a mess!"

"I've hardly slept in the last three days. I'd like a stiff one or coffee or an energy drink. But all this will just turn me into a double zombie," Mzi responded.

The lanky struggle hero spotting an Afro hair kissed his wife Sibongile.

"So, what is going to be," asked Dave.

"Do you have red wine?"

"Yes, we do; but you're not gonna take it and then take sleeping tablets, are you?"

"Never."

"Alright then," David said, as he walked up to the bar area outside the conference room. The wife asked for still water.

The well-stocked bar was used to entertain clients every Friday afternoon. Mzi had been there a few times. The last time was just over a year ago, when he was invited to the firm's Christmas party. The national civic association, The Movement, which he led, was a longstanding client of the firm.

David returned with a bottle of wine and still water and put the drinks on top of the rectangular mahogany table.

"Here you go, Optima, straight from the Cape wine lands, easy but very fruity. The finest from WOC," a beaming David said.

"You're capturing me fully now, what's WOC," asked Mzi.

"It's the Stellenbosch mafia. It's white oligopoly capital, the people you guys should really be worried about. Not the small fries called WMC, yesterday's funny money," said David.

"I can take on white monopoly capital or your WOC any day, but I can't deal with the snakes within The Movement. They smile with you whilst turning the dagger in your back," said Mzi.

In the many years that he was president of The Movement, he survived several challenges, including a mutiny, to his leadership. The last one was a few months ago, when he saw off a challenge from his deputy, Nomsa, a young ambitious gender rights activist with legs that seem to go on forever. After it became clear he would win on election night, Nomsa, spotting her neat dreadlocks, retreated on the advice of her lobbyists and, instead, stood for her old position, returning as his deputy to resume another term of an uneasy leadership partnership. But the truce didn't last long enough before the wrangling resumed.

"Mzi, my brother, I understand your frustrations very well. But politics is your game. I'm just a stupid Jewish lawyer," he said, trying to get Mzi to stay focused on the case at hand.

"Wow, this WOC product isn't too bad at all," Mzi said.

David handed thick files to Mzi and Sibongile before being interrupted by Mzi again.

"Dave, can you please ensure that my body men get Nando's before they close," he said, referring to his three-man security detail.

“Don’t worry, I will sort it out. I know big men like you carry no wallet these days.”

They all laughed as David asked his assistant to organize grilled chicken and chips for the bodyguards.

David, dressed in a smart grey suit, white shirt and a black tie, tried to get the meeting off the ground.

“Since our last meeting we’ve reviewed the complainant’s case against you, and assessed the implications. What we have so far is a complaint of sexual assault launched by the employer against you and the association. There’s no police case opened. She claims you harassed her over a period of weeks, and this led to the rape, er alleged rape, at the stadium last month. My guys...”

Mzi interrupted.

“Dave, does my wife have to listen to these details again? Please man, have some sense, I beg you.”

“No, sweet, it’s fine. This is important,” said Sibongile, a trained sangoma and a professional nurse.

“I’m sorry again that you’ve to go through this. You’re a good woman.”

Mzi took another gulp at his wine.

“Mzi, please forgive me. Time is running out. As I was saying, my guys are working on a few things. A, we need to get CCTV footage of the night at the stadium. B, we need to check one more time that there’s no police case opened or an occurrence book entry. And C, I’ve asked the guys to ask MTN for your mobile records...”

Mzi’s phone rang. He remembered his mistake. He ordered all phones and iPads to be removed from the room as a security measure.

“Dave, I hear all that. This is political, and personal. What I don’t hear you say is how we deal with the political. What are those well-paid guys of yours doing...?”

“We need to be focused here. We can discuss politics later. With respect, right now, we need to figure out whether you’ll be going to prison over this or lose your job...”

“I don’t care about the job and I’ve been in prison before. No one should get away with this conspiracy,” Mzi said.

“Politically, I think you need to step aside from your role as chairman of the Integrity Commission of The Movement in light of these allegations...”

Mzi jumped in again, banging his hand on the table.

“Never, playing straight into their hands. I’m not guilty. Standing down from the IC is an admission of guilt... I don’t agree with you. Whose brilliant idea is this anyway?”

“He’s right Dave,” Sibongile stepped in.

“It’s mine and the team’s idea, but I strongly believe it’s the right thing to do. You’re not standing down, you are stepping aside.”

“Dave, don’t play semantics with me. This is my life, my career, these arses will have me for breakfast if I did any of that. Excuse my French. What we need here is a proper political strategy based on credible intelligence. Who’s this girl, and who does she work for,” he asked rhetorically.

The complainant worked for him in The Movement as his executive assistant, a newly created position to help him deal with his many commitments outside The Movement.

“Can you at least think about two things? One, your IC role which has nothing to do with your job as head of The Movement, but it’s affected by the nature of the allegations. And two, even if this isn’t leaked you need to think about front-footing this. Lastly, so you know I listen to you: I will get a private investigator on this right away. We can get together first thing in the morning,” Dave added.

“We can’t turn the other cheek,” said Sibongile, making sure the couple was bracing for a bruising battle.

The meeting ended. Mzi asked Dave to text him the name of the wine as the couple left the office.

It was freezing in Johannesburg. Temperatures were minus seven-Celsius degrees. The heater in the room was making no difference. Nor did the extra blanket supplied by Mapungubwe, a hotel in downtown Johannesburg where Nelisiwe had been booked by her lawyers. She decided to take a bath to warm herself. The bath did much more than warm her up. It made her reflect on the unfolding saga.

She thought this problem was too big. She came to Johannesburg to start a new life. She left Richards Bay to forget about the municipal manager and his wife. Now she was no longer sure of anything. Her husband, Eric, was supportive after the Richards Bay episode. Too supportive in fact, given what transpired.

As the water soothed her skin, she felt all alone in this hotel room. Her flat would be a better place than this characterless room. Were her kids safe? What would her parents say? Her church? The few friends she had?

Maybe she should just drive back to Ngcobo, her parents' village, for some time out. A new set of questions took her away from the water and heater in the room. Would her parents disown her? Her dad was angry, but supportive, after she accused her boyfriend of rape. Her mum forgave her, though she felt let down. She didn't mind what her good-for-nothing brother was thinking of her, for he was sponging off her parents' money. She worried about her elder sister, who was quick to judge her. She recalled that her sister never believed the rape story. That hurt Nelisiwe. Bitch, she thought.

By now, the water was lukewarm. Her thoughts turned to Mzi. If she had her phone, she would contact him. What did he think of her? What did his wife think of her? Taking her phone was an ultimate act of insanity, she concluded.

The questions went on forever. She dozed off in the middle of this fruitless inquisition. The soothing water in the bath went cold, but failed to wake her up. It was the sound of the banging on the door that woke her up.

It must be the damn lawyers, she thought to herself, as she looked for a robe.

She remembered that she took the bath to warm herself, not necessarily to wash. Now, the water was ice cold. The banging on the door continued.

"Fuck this," she said peering through the hole in the door, "I've nothing on, let me dress up, I'll be with you shortly."

Jan-Jan Pieterse was her stout Afrikaner criminal lawyer. JJ, as he was known among his clients, took her case because he felt women abuse by the powerful politicians needed to stop. This was a stand against abusive African patriarchy.

"Don't take the whole day. Die son trek water," he barked back as he left for the coffee shop at the hotel.

Mzi was exhausted by lack of proper sleep. Still, he insisted he would like to take his thirteen-year old daughter to school before seeing Dave.

“Daddy, mum says we will be fine,” said the young girl as they drove off in her dad’s bullet-proof car.

The car was procured by The Movement as an extra security measure after his car was nearly run off the road by two unknown assailants.

“Oh no my princess, you know mum is a woman of prayer and spirits. She loves us too much,” Mzi said, trying to divert attention from his scandal.

He was unsure whether she knew. His elderly kids, five boys from previous relationships, would know. But they were grown up. He didn’t want to bother them yet.

“Why’s she not saying so then,” asked the young girl.

“This is just another way of saying so my baby. What’s happening at school today that you can tell me?”

“Usual, usual, usual. Classes, homework and netball.”

“We’re here, kiss daddy goodbye, I love you.”

“I love you more daddy.”

As he reversed out of the parking lot, he heard an irate parent hooting. Mzi didn’t see the car. He came out to apologize, and the woman in the car recognized him and apologized profusely and asked for a selfie with the politician.

Nelisiwe, a beautiful high school graduate in her thirties, came to Johannesburg after Eric found a job as a business development executive for a courier company. Both were unemployed for years before then. Or, more precisely, no one would touch them after running a few background checks. Their credit records read like pornography. In five years, they had no less than nine bank accounts. All were forcibly shut down by the banks after running into a few thousand rands worth of arrears. The only car they owned, a battered BMW five series, wasn’t registered in their names. But it wasn’t their chaotic finances that blackballed them. It was the talk in town that constantly proved a deal breaker after job interviews and background checks.

It was only after they reluctantly changed their names that he landed this job. As a proud Zulu man, he was hugely conflicted to adopt someone else's name. Apart from the protracted process of acquiring a new identity for himself, Nelisiwe and the kids, there was also the more complex challenge of dealing with his ancestors. His clan name changed too, and he was now forced to assume new clan names that would serve as a conduit to communicate with his ancestors. In any case, he rationalized that he would slaughter a goat to appease his real ancestors once his finances stabilized. They would understand, he thought to himself.

Money wasn't as good as the title suggested. In fact, the pay was more at the level of trainee manager than manager. But it was better than nothing. And, he understood his boss' logic that this was about a proverbial second chance in life.

Mzi, who lived in the hilly south of Johannesburg, arrived at the Sandton high-rise offices of his lawyers. The building was one of many, including insurance, energy, retail, mixed-use developments which were being built in and around Sandton. On his way, he wondered whether The Movement could continue resisting the trek to Sandton.

"Mr Marcus your seven am is here," announced Dave's assistant as she ushered Mzi, with three bodyguards in tow, into the conference room.

"Did you manage at least two hours of sleep," enquired Dave who was wearing a dark-blue suit with a matching light-blue shirt and red tie.

"None whatsoever. But I did think about the IC idea. Instead of resigning or stepping aside, whatever else you want me to do, I will just stop attending meetings whilst this crap is continuing. But I won't hand these vultures and liberals a sharp spear to stab me," Mzi said.

Mzi was dressed in a leather jacket, white T-shirt and jeans and sneakers.

"So, you mean I've failed to persuade you, and this also means what I'm about to say is a moot point as well?"

The assistant, a blonde slender candidate attorney, walked in to bring coffee.

"What are you about to say," asked Mzi.

"We were suggesting you issue this statement today."

The statement was a holding statement prepared by lawyers, announcing that he would take special leave due to serious allegations that have been levelled against him by a junior employee.

“Over my dead body. Never. Allow a kangaroo court to unfold in front of my eyes. Never. I’m being framed here. Can’t you see that,” he asked, banging the table.

Dave tried to be calm.

“The fact that my own colleagues kept the so-called complaint away from me for days, if not weeks, shows that they’ve been preparing to ambush me, not give me a fair opportunity to defend myself. I will not go down without a fight. So, we are where we were at the last meeting – no progress. I suggest we meet again when you’ve something tangible to discuss with me, such as who are this woman’s handlers,” he said, as he took his jacket preparing to storm off.

The meeting ended abruptly. Dave understood Mzi’s frustration. To him, however, the criminal case and the perceptions of the matter mattered more than winning another political battle for his client.

JJ was getting increasingly agitated when Nelisiwe appeared from the lift.

“I was about to send a search party for you!”

“Môre, hoe gaan dit? This is Gideon, my associate on the case,” JJ said, introducing his partner.

“I don’t think the hotel thing is working for me. I can’t sit here and watch TV day and night, without my phone. I didn’t kill anyone,” she said.

“Well you’ve not killed anyone. But what you’ve started is a war, which may result in someone’s career being killed, literally. You’re dealing with powerful people here meisie. You hear me,” JJ tried to speak some sense.

“I didn’t rape myself,” Nelisiwe pushed back at the mature man.

“We are on the same side here. Don’t fight me. We need to just go through a few things today.”

“Like what now, I’m tired of repeating the same story. He raped me, period!”

“We need to go through the SMSs, and other communication between you and him to establish the nature of the relationship you’ve had with him. Frankly, we are worried,” JJ said, as he took another sip of his cold coffee.

Most of his time was spent inside the smoking area of the bar, adjacent the restaurant, instead of the restaurant.

Gideon handed Nelisiwe a printout of her SMSs, and a separate folder with what looked like an itemized billing with two highlighted numbers of incoming and outgoing calls.

“Before we proceed, can I use my phone to call home and check messages,” Nelisiwe said.

“No, you can’t. It’s not here, it’s in the office. We don’t want to take chances. The phone is a tracking device. Our enemies will know your movements. We can’t be that stupid. You can use mine though,” JJ said, passing on his phone.

JJ ordered more coffee and white toast. Gideon asked for cappuccino and a vegetarian omelette made up of peppers, tomato and onions. And Nelisiwe ordered an English breakfast – fried eggs, macon and baked beans and toast – and skinny cappuccino.

“Hello,” answered a woman on the other side.

“Hi mum, it’s me, Tenjiwe,” Nelisiwe said.

“Oh no, have you changed your numbers?”

“No, I haven’t. This is my lawyer’s phone.”

“Lawyer, what lawyer? Is everything okay Tenjiwe?”

“Mum, it’s a long story. I’m fine. I will explain when I see you.”

“Are my grand-kids fine?”

“Yes, mum, they are all fine,” Nelisiwe lied to her mum.

“Then, why do you need a lawyer?”

“Mum, I will explain when I have time. Something happened at work. That’s why I need a lawyer.”

“I don’t understand...You’re making my sugar worse with these secrets. Call when you’ve time then,” she told her daughter.

Nelisiwe was equally anxious.

“No, mum, don’t hang up. Are you alone?”

“Your father is still resting. We have not seen your brother for days. you know that one. Why?”

"I need to come home for a while. I don't know how long for. It's important. I need to leave Joburg."

"No, I don't think it's a good idea..."

"What... that's still my home!"

"That's not what I mean, I mean..."

She didn't think the conversation would be this hard.

"I mean it's not a good idea for you to come home," her mum tried to explain.

"Why not?"

"It's difficult to explain, but trust me it's best for you not to come this side."

"Why?"

"How about Richards Bay mntanam," she asked Nelisiwe.

"I can't go back there. You know that."

Her mother didn't have all the details of how and why Nelisiwe left Richards Bay. She remembered that Johannesburg was welcome news for the young couple.

"We didn't want to tell you this. Not on the phone."

"Tell me what ma? We now keep secrets?"

"He's back!"

"Who's back?"

The conversation was getting tortuous for both women.

"A few months ago we received news that he might be released. We didn't believe it," her mother continued, "two months ago he was released on parole on good behavior."

"Who?"

"Vuyo."

Nelisiwe's heart almost stopped. This was not what she wanted to hear. Not now, anyway. She last saw him years ago when he was sentenced to a long jail term for statutory rape.

"He came to see us with his lawyer. Your father and I saw him."

"What does he want?"

"He told us he wanted to see you. We told him we lost contact with you."

That was a lie. Even though the communication was erratic, the parents knew Nelisiwe lived somewhere in Johannesburg. Occasionally, they called – and informed her of deaths and births in the village.

“Tenjiwe, we can’t go back there,” cautioned the old woman, “he told us he wanted to tell you that he’s forgiven you for sending him to jail.”

“What,” Nelisiwe asked, looking at the lawyers with one eye as if to check if they could hear this conversation.

They were too far, but JJ’s disapproving look was evident. Time was running out.

“Yes, that’s right my child. We don’t believe him. We think his motives are not pure.”

“It was dad who asked me to open the case,” said Nelisiwe, who was now sitting down in an empty chair as she tried to reason with her mother about the case – an impossibility given the logistical constraints.

“You were just fourteen at the time and daddy was just protecting you,” the old woman said.

JJ yelled at Nelisiwe.

“Neli, we don’t have all day.”

Looking subdued, she walked back to the table to rejoin the lawyers.

“Are you okay, your food is cold,” enquired JJ.

“Don’t want it anymore,” she said.

“Oh no, who did you call, and why are you upset now?”

“It’s my mum. Nothing really.”

“Okay, let’s talk about the case Neli. There are some worrying discoveries we’ve made...”

“Like what JJ?”

“Two things worry us. There are way too many calls to each other after hours, and...”

“And what,” she responded angrily.

“And the tone of the text messages is far from professional. We also found nudes from your WhatsApp phone to his...”

“JJ, are you my lawyer or his?”

“Of course, we represent you. We can do this some other time. Calm down and call me when you’re ready.”

The old lawyer knew a trick or two about getting information and client co-operation. He deferred the conversation, although he was concerned at the impact of the new discoveries on his case. The lawyers left without getting much done.

Mzi, an honours development economics graduate, had just finished his evening prayers, and was getting ready for bed when his mobile phone rang. His daughter kissed him goodnight, as he reached out for his phone. He took the call from his lawyer.

“Mr Marcus, it’d better be good reason to call me so late. How are you broer?”

“It’s good and bad, Mzi, but it’s urgent. The Movement wants to suspend and discipline you for gross misconduct over the incident. Now that’s bad.”

“So what’s good about it,” he asked, rather calmly, “we know they want to lynch me.”

David continued.

“The good news is we’ve gone through all your telephone records now. I must say upfront they’re embarrassing, but they confirm your version of events. We’ve a copy of all texts, images and videos for you. My suggestion is that your wife shouldn’t see these...”

“Chief, I’ve already apologized at home. This is an epic blunder. The worst I can do now is to wreck my marriage by keeping secrets. She needs to know.”

Though convinced that his wife needed to be an integral part of the fight-back plan, he left the living room toward his messy study as if to spare her feelings.

“I get you. There’s more good news. The stadium’s CCTV footage shows her going into the gents after you. The question is...”

“What’s the question?”

“Who invited her to the football match?”

“Dave, you’re telling me everything I know. Tell me what I don’t know. Who’s her handler, and what do they want?”

“We don’t have that information yet. But what we’ve found is that the car they own is registered to a municipal manager somewhere in KZN, a white guy. He doesn’t want to talk about it. But he did tell us that the couple had accused him of rape and then asked him for a million rand to keep this from the municipal authorities.”

“Now, how is this relevant to me?”

“It’s good for our case, it’ll tear the credibility of the complainant apart. The BMW was a settlement in lieu of the million rand ransom. Let’s huddle in a day or two to discuss our response to the suspension notice, and maybe by then our spy will have answers on the politics of this as well.”

“Good work, the politics is more important to me than the legal stuff. I can’t fight in the dark,” said Mzi before terminating the call.

Mzi changed his mind. Instead of joining his wife in bed, he walked down to his cellar to get a bottle of his eighteen-year old Irish whiskey to help him mull over David’s call. He switched on the television for English football.

What would the suspension and charges mean to his political ambition? Should he go through the disciplinary action? Or should he just resign? What would his daughter think of him? Could he survive this at all?

The score on television was disappointing. Another loss by Liverpool. He returned to his thoughts. Should he leak the news of his impending suspension or his response to The Movement’s notice of their intention to suspend him as his fight-back strategy? Who could be after him? Could it be his deputy president in the association? Would disclosing the complainant’s history be an attack on women’s rights? And, would this alienate The Movement’s female members?

JJ was growing increasingly concerned about the strength of his client’s case. But for him it wasn’t about money. It was more about principle. He took on the case to stop what he saw as abuse of power by politicians, and he felt duty-bound to see it through.

On their way to downtown Johannesburg, where they had booked Nelisiwe, his associate reminded him of a more cynical approach to law.

“Jan-Jan, lawyers don’t lose cases, clients do,” Gideon tried to joke with his mentor.

JJ failed to see the humour in this. Instead, he reminded Gideon that the interests of the client were above everything else. Then an uneasy silence returned.

Nelisiwe looked sprightly that day. At least she wasn’t ambushed. The meeting took place at a more decent hour than others, which were either too late in the day or first thing in the morning.

“Nels, we are approaching a critical point in the case. We need to have our ducks in a row. The Movement has served him with the notice to suspend. If we get much done today, we can allow you a few days out of town, although we don’t advise it,” said JJ.

“Sure, anything but this hotel”.

“Where would you go?”

“I really don’t know.”

“One of my clients has a game farm in Limpopo. We can put you up there for a few days. Let me know,” JJ offered.

“What are we dealing with today?”

“What would you say is your relationship with other officials of The Movement?”

“Good and professional, I’d say,” answered Nelisiwe, not knowing the relevance.

“We want you take a look at the highlighted number,” said JJ as he showed Nelisiwe an itemized bill of her calls and text messages, “whose number is this?”

“This is DP’s number,” replied Nelisiwe.

“DP?”

“Yes, the deputy president of The Movement.”

“Oh, there’s one more thing: Your ID number is the same as one Tenjiwe Mabongo,” said JJ, before spelling out the name.

He continued.

“I’m not saying anything. But for now, I’m more worried about the number of calls to – and from – the association’s deputy president. Is there anything you’d like

to tell us? Why do you talk to her so frequently when she has her own assistant, doesn't she?"

Nelisiwe seemed nervous.

"Well, not really ... I don't; she has taken me to lunch once or twice, and once she gave me a voucher to do my nails and get massage treatment. That's all."

"When was this?"

"I can't remember, but it must have been after the last conference."

"Alright, but then this is beyond 'good and professional'. They may ask you at the hearing what you discussed and the spa thing. We need to know our story. Let's discuss this tomorrow. Meantime, I will get my assistant to call you about your game farm getaway and to schedule tomorrow's meeting."

In the car, JJ was furious at the emerging picture, but sought to contain it. After all, he just asked his associate to prioritize the interests of the client above all else. He asked Gideon to look at the phone records closely.

In the car, JJ asked Gideon to look at the phone records closely.

"We must find a way of checking location."

"Great. I'll speak to our friends in Midrand," Gideon said, referring to the headquarters of a mobile company.

If they got records, they could then connect the dots – between Nomsa, the deputy president of The Movement, and their client, if any.

The drive from Sandton to downtown Johannesburg was normally short after the morning rush. But today wasn't. JJ was annoyed that Nelisiwe didn't respond to his calls or the hotel's. Even more infuriating was their find. The case was at a critical stage.

Did she leave the hotel against his advice? Did she leave town? Where for? The instructions were clear – if she needed anything, she should just ask his office's assistant. The last time was two days ago, when another bag of clothes was delivered for Nelisiwe to change.

"Morning beautiful one," he said to the lady at the front desk at the hotel, "when last did you see my lady friend from room one-o-three, I'm battling to call her from her room?"

“Morning, my colleagues from the nightshift tell me that they saw her having dinner with another lady at the restaurant last night,” said the receptionist.

JJ asked the receptionist to describe Nelisiwe’s dinner guest.

“She was very tall, and she had nice dreads. I think she had a red T-shirt on with something written on, but not the label,” she said.

The description worried JJ. But he brushed the thought aside.

“Did she return to the room or leave with the other lady?”

“I don’t know, we’ve not had any room service orders, but we can check her room. If you like, I can authorize another card key to open the room?”

“That would be lovely, but you must come with me since I’m alone today. My associate is elsewhere.”

After several heavy knocks at room 103 went unanswered, JJ decided to open the room with the hotel clerk. There she was. Nelisiwe was sleeping. Alone. Still. No pulse. Clothes lying neatly on the couch.

Payback Time

Dada sat very uneasily, sipping his honeyed rooibos tea at Amina's mansion in Americah, an affluent private estate. His presidential motorcade, including a high-tech mobile clinic, was lining up the street with engines running, to the annoyance of the remaining neighbours. They could never understand why Amina never visited Dada in any of his many official residences.

"Don't like this one bit," she said, "we must see Petrov. He will know what to do."

"Not with one leg Amina. I came back from the war without losing a limb," Dada said.

"Petrov is a friend," Amina added, trying to allay Dada's concerns about his new condition.

Petrov was expecting the pair to visit him. It was the Russian president who convinced Dada that his leg couldn't be saved. The diabetes was at an advanced stage. Petrov's doctor's opinion was the fourth Dada solicited as the disease was threatening his capacity to do his job as president.

The two politicians were introduced by Amina, and became close personal and political friends over time. Petrov's opinion was only second to Amina's in weight.

"The Fair Lady is in good shape," said Amina, referring to her mid-sized private jet, but also mischievously contrasting Dada's condition with the plane's.

The aircraft was at Dada's disposal for discreet trips around the globe. In the three years since Dada became president, it made no less than eighteen trips to Moscow and Luanda. Prior to becoming president, Dada used it to campaign for elections that saw him managing just above 50% of all votes – a major achievement considering that his party had lost 10% of its support to a breakaway grouping aligned to his late brother.

Amina came to South Africa from Abbottabad in Pakistan just before the end of apartheid. This was after her husband took two other wives in quick succession. She settled with her two daughters in Americah, a sprawling suburb between

Johannesburg and Pretoria. Her husband, Anwar, visited them once a year, if at all. She was an obsessively private, intense and modest person – her daughters were her world. The house staff called her Mamina.

Her contact with the world was limited to the estate's body corporate meetings and prayer meetings. Then there were her charitable activities. Every Thursday, without fail, she would make rounds with the gardeners, dropping off fresh vegetables to all neighbours in the complex and households in the nearby squatter camp. Although the property was large, the three-storey building was classy but not over the top but the exterior was a design eyesore. The rest of the space was taken by the garden.

As well as contributing her fair share of levies, which were paid a year in advance, the estate made a fortune from her through penalty fees incurred from her refusal to comply with the plethora of tedious building regulations. With all the elaborate security arrangements, the homeowners' association insisted that the fencing, if at all, should be kept to just above one metre high to build a strong sense of an intimate community and to showcase the beauty of each property. The high wall around her property, which almost blocked the view of her house and the garden, was the first reason for a penalty. Worse, the fence came up before construction of the house could commence. Once the house was up, another fine was slapped on her: the side facing the street of the third floor had no windows. Light came through a bullet-proof glass panel on the roof. After years of fines, she found a semi-permanent solution to her problems: each time there was a complaint, she would commission a valuation of the complainant's property and then offer to buy them out at twice the market price. Within no time, the twenty-five house estate was shared between her and nine other households.

She met Dada at a Hindu charity event, a few years after the end of apartheid. Dada, then deputy president of the ruling party, was clinically depressed.

'Swing by when you have time,' Amina told Dada on the margins of the event.

It would be months before Dada called, sparking off a long but controversial friendship.

'She's my sister,' Dada would tell anyone who asked.

Talk was that the two were more than just friends or she was more than just his spiritual guru. Others speculated that the ill-understood relationship was the reason for Dada's divorce from the mother of his two sons.

After the assassination of Chief, Dada's elder brother who was president, Dada withdrew from the public scene and spent months at Amina's house. One evening in her house, she broached the subject again.

"I think party elders are correct, you should take Chief's place," she said.

"Never -- I stand accused of killing him," he responded emphatically, "never."

This was a sore point for Dada. The conviction of a former liberation guerrilla, Mgence, who confessed to having pulled the trigger, failed to quell the rumours. Dada was interviewed by police, but never charged for Chief's murder.

"Sleep on it," Amina said.

Clearly the chamomile tea, she had served him, wasn't succeeding to calm his nerves. Nor was the plate of vegetables and sumptuous angel fish, which was her trusted way to his heart.

The conversation was deferred due to the death of Amina's husband. Together with her daughters, they left the country to bury and mourn him. Winding down the affairs of her husband took longer than anticipated.

Dada's path to political and economic power was accidental, but spectacular. As a young man, he loved nothing more than a nice time consisting of soccer and music – all things that left young girls drooling over this tall charmer of hearts. School wasn't his thing. That was Chief's forte. In fact, it was through books that his nerdish brother's political consciousness was nurtured. Even before the arrest of their father, Chief was aware of his country's worsening political situation. The arrest of his trade unionist father, as part of a wider clampdown by the apartheid regime, didn't come as a surprise to Chief. His biggest concern rather was the rapidly deteriorating quality of education given to the black child. If he didn't do anything about it, he would end up as a mine clerk or teacher, at best. So, a year after his father's arrest, he left the country for exile to save himself from a low-quality education.

With his father and brother immersed in politics – one behind bars and another in Europe studying industrial engineering – Dada's life was lonely. His only brush with the South African law was when he got arrested, twice. In the first incident he was arrested with a bunch of drunkards from the mine hostel, and in the second he was picked up after being suspected of being an illegal immigrant due to his darker-than-average skin.

'Can't believe this shit,' he barked at his friend after the arrest, 'I speak Zulu, Shangaan and Fanagolo better than these fools.'

This incident offended his sense of decency. But it didn't change his world outlook much.

One night he overheard co-workers plotting to flee the country for exile. Without thinking much, he joined them when they left the country for Swaziland where he would spend years waiting for instructions from exiled leaders. With no post-school education, he eked out a living through helping out locals with their farming and other menial chores. When his instructions did come, he took a job as a cross-border funeral undertaker, helping comrades flee South Africa using the business as cover to and from Swaziland. During this time, he met and fell in love with a Swazi woman, Thuli, who would bear him two boys. Joseph, the elder son, became an investment banker, and took up a post in London. Manzini, the younger son, tried many business ideas without luck before following in his father's footsteps and selling access to his father.

When he returned from exile, Dada wanted to leave politics for business. He had become disenchanted with politics and wanted the good life. The good life needed skills and money, and he had none that he could use in business. What he did have though in abundance were networking skills. Through these he connected white businesses with the new rulers. The boom times occurred after Chief took office. Dada made a fortune, peddling his brother's name – without Chief's knowledge or approval. When the country's founding president retired due to ill health, Dada reluctantly agreed to deputize for his brother, only in the party. He preferred the informality it brought.

Dada arrived at Americah slightly anxious. He understood Amina needed to wrap up Anwar's affairs. All he knew was that if it was important Amina wouldn't discuss it on the phone. Discretion was everything in their relationship. He agreed to meet Nikki, Amina's eldest daughter. After settling down with his cup of rooibos, Dada read the note from Amina, which ended with, 'much love, A.'

"Who's Petrov again," he asked Nikki.

"He's returning to Russian politics as president. He's prime minister now," she answered, respectfully. Secretly, she was surprised at his apparent ignorance of global affairs.

"She doesn't give up, does she," he said.

He wondered what was on Amina's mind. How would a visit to the Russian leader persuade him?

This visit to the Kremlin changed the course of history. A deal was struck. Dada would allow the party to choose an interim successor to complete Chief's second five-year term. And Dada, instead, would campaign for both the party's and country's leadership elections. This would enable the noise around his brother's assassination, or his suspected hand in it, to die first.

The campaign was grueling. The intra-party leadership was hostile. A group loyal to Chief left to set up a rival outfit to contest the next general election. A swirl of rumour – about blood on Dada's hands – continued, shrouding his campaign in negativity. His worsening diabetes didn't make the campaign any easier. What did help, however, was Amina's generosity – especially by making travel easy through the Fair Lady. Petrov's advice, including sending his shrewd political strategist Sergey to assist Dada, was indispensable. The fifty-something percent reflected the effort they put in the campaign.

In office, Dada discovered that governance was a hassle, much more than he anticipated. It wasn't just the meetings, bureaucracy and dress code.

The first major fight was with Dada's private office. This office was a bunch of handpicked appointments a president could make. Most were party loyalists and, in Dada's case, a few members came from his large, extended family. The office acted as a shield for the president, and as a gatekeeper. Its head, Nkuli, a long-standing

associate of Dada's with no high school qualification, was more powerful and feared than Dada's deputy. Her enemies, of which there were many, called her the real president or deputy president or most enduringly the co-president or 'the co' (pronounced as 'coh').

As was her wont, Nkuli walked into Dada's office unannounced one day, looking visibly worked up to confront him about the latest indiscretion.

"She's my friend," Dada said, trying to conceal his irritation, "everyone knows that."

"We're in government now. She can't just call as she pleases and order staff around," the Co insisted, staring at Dada who was sitting behind his stately desk with three telephones and a stack of papers awaiting his signature.

Dada wouldn't have any of it.

"Last time. All her meetings must happen at home. No discussion!"

The fight between the co-presidents was sparked by Amina's outburst at being made to wait at State House, the president's office, and having to schedule meetings like everyone else. Nkuli left the office subdued.

Dada wasn't feeling entirely victorious either about the fight with his co. As he made his way to Americah that evening, his mind was everywhere. Although he had no solution for defusing the tension between his two women, he knew the co had a point. Once the motorcade had pulled into the estate, Dada made his way inside the architectural monstrosity. He was met at the door by Amina with the usual embrace and, yes, that ill-defined kiss on the mouth.

He brought up the subject of the fight with the co. Ever so resourceful, Amina proposed a solution:

"Don't trust them anyway," she told him in a dismissive tone, "and those buildings of yours are bugged."

On most things, especially security arrangements, she was as obsessive as Dada, and her instincts were mostly correct.

Dada's private office now extended to his official residence. As well as the support staff there, Dada moved one of his trusted bodyguards to his home as personal liaison with Amina's family. The second appointment was a young lawyer.

“That chap from Mthatha, with problems,” she said, trying to jog Dada’s memory.

“We can’t use him,” said Dada.

The young lawyer, Clement, who worked in the president’s office, had been fired after an internal disciplinary hearing found him guilty of making an inappropriate pass at the co. A labour court reinstated him with full benefits after a year at home.

‘Improbable that a junior employee, much younger than the employer representative, could orchestrate sexual harassment against a superior two layers above him,’ the presiding judge told the court.

Clement was summoned to a meeting with Amina and Dada.

“My brother,” Amina told him, as she explained the job.

“Government spends billions buying services every year,” she continued, “the president needs to know what is being bought, from whom, you hear me?”

“Every Friday, you need to give him a list of all tenders put out by the state,” she said. She wanted to eliminate any doubt in the young man’s mind about what was expected of him.

Dada sat quietly through the meeting with eyes glued to Clement. His worries about crossing Nkuli lingered. But he kept them to himself as occupational hazard that came with his affection for both women. Still, for now, it appeared peace was restored.

Petrov’s return as president was not what he hoped it would be. Opposition to his increasingly dictatorial rule was rising. Street demonstrations were commonplace. These were normally brutally crushed by riot police. In one incident, an elite unit killed over hundred protesters, mostly young people, sparking off global condemnation. Unperturbed, Petrov, through a decree, banned independent press, an irritation that was streaming images of running battles with police overseas.

Whilst he tolerated domestic resistance to his rule, he resented public criticism of his administration by western powers.

Calls were growing for the Russian leader to be tried by the International Criminal Court in The Hague. Amidst all this controversy, he called Dada.

"I should be asking how you are my brother," said Dada, with a tinge of embarrassment that it was his mentor calling, not him.

"Good, you say, under the situation, in anyway, yes," he responded calmly, showing he was in charge.

"Aggression," he continued, denouncing the western outcry at his suppression of riots.

"Anything I can do my brother," Dada offered.

He remembered how helpful Petrov had been in his rise to power. Lingering ominously at the back of Dada's mind was a question he had no guts to ask. Was Petrov behind the death at a London hotel of a dissident spy, Yuri Chekov?

"Collaboration," said Petrov, without being specific.

The call ended with Dada still wondering what its purpose was in the first place. He was rather surprised about how composed his Russian counterpart appeared to be in the face of opposition to his rule. Russian-South African trade was low, but there were no concrete plans other than talking it up to do anything to increase it. Soon after becoming president Dada shepherded a deal that would see a Russian state-owned company, headed by Mikhail, Petrov's son, start a shipbuilding and maintenance operation in South Africa. Talk in diplomatic circles was that the project, which was awarded without an open tender or approval by parliament, was just a ploy by Dada and Petrov to siphon off South Africa's taxpayers' funds to the Kremlin. The other theory had it that the project was a cover story for spying on western powers' activities.

Returning from an overseas trip, one of few without Amina, Dada made his way to Americah. The presidential motorcade, which was delayed by an accident on the freeway, finally snaked its way to Amina's mansion.

Dada knew it should be important if the matter couldn't wait for another day. His rooibos was already on the coffee table in the spacious, stately living room, with couches and cushions to rest arms. The youngest daughter left the room, giving Amina and Dada some privacy. The intimate nature of the kisses and hugs between Dada and Amina made the daughters uncomfortable, even after the death of their

father whose picture, alongside those of other family portraits, continued to be on display on the bookshelves.

Amina seemed worried. She wore no makeup – in public and private. She attributed her beauty to her mother's good genes. But this time, she looked a little older than her real age. Perhaps it had to do with the subject at hand. She switched off the television, and launched straight into it.

"It's Nikki," she said, rattled.

"Nikki," an exhausted Dada wanted to know.

"The journalist knows she's working from your residence," she continued, "they're running the story tomorrow."

"Argh, I've got good news," he said, brushing aside Amina's concerns, "you're now a naturalized South African and you can keep your Pakistani passport."

As well as assisting her mother's charitable activities, Nikki ran a private grooming service. One of its best-known clients was Manzini. Though she had offices around the country, she was spending a lot of time at the president's official residence.

Dada's strategy of dealing with bad press was nonchalant. 'I don't read South African newspapers,' he told anyone complaining about negative reporting, 'one day I'll write my own book.' He hardly read newspapers, even the rare set piece interviews he gave.

The couple went on to have dinner. Over lamb curry and steamed spinach from the garden, they discussed the forthcoming trip to Angola.

The Fair Lady's twin engines were idling on the military tarmac when Dada's motorcade arrived at the military base. Turmoil continued to characterize Dada's relationship with the two women in his life. The president's use of a private jet was a source of concern to Nkuli who felt it was her duty to protect him from allegations of impropriety.

'She's my friend,' he would retort to Nkuli about Amina, 'you must meet her sometime. Besides, there's no state money.'

Nkuli let this one slide too, only to open another door for more indiscretion by the daughters.

The trips on the Fair Lady were an opportunity to catch up and strategize for Dada and Amina. Dada was on his way to Luanda to launch a media company owned by the president's son, Mondlane, who was named after one of Mozambique's guerilla fighters.

"I like the boy," Dada said, as the Fair Lady began its approach towards Luanda.

"Good boy. Much to learn from," Amina said, as if reading Dada's admiration for the Angolan boy whose business empire included hotels and clubs and now a media company.

At the airport, Dada only shook the South African ambassador's hand before departing for the event. The South African party was swiftly whisked away by the host's motorcade. The South African presidential motorcade, specifically flown for the event by a military cargo jet, followed the Angolan one.

At high speed, the motorcade made its way through the slums into the Angolan presidential villa, an island of wealth in a sea of poverty.

After tea with his Angolan counterpart, the party made its way to the event in a single motorcade, ignoring warnings from the South African ambassador that 'this isn't protocol.'

Mondlane, a short Lisbon-educated economist, met his father and Dada at the entrance of a glitzy five-star hotel casino, which he owned and the venue of the launch. He was grateful for Dada's gesture, a suggestion by his father. His guest speaker preference, though, was Rupert Murdoch, a British media owner.

"Today marks a major step in our journey as Africans to tell our own story through our own channels," he told the audience, which was made up of Angola's military-political elite.

"We need to share these lessons of success. We need to learn from each other," he continued in a speech peppered with Portuguese phrases.

He envied what the Angolan first family was doing – it appreciated that political power without economic power was useless, and lines between private wealth and state finances were necessarily blurred.

After the festivities, the South African visitors made their way to the airport. As the Fair Lady took off, shadowed by the official presidential jet including a cargo plane, the pair continued their reflections on the day's events.

Amina asked for a glass of Gyejacquot rosé and Dada ordered a glass of the Fair Lady house sauvignon blanc. For his main meal, he ordered salmon whilst Amina settled for a green salad.

"I like the 'I'm an Angolan patriot' concept," said Amina, as she sprinkled a dressing over her salad.

"Will never work in our country," said Dada, "I can't even change a national anthem...a song!"

After his election, Dada tried to change the national symbols, including proposing a debate on a 'proper African name for our country instead of the current geographical location.' He failed.

After a brief nap, the Fair Lady began its descent at the military base, ending one of many trips between the two countries.

Dada's term in office was rough. During Chief's term of office, South Africa's economy grew faster than at any time in the history of the country – by as much as 7% in one year – and more South Africans were employed than at any point. More people, especially blacks, could afford cars and better education for their children.

Unlike his brother, who was in relatively good health until his demise, Dada's health was poor. The diabetes was advancing rapidly, as the economy was failing. A few months later, military doctors recommended the amputation of his one leg. He asked for more opinions including one from Nikolai, Petrov's doctor. The economy shrank, slipping to third place in Africa. Angry South Africans took their grievance over lack of basic services to the streets. A thousand protests, mostly violent, were recorded each day. Crime was on the resurgence. A new feature was kidnappings of children of the new ruling elite.

With state revenues running low, his government was forced to do the unthinkable – it stopped paying social grants, and ran out of money to supply free drugs to HIV-positive people. A daily tabloid reported, 'HIV-positive people in revenge stabbings.'

The Fair Lady landed in Moscow just before midnight. A combination of painkillers and fatigue ensured that Dada spent much of the flight time sleeping.

Only the trip between the airport and Petrov's family villa reminded Dada of his new normal – one leg.

"Good plane comrade," Petrov said, as he hugged Dada, "not drink?"

"This stuff will kill you one day I swear," answered Dada, referring to Petrov's love of Japanese whiskey especially Yamazaki single malt.

Petrov's cats, Pushkin and Sputnik, were already quarantined to avoid another allergic reaction by Dada.

"Not pain," asked Petrov, who sounded sprightly and fresh for such an hour as the trio settled in one of his three reception areas.

Most of his meetings with Dada, especially ones arranged and attended by Amina, took place without aides, including interpreters, which meant he relied on his limited English.

"What I do for you," asked Petrov.

Amina, dressed in a black Michael Kaplan casual costume and a pair of Jimmi Choo flats, jumped in to explain the problem. Poverty. Unemployment. Inequality. And riots.

"No. No problem," he said, with a fat Cuban cigar dangling between his fingers.

The smell annoyed Dada. He wondered how Petrov maintained a clean set of white teeth after years of smoking. By now the room was almost grey with smoke.

"You rich," he continued, referring to South Africa's vast diamonds, gold and platinum deposits, "we mine oil, yes, you say?"

Dada wondered where this was going.

"We have riots every day," Amina stepped in, in an attempt to give direction.

"New object, yes. Football, yes... how you say, optimism, nationalism," he said, trying to offer a solution.

"But you're organizing the next one," Dada jumped in, referring to a forthcoming international football tournament.

"I get it. Something to excite us and restore pride, like the world cup, right," Amina said, trying to follow the Russian leader's logic.

“Pride, pride, pride,” Petrov added, sounding animated that Amina was finally getting his drift.

He pulled out a four-page document and referred from it as he elaborated on his idea of getting South Africa out of the slump. At the centre of his proposed solution was an ambitious project to galvanize nationalism by constructing a space tourism project. The pair listened intently as Petrov explained how this would help stop street protests.

“You believe not, yes,” asked Petrov, looking at his South African counterpart.

“We do,” butted in Amina.

Dada asked a few thoughtful questions about the idea, including its cost and job implications, and the availability of expertise to construct such a high-tech programme.

Before they left, Petrov called in Nikolai to speak with Dada about the surgery. The short physician, sporting a bushy beard which made him look like a university professor, walked in.

“You good Mister President, how you feel,” Nikolai said, “can I...”

Dada felt uneasy, but played along as the man inspected the wound which was still fresh. His pants had yet to be altered to accommodate his amputee status.

“Curing good,” Nikolai remarked before helping Dada up.

Petrov walked them out.

On their way back home, they spent time interrogating Petrov’s idea of restoring South Africans’ pride. It didn’t immediately make sense. The numbers didn’t add up.

“We can’t finish a simple power station on time ...Hundred billion rand,” asked Dada, betraying his skepticism of Petrov’s idea.

If he turned this down, it would be the first time that Dada rejected counsel from his Russian mentor.

“Results, not process,” Amina said, trying to get his friend to focus on the bigger picture.

Dada began to doze off as the Fair Lady flew over the Crimea. However, this wasn't before he remembered an earlier conversation with Petrov about the annexation of Crimea. Even though Russians were feeling the bite of western-inspired sanctions and the collapse of oil prices, the campaign to annex Crimea had united Russians, making them forget their economic hardship, according to Petrov's logic.

'That war,' he told Dada, referring to the cold war, 'painful, painful.'

His return to the presidency – anchored on the Crimean campaign – was aimed at addressing the cold war wound. This reasoning, laced with Petrov's passion, made sense to Dada. However, he dreaded the task ahead – having to convince the ruling party to buy into his first African space tourism project.

Only fifteen thousand high-tech jobs would be created during the five years of construction.

"Well, I'm sure we can increase this number," said Amina when her friend woke up to interrogate the idea further as the Fair Lady was flying over Africa.

"And Russia will fund it," she added, as if the loans would be cost-free. Sensing further hesitation on her friend's part, Amina offered to source in Indian experts to work with Petrov's team to spruce up Dada's presentation to the party leadership.

Grudgingly, he agreed, before returning to his sleep.

Amina was growing impatient with Dada's poor sense of style and fashion. He was successful, she felt, but didn't look the part. Nikki's grooming service couldn't fix this problem. He couldn't go to his next birthday, to celebrate his seventieth, with his shocking sense of style. While he was growing as a leader, he was slow to take on style tips. The suits were still oversized and his shirts were baggy. This all made the expensive Fabiani waist belts and luxurious wristwatches look out of place.

At an umpteenth party planning huddle, Nikki thought she had found a perfect gift for the birthday boy.

"Raj'd love it here," she told her mother, as they sat on the patio looking at their vegetable garden, the size of which was now approximating a small subsistence farm in the middle of suburbia.

“Raj,” Amina asked, wondering what the excitement was all about with the background of birds singing, “aren’t we discussing gifts.”

“He’s got nothing to do, dad would do this,” she said, in support of her proposal.

In his twenties, Iraj left his full-time job in a Karachi textile company to work for Amina’s husband, as a personal tailor, at their Abbottabad homestead. Prior to Anwar’s death caused by pulmonary cancer, Iraj was making clothes for the three sons of the young wives. When the patriarch died, the bonds with the boys loosened – they liked the perks of a private dressmaker, but didn’t want to pay for them. Iraj was forced to take up a new job at the age of fifty-three. This deterioration of his living standards pained Nikki.

“Can’t just dump him on Dada. Look what I got him,” Amina said, as she redirected her daughter’s energy to Dada’s gift. She opened the box.

“You never did this for daddy,” Nikki said, as she inspected the 170th limited edition version of a Patek Philippe wristwatch.

The watch-making company had made just seven for select connoisseurs, and Dada’s, with his DD initials, was one of the special seven.

“I gave him two daughters, and you know how he thanked me – don’t...” Amina replied with anger in her voice.

Nikki couldn’t believe her mom would shell out two million dollars on a timepiece for a man other than her dad. They agreed to pick up on the discussion about Dada’s birthday later when tempers were cooler. She stood up to fix herself a cold drink.

Dada had been too busy with overseas travels, preparations for the party’s conference and his approaching birthday to pay attention to growing discontent in his private office. There were two unfortunate departures: first, his parliamentary adviser, and second, his co left over the fallout from allegations of abuse of state resources.

The official opposition had filed a parliamentary question, seeking to confirm leaks that the president was using a private jet, shadowed by his military jet and sometimes a second plane, for state and non-state travel. The adviser, an Afrikaner

career civil servant, prepared a factual response to the enquiry. The co revised and fudged the response, inviting more direct follow-up questions from the opposition.

The Afrikaner, who was nearing retirement, resigned in protest.

Mysteriously, days later, Nkuli quit too, leaving her work phone behind. Dada was arriving at Americah for a meeting when the news of Nkuli's resignation arrived.

"Turn back," he ordered the driver, before returning to his mobile phone.

"What do you mean she's not in the office, find me her address," he fumed.

"Find her address for God's sake," he ordered the bodyguard.

He was seriously upset, sweating through his grey jacket. The motorcade made another turn, this time driving towards Johannesburg. What could have upset her so much as to leave without notice, he wondered. As the drive seemed to take forever, another thought crossed his mind: he actually didn't know where the co, a trusted lieutenant, lived.

As the motorcade passed Johannesburg on the left, and made its way southwards, the long drive made him realize the depth of Nkuli's commitment over the years. Every day, the single woman drove more than 100 kilometres to work, leaving late at night.

Then there was another snag: the area hadn't been swept by an advance team including the bomb squad. At the entrance of the complex, Dada lost his cool.

"It's me," he said, peering through the window.

Recognizing who the VVIP passenger was, the guard swung open the gate, allowing the entire contingent to drive in. Neighbours in the complex were peeping through the windows at what seemed like a combination of a funeral or wedding procession.

The bodyguards jumped out of the vehicles to try and ensure their charge was safe. Nkuli met them at the gate.

"It's safe," she said, stunned by the guest.

She was home alone, only with the helper who was overwhelmed by the unfolding spectacle.

Dada shuffled out, grabbing his crutches to limp towards the house's entrance. Although the house was simple, its interior was warm and homely. Its simple, yet stylish, decoration and furnishing gave it a personal touch.

Dada jumped straight into the subject.

“Rooibos mama,” she told her helper.

“What’s it,” Dada said, before commanding her, “I want you back.”

Shocked though she was at the presidential gesture, she decided to stick to her guns.

“With respect, baba, we can’t go on like this,” she said, “either we’re running the country according to protocols or she is.”

At the back of his mind, Dada could tell what this was about, but he pushed aside the thought. She went on.

“The opposition is on our case because of her ---“

Even though he didn’t know the details of the opposition’s inquiries, he knew enough that the bad blood between the two ladies was unbearable. The problem though was that he didn’t have a solution.

“You’re asking me to ---“

“It’s me or her,” she said.

“I want – I need – you back at work,” he said, without offering any credible, well-thought solution, “you run the office.”

He took his last sip of his rooibos tea as if this would conclude an inconclusive discussion he had just had with one of his loyal aides. He couldn’t believe the pushback Nkuli, much younger than him, had put up. Calmer than he was when he arrived, he was driven back to Americah. The road construction on the freeway and cranes atop Sandton high-rises offered no solution to his predicament.

Dada was due to leave the country for the annual United Nations general assembly meeting in New York later that week. He looked forward to the trip. He was scheduled to travel with the co – the first such trip since her resignation. The trip would also be an opportunity for dinner with Petrov and, maybe, coffee with his Angolan counterpart. A day before the trip, just before the conclusion of the daily intelligence briefing, the co slipped in a note, ‘min of prisons wants 2 c u, after this.’

‘?’ Dada wrote back.

‘Dunno. Says NB,’ came the reply.

Dada showed a thumbs-up sign, as he tore up the note.

As the spy and security chiefs shuffled out of the oval-shaped conference room, Dada looked at his prisons minister, who was also the country's justice minister.

"Mr President," Chairman said, looking sheepishly at his boss.

During the struggle against apartheid, Chairman acted as an intelligence officer after a crash course with Uganda's intelligence service. This was when that country's spy agency was well regarded – among Africa's top three. In Dada's cabinet he was known as the keeper of secrets. His codename in exile was Mao, but everyone just called him Chairman. This stuck with him after exile.

"She stays," said Dada, in reference to Nkuli.

The three eyeballed each other before Chairman opened a large brown file. He pulled out two copies and handed them over to the co-presidents.

"This is Mgence's parole application," Chairman said, leading the discussion.

This was Mgence's second application for amnesty since his incarceration. The first was filed during the interim leadership that followed Chief's murder. When consulted, Dada's family, including Chief's wife, filed an objection to the application. Dada never made a submission.

"Thought it was rejected," Nkuli said.

"Yes, but this is another cycle – he can apply again," explained Chairman.

"We reject it again," she said, "what's the problem."

According to the parole process for capital crimes, the prisons and justice department reviewed applications and made recommendations to the president. This was after taking into account the victims' family submissions.

"What's special now," Dada stepped in.

"He claims to have new information. He says you'll know it, sir," the spy continued it.

"Rubbish," Nkuli shot back, "what does he want ---"

"A meeting with the president."

"Never," she said, "not protocol, since when does the president meet killers?"

"Go hear him," Dada intervened.

"I have Mr President," Chairman said, before being interrupted by the co-presidents.

"And ---" the co-presidents said.

"You, sir, ordered Chief's killing, he says."

"Insanity, you know this minister? Don't waste our time," she said in an attempt to end the conversation.

"Where's the process now," Dada wanted to know.

"We've had a preliminary hearing with his lawyers and interviewed him. In terms of process, the only missing step is to canvass the view of Chief's family and, of course, decide on the meeting with you, if you wish..."

"No meeting, we're done here," said Nkuli, as she stood up.

"Sir --"

"I said no meeting!"

Dada kept quiet as Nkuli and Chairman duelled. He had dreaded this moment since Chief's assassination. Could this be the end of his presidency, he wondered. How would it play out if he granted the pardon without seeing the prisoner? What would his family, especially Chief's wife and children, say? How would Petrov deal with this? Should he proceed with the UN trip or delegate it to the foreign affairs minister? Would this be the one thing that united the two women in his life? Would they see the bigger picture?

Dada considered not proceeding with the UN trip to focus on the new turn of events at home. His foreign affairs officials advised against it. The assembly itself wasn't important. What was important, a foreign affairs advice note explained, was diplomacy on the margins of the world event. Three of the world's eight industrialized countries, still South Africa's major trading partners, were led by newly elected leaders. Reluctantly, Dada agreed to proceed with the trip. After all, this would be an opportunity to speak with his mentor.

Apart from inviting Chairman to accompany him on the presidential jet, Dada instructed that Amina be included. Nkuli tried to get out of the trip, but remembered how high the stakes were. This trip could determine whether their administration survived or would come crashing down. Amina made a compromise as well. Nkuli's

desperate act of spiting her rival failed when the captain told her that there was a strict instruction from the minister of war that the president wanted Amina to sit with him in the front part of the repurposed plane.

“Don’t worry madam, there’s no economy class in the presidential jet, we’re all equal here,” said the pilot.

This irritated Nkuli. She slept through the flight to New York. Ordinarily, she would watch movies and chat with the bodyguards, ministers and other guests. She didn’t even eat her supper.

In New York she was invited to a breakfast between Petrov and Dada at the residence of the Russian ambassador to the UN. She was annoyed Amina seemed to know everyone including Petrov’s wife, Katrina.

As they walked into the large house, Nkuli was staggered by the opulence of the artwork adorning its walls. Interestingly, only pictures of the Russian monarchy were on display.

She was saddened to see Dada walking with great difficulty, supported by crutches as the two leaders walked in. The chemistry between the two men was unmistakable.

Dada introduced Petrov to her.

“We meet,” Petrov said, as he walked around to embrace and kiss her on the cheek.

As Petrov took off his jacket to have his breakfast, Nkuli, chuffed with the recognition, noticed Petrov’s right wrist was wearing his signature Blancpain watch.

Petrov, a short loquacious man with blue eyes and bushy eyelashes, had a glass of Ken Forrester wine to accompany his fruit salad breakfast. Dada had a fruit salad too and sparkling water, whilst the rest of the two teams were served a hot meal.

After breakfast everyone, including the South African and Russian ambassadors to the UN, left, and the two leaders stayed behind with Chairman and Amina.

Amina didn’t stay for the three-day session. She left that evening on the Fair Lady.

Nkuli lost the sense of time with the back-to-back meetings between Dada and African and world leaders. Of the three new world leaders, he managed only to see one. She was relieved that they were on their way home. The South African motorcade made its way to J F Kennedy International Airport. On the presidential plane back home, seated on the front part with Dada and Chairman, she reflected on the rest of the trip. The angst and tension that engulfed the pre-UN days were gone. Still, she was resentful about the toxic grip Amina had on statecraft, and how things had got to that point. The Pakistani, as she called her, was nowhere near the anti-apartheid struggle and, now, she flew around on a presidential jet to sit through meetings with world leaders. At least, something had changed: Dada travelled on the official jet, not the Fair Lady.

Back home, life appeared to return to normalcy. Dada even managed a two-week vacation – a part of it was spent in Angola. During the second week, Dada reluctantly agreed to enjoy his seventieth lavish, but private, party organized by Amina with 70 special guests. The co made a grudging appearance.

He returned to office feeling rejuvenated. His health was slightly better. After the wound had healed, his medical team arranged for a prosthetic leg to be fitted to improve his agility. His first order of business included a cabinet reshuffle which he positioned as part of his fight against corruption. Amongst other changes, he fired three ministers, demoted the ministers of war and police, and consolidated their portfolios under a single super-ministry headed by Chairman. A new ministry was created for innovation. An initial appointment, Joseph, Dada's elder son, was forced out of it before being sworn in after protests from party elders. An unknown white space scientist was appointed to head up the ministry. A key task of the portfolio was to oversee the establishment of the space tourism project.

Street protests continued. The state's response was increasingly brutal. In parliament, a coalition of opposition parties filed a motion of no confidence in Dada over abuse of his power. Whilst this failed, a charge of perjury against Nkuli forced her to resign. This was in relation to the edits she made to a parliamentary answer in response to the opposition's enquiries about Dada's travels.

This decision was like slow poison for Dada.

In one meeting with Amina, he witnessed how she marvelled at plunging the dagger on Nkuli's back.

"I think it would be best for her to leave the scene for a while," she told Dada.

After discovering Amina's hand, Nkuli quit her job to save her pension. After a three-month break, which saw the controversy subsiding, the co-president accepted a six-month diplomatic training in India ahead of her posting as South Africa's ambassador to Havana.

A few months after the co-president's departure, towards Christmas, Chairman, with his expanded responsibilities, called a press conference at his office. Flanked by his three deputies, he strode in and sat at the head of the table, basking in the light of TV cameras. Once the media had settled, the proceedings got underway. His press secretary invited him up to the podium.

He began his address with the usual mundane programmes of his ministry. Too boring for what was billed as a special media briefing.

"As you all know, His Excellency turned seventy this year," he continued, as he fiddled with his papers, "we are announcing a special clemency for a category of long-term prisoners."

He rattled through names of unknown prisoners, mostly murderers serving life terms and had shown progress in terms of the corrections system. Then he paused halfway through the list of the special seventy inmates.

"Using his prerogative, the president has decided to release Mgence from the maximum prison to be the patient of the state at one of our mental facilities for a year -- "

He was interrupted by the sound of still photographers, snapping away, and murmurs from journalists who noticed the name he had just mentioned.

"Ladies and gentlemen, please allow the minister to complete his address," said the press secretary.

"Mgence will serve one year as a patient of the state, before being released to spend the rest of his life in the care of his family," he continued.

The mutterings continued at the mention of the news.

Chairman completed his list. His press secretary stepped in to announce the end of the proceedings, and offered to circulate the full list of beneficiaries of the presidential clemency. With his deputies in tow, Chairman left the boardroom without taking questions.

The afternoon news cycle was dominated by the outrage at the institutionalization of Mgence and questions about the process followed to pardon a self-confessed murderer of a head of state who hadn't even served ten years of his life sentence.

The coalition of opposition parties issued a statement, calling for an explanation on how Mgence's name made the list.

'We will spare no efforts in getting answers at what smacks like abuse of presidential powers,' the statement threatened.

India was boiling hot. Nkuli had just returned from classes when her mobile beeped. It wasn't a message, but the sound of her newsfeed application refreshing. She scrolled to check news updates. An item drew her attention, 'Dada gives brother's killer amnesty.' She read the article. Mixed feelings consumed her. This reminded her how far she was from home. In other ways, it also reminded her of the cold fact: she was no longer part of Dada's inner circle. Once such decisions were unthinkable without her participation. At worst, she would hear about them before they were announced. Upon hearing the news, Nkuli reached for her mobile.

She fired off a text message, her preferred means of communication, to Chairman.

"Hey, and Mgence? Rgds, N."

Minutes later, Chairman responded, equally terse.

"How's India treating you? Re Mgence, it's what it is – better he dies outside than in our custody!"

Nkuli didn't know what to think. Should she be celebrating? Should she be questioning this sudden turn of events? Was Mgence always sick? Mental illness? Was there a connection between the contents of the parole application and the subsequent hospitalization?

Cast Of Characters

1. Human Capital

Gladwell, CEO of a state-owned trade and logistics company

Lerato, Gladwell's personal assistant

Mlungisi, Gladwell's chief of staff and acting head of Human Capital

Gift, Gladwell's bodyguard

Chris Ratshitanga, non-executive chairman of the state-owned trade and logistics company

Velaphi, the director-general of the Bureau of Public Enterprises

Andrew Mitchell, the South African head of Deutsche Consulting

Thulani, CEO of a major commercial bank, Deutsche's client

Malinga, Chief Audit Executive

Siphokazi, head of Human Capital

Jennifer, owner of *Mom's*

2. Justice For Sale

Mbali Jiyane, Mandla's wife

Mandla, former freedom fighter and post-apartheid South African businessman and Mbali's husband

MaDlamini, Mandla's mother

Simphiwe, Mandla and Mbali's daughter

Emmerson Banda, the Malawian butler at Mbali's household

Alastair Harris, Mbali's former boss

Zakhele, Mandla's elder brother

Mark Kahn, Mandla's lawyer

Justice, the minister of police

Mabasa, the lead detective at Sandton police station

Malan, the prosecutor

Judge Dennis, the judge who presided over Mandla's case

3. Work Hard, Play Harder

Mduduzi Macingwane, millionaire insurance magnate

Manzolwandle “Che” Gumede, South Africa’s high commissioner to the UK and

Mdu’s friend

Steven, Che’s deputy at the South African high commission in London

Zola, Che’s wife

Dr Singh, the lead surgeon at the London General Hospital

Zingisa, Mdu’s life partner

Mandisa, Mdu’s wife

MaKhumalo, Mdu’s mother

4. Whatever It Takes

Mziwabantu, president of The Movement

David Marcus, Mzi’s lawyer

Sibongile, Mzi’s wife

Nomsa, Mdu’s deputy in The Movement

Nelisiwe (Tenjiwe Mabhongo), Mzi’s executive assistant at The Movement

Eric, Nelisiwe’s husband

Jan-Jan Pieterse, Nelisiwe’s lawyer

Gideon, JJ’s associate

Vuyo, Nelisiwe’s ex-boyfriend

5. Payback Time

Dada, South Africa’s president

Chief, Dada’s elder brother and slain South Africa’s president

Joseph, Dada’s elder son

Manzini, Dada’s younger son

Thuli, Dada’s ex-wife

Mgence, Chief's self-confessed killer
Amina, Dada's friend and spiritual adviser
Nikki, Amina's elder daughter
Anwar, Amina's husband
Iraj, Anwar's personal tailor
Nkuli, head of Dada's private office
Chairman, Dada's minister of police, prisons, justice and war
Clement, a lawyer in charge of overseeing state tenders for Dada
Petrov, Russia's president
Mikhail, Petrov's son
Katrina, Petrov's new wife
Nikolai, Petrov's physician
Pushkin and Sputnik, Petrov's cats
Sergei, Petrov's political strategist
Yuri Chekov, a Russian spy found dead in a London hotel
Mondlane, businessman son of Angola's president

Note to Readers

This is a work of fiction. The events and names of characters and places portrayed in this work are fictitious. Coincidences are just that.