

NIQ MHLONGO
After TEARS

ONE

NOVEMBER 22, 1999

That was it. I had had enough of Cape Town. THE cold Atlantic Ocean, the white sand beaches, Table Mountain, the Waterfront, everything I had once found so beautiful

“That sounds nice, my Advo, but I still want my whisky that you promised,” he insisted. “Don’t worry if you forgot to buy for me in Cape Town, there are lots of bottle stores where we can buy. There are the Lagos and Kinshasa bottle stores in Hillbrow that operate twenty-four hours a day. There is also a nice new bottle store here next to Park Station called Dakar. Or, if you like, we can go to Zak Zak in Diepkloof. That’s the cheapest place in the whole of Jozi.”

“That’s fine, uncle. We’ll see when I get there.”

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

“We’ll talk about that, uncle. My battery is low and my cell can cut at anytime.”

“Sharp, Advo. We’ll be waiting for you at Park Station.”

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

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

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

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

I negotiated my way to the next carriage in search of a toilet with a sink. The door to the first one read *engaged* and I waited outside, looking at the fields through the window.

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

Two

Tuesday, November 23.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Look at you!" my uncle continued excitedly, "the Mother City has bathed you. You have gained complexion by spending all that time with the ngamlas and dushis. Yeah, you look handsome, my laaitie. All the girls ekasi will be yours."

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

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

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

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

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

Very few people remembered or knew PP's real name. I didn't know it either, but it was easy to pick him out of a crowd because of the way he walked. Because of his

gout, he stuck his chest out as if it were an arse and walked slowly without his heels touching the ground.

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

“Hey, madoda! I told you that my laaitie was a student at the University of Cape Town, and not working there. Perhaps we can ask him for a case of J&B next year when he is already the biggest advocate in Msawawa,” said uncle Nyawana protectively.

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

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

* * *

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

“Ahhhh!” Uncle Nyawana opened his mouth wide and looked at the roof of the car as if to allow fresh air into his lungs. “One nine nine nine was a bit of rough year, Advo, but this coming year of two gees belongs to us, me and you, Advo,” he whispered into my ear. His eyes were bloodshot. “We’ll be fucking rich. You’ll be an advocate and together we’ll sue Transnet for my lost leg, my laaitie. I’m telling you that we’ll win the case, as it was all because of their negligence that I lost it. I tell you, we’ll be rich, my Advo. Our days as part of the poor walking class of Mzansi will soon be over. We’re about to join the driving class, with stomachs made large by the Black Economic Empowerment. Yeah, we’ll be fucking rich. Stinking rich, Advo,” he repeated over and over again, as if the topic had somehow become trapped in his brain

“I think so too, uncle,” I said, without meaning it.

“Yeah. We’ll buy all the houses in our street and put up boom gates, like they do in the northern suburbs, so the thieves can fuck off,” he said, pointing randomly at the mine dump along the M1 South freeway. “But, no,” he corrected himself, “I’ll buy you a house in the posh suburb of Houghton because ngiyak’ncanywa, ntwana. I love you, my laaitie, and I want you to be Mandela’s neighbour and own a mansion with very high walls like all the rich people do. Then you can go around your house naked

and your neighbours won't complain or think you're mad, like they would in the township, because they won't be able see you. We'll also join the cigar club and all Mandela's nieces will fight over you because you'll be stinking rich. You'll be the manager of my businesses and when I die you'll take over, my Advo. We'll buy a funeral parlour and make huge profits from the tenders we'll get from the Department of Aids because people in Msawawa die of those worms everyday."

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

"If you're black and you failed to get rich in the first year of our democracy, when Tata Mandela came to power, you must forget it, my bra," said Zero. "The gravy train has already passed you by and, like me, you'll live in poverty until your beard turns grey. The bridge between the stinking rich and the poor has been demolished. That is the harsh reality of our democracy."

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

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

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

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

"Thanks," I said, tiredly.

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

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

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

"Arggh, bleksem! Don't worry, nka!akatha, you'll work again," said uncle Nyawana in a consolatory voice. "Advo will sort that one out for free when he

becomes an advocate next year. Is that not so, my laaitie?" asked uncle Nyawana, but he wasn't expecting an answer from me.

"You're right. That must be his first test as an advocate," said Zero

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

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

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

Dilika blamed his misfortune on the students he had selected from his class to help me mark the papers. He believed that since he hadn't paid them for the job they might have alerted the authorities. Although I was also not paid for the job, I escaped the blame because I was still in Cape Town when the investigations started.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

SHORT STORY

The following short story was written during the Caine Prize Workshop in Kenya and was first published by Jacana Media (Pty) LTD in 2006, in the anthology called **The Obituary Tango** (*a selection of writing from the Caine Prize for African Writing*). In 2007 it was translated into Dutch and it appears in Bunker Hill Magazine. In 2008 it was further translated into Spanish and it also appears on the South African Literary Magazine called WORDS.ETC

GOLIWOOD DRAMA-BY NIQ MHLONGO

Soweto township. The time was 16H00 according to the big watch at the Mangalani BP Garage. If you were not from around that Chiawelo section, you would definitely think that was the correct time. But the locals were aware that the 'BP watch' was ahead of time by almost thirty minutes. That Saturday afternoon of the 15th of March the sky of Soweto Township was ripped apart by fireworks like never before. It reminded many Sowetans of the day Mandela was released from jail in February 1990 after spending twenty-seven years behind bars.

Thirty-nine year-old Thulani ducked involuntarily from his chair as the first set of explosions went off. His friend Vusi flinched as another cracker was carelessly thrown in the street. Since two o'clock that afternoon, they had been sitting at the balcony on the second floor of their favourite Chiawelo tavern called 24HOURS. They were not drunk yet, but a bit tipsy, although Vusi had bulging and bloodshot eyes that you could easily confuse for those of a drunken man. He was a lawyer by profession and had offices in Joburg City. Thami worked as one of the cabinet ministers' bodyguards. Many people in the township called him 'The Bull' because of his massive body. Besides giving him glasses of his expensive Blue Label whisky that morning, The Chief (as his employer was fondly known) had granted Thami five days off.

There were lots of people in the tavern. But all eyes were glued to the television set that was mounted on the wall. The wall itself smelled terrible because of the new paintwork. There was no music playing this time. The only noise in the tavern came from the wordless voices of the patrons and the television set. Everyone was waiting eagerly. Some people were biting their nails in anticipation. A very important announcement was to be made by the FIFA President, Sepp Blatter. The majority of the people, if not all of them, were hoping that South Africa would be selected ahead of Tunisia to host the World Cup in 2010.

But poor Thami felt alone with his thoughts and personal misery, even amongst that throng of people. No doubt he looked like he was enjoying his Castle Lager. You could tell by the way he sipped it slowly and licked his thick lips. Of course, he was in good company of his best friend Vusi. But Thami's heart was heavy. His mind was

very busy, racing like a moth looking for a flame. Less than two months ago he had separated from Thuli. She was his common-law wife of eight years. He could not believe that the following Monday he was going to face her at the Johannesburg Maintenance Court. About a week ago, Thami had received summons to appear in the court for not paying the maintenance of his three children.

'Just look at me man, everyone can tell that I'm as black as Africa itself. I cannot be that boy's real father. There is no history of albino children in my family' said Thami. He paused, and took a drag from his cigarette again. He emitted the smoke through his nose and it lazied upward. 'Thuli probably slept with an albino guy when I was away with the chief.'

'Oh, good heavens! Stop making a revolution out of it man,' said Vusi while shaking his head. 'These things happen. There might have probably been a biological reason.'

'Heavens, my balls!' intercepted Thami. 'Even my mother knows that kid is not mine and he's the cause of my separation from Thuli. I'm going to tell the court on Monday that I can't pay maintenance for the kid when I know it's not mine'

'I've advised you to deny paternity in the court on Monday, so what are you still worried about?'

'I have a problem with that date of Monday. I'm going to miss all the celebrations with the big guns of South Africa because of the stupid court case. Everybody from the parliament will be there by the presidential residence if South Africa wins the bid. From the Governor of the Reserve Bank to the Minister of Sports, you name them.'

A joyful noise suddenly stuffed the tavern. Yes, South Africa had just been declared the host of the 2010 FIFA World Cup! People were hugging, squeezing and patting each other. From the second floor balcony Thami and Vusi could see cars driving past the main Old Potchefstroom Road with their headlamp on although the sun was still bright up there.

'You see, today baba,' said Vusi, 'If you want to watch a good movie for free, you don't have to travel too far to town. Our Soweto is like both Hollywood and Bollywood combined. Viva 2010 World Cup, viva!' Vusi announced proudly. He burped loudly after taking a sip from his quart of Castle Lager.

'Oh, sure,' Thami answered uninterestedly, while flicking the ash of his cigarette on the floor.

'Come on. don't give me that worried look,' said Vusi. He looked at his friend with a mixture of pity and disappointment, 'I'm sure you can do better than that.'

Thami did not say a word. Instead he stared at his empty bottle as if he was wishing it full again. From every direction you could hear the deafening noise from the vuvuzela plastic horns of soccer lovers. Most of them donned the jerseys of the national soccer team. The hooting of the cars along the road also disturbed the peace in the whole neighbourhood. At the nearby traffic lights at the Mangalani complex some thugs started spinning their BMW's. a huge crowd of people, young and old, watched in amazement. It looked as if the whole of Soweto Township had come to the street to celebrate.

Ten o'clock Monday morning was the court date. That morning Thami was driving along the M1 North Freeway in his Honda Ballade towards the Joburg city centre. The traffic was moving very slowly as usual. Thami looked at the watch on the dashboard. It was half-past nine. He began to panic. His friend Vusi had warned him a number of times about that particular magistrate at the maintenance court. 'She's a feminist. She will not hesitate to hold you in contempt of court for not showing up in time.' Vusi's words rang in his mind again.

To Thami's relief, the traffic started to clear next to Gold Reef Casino. Cars moved faster. The road was like that until he arrived at the Johannesburg Magistrate Court four minutes before his case was due to start. The benches along the corridor were full of people. Most of them were women. As he entered, Thuli was already sitting on the bench along the corridor. Her face was almost beautiful. But her flat nose spoiled whatever beauty she might have had. Her hair was well braided and her Police sunglasses were pushed back on her forehead. She wore a fake Gucci leather jacket. In her right hand she carried a leather handbag of the same design. Big silver round earrings were shining from both her ears. She could not hide her anger as she saw Thami approaching. She stood up. Her squinting eyes warned him that she was angry. There was an obvious tension between them.

'And you call yourself a man. I don't think so.' Thuli said out loud. She then shook her head. 'Do you want me to tell you what real men do, huh? Real men

support their children. They put the bread on the table everyday for their children. Real men pay for their children's studies, and they make sure that their children have shelter. You are not a real man because you do not support your three children.'

'Yes. Tell the bastard how he is,' said the lady who was breast-feeding a baby on the opposite bench.

Thami was tight-lipped. Everyone in the corridor was looking at him. He felt humiliated. He hid his face in his hands for a few seconds. But his heart was pounding furiously in his chest. He cleared his throat in a sound of disapproval. Thuli clicked her tongue twice and wrinkled her nose. There was an expression of bitterness on her face.

'Just look at you!' she eyed him sharply

The outer corners of Thuli's eyes had mascara on them. She pointed her finger at him as if it was a gun. They had long nails that were painted red.

'You are not even ashamed of yourself!' she continued. 'You are here wearing an expensive suit and nice shoes but your three children are naked and bare-footed at home. I would be ashamed of myself if I were you.'

'Divorce the bastard and get on with your life, Girl. You are still young and there are lots of men around that can kill to be with you,' said another lady who was sitting at the far end of the bench. The lady leaned forward and snapped her fingers. 'Just like that! Dump him like a hot potato, Girl. But you must make sure the bastard pays heavily for wasting your precious time. He doesn't deserve you at all.'

Thami pinched his nose in embarrassment. Many thoughts were going through his mind. He felt tired of being around those women. His friend Vusi was right. He had warned him that all the women inside the Johannesburg Maintenance Court belonged to one organisation called MAPS (Men Are Pigs Society). He had thought that Vusi was joking. But now he was convinced that MAPS was not one of his friend's exaggerations. To him it existed as a secret society that specialised in hating men like him. He was also sure that competing with those women would be like cutting his own throat. They were all giving him a stare that he could only interpret as hatred.

'Your friends think that you're a man because you are President Mbeki's bodyguard.' Thuli shook her head again, 'I don't think so. The only thing that makes you a man is that useless stick between your legs. Yeah, real men don't go around

fucking and making babies, leaving them to starve like you do. You are a useless son of a bitch with a heart of stone. I wonder what came into my head the moment I spread my legs for you.'

Her statement hung around Thami like bad smell from the toilet. There was laughter, and it came from most of the women who were sitting on the benches. Thami was tempted to throw back some nasty words. But he remembered his friend Vusi's advice not to do that. At the same time, the door to one of the offices yawned open. A woman in black pants and a blue shirt appeared. She stopped at the door frame. On the door was written: Ms Dube, Marriage Counsellor.' all the noise in the corridor subsided.

'Mr and Mrs Maphela!' the woman in black pants called out while standing at the doorway of her office, 'Come to my office please'

Thuli and Thami followed the woman inside. She pushed the door shut with her right leg without turning. Again without wasting time she gestured to them to sit on the two chairs that were there. Above the woman's head on the wall was a poster that read: 'Stop the Violence against Women and children'. on the other wall was a framed photograph of a woman shaking President Thabo Mbeki's hand. Thami realised that it was a picture of the same woman that was sitting before them.

'Well, as you might already know, my name is Sylvia Dube,' she said. There was a tone of authority in her voice, 'I am the marriage counsellor. I can tell that it's a difficult period between the two of you. I also know that for the sake of the children, Mrs Maphela here has laid a complaint against you for not giving your three children some financial support,' she said, while moving her eyes from Thuli to Thami. 'I understand that you are at your job and earning the same amount as when you were paying your maintenance about three months ago. But what made you suddenly stop doing that Mr Maphela? Why are you not supporting your children anymore? I think the problem is not about money here?' Counsellor Dube looked at Thami with accusatory eyes. They possessed the power of asking questions, although they were small and serious.

Thami thought for a while. He felt some great demand in Counsellor Dube's question.

'Yes, you are right counsellor. My problem is not about money at all. I am denying paternity of the last born. I don't believe I fathered him,' he said with a forced calmness in his voice. The reply was very slow in coming. But he regretted what he had said the moment it came out his mouth. He loved his two other children and wondered how the whole thing might have affected them. He did what he did because of that last-born albino baby. That is what had come to contest in the court. He wanted to know the truth.

A shock wave passed through Thuli.

'What?' she demanded angrily, and without a blink in her eyes. It was as if she was not expecting those words from Thami. She then gave a derisive laugh, 'Ha, ha, ha. You want to tell me that all these eight years that we've been together you did not trust me? You also want to tell me that you had no balls to face me, and that you were just waiting to say it in court? Is that right?'

Thami remained calm. He did not say a word. But a puzzled expression passed into Counsellor Dube's eyes.

'Hold on! Let me get this straight,' said Counsellor Dube while demonstrating with her hands. Thami and Thuli's eyes followed her. 'What you are saying is that you are here to contest paternity of one child amongst the three, is that right?'

'Right'

'Are you sure about this?'

'Yes, I am. In fact my intuition tells me that the last-born child is not mine, I want to clear it up once and for all,' said Thami without p.

'What about the other two children, why are you not supporting them?'

'I think that for those past two months my mind was not working well. It had affected me a lot.'

'Did it affect you to the extent that you failed to support your own children?'

'Yes. I guess so.'

'That's a tough one,' said Counsellor Dube. She sounded unconvinced. 'So you want the blood test to be done?'

'Yes. That's what I want to do and I'm doing it for the sake of the children and myself. I want to clear my doubts. And if in fact I am the father, I will happily support my child,' he answered, avoiding eye contact.

'You are a liar! You are doing it for you ego and not for the sake of the children,' interrupted Thuli angrily. The way she looked at him it was like she could plunge her long nails into his face.

'Mrs Maphela...let's...'

Counsellor Dube could not finish her words.

'Please call me Thuli. I no longer want to be associated with his surname.'

'Ok, Thuli. We assure you that this court will do everything in its power to make it a point that your children are well looked after,' said counsellor Dube, as she tried to calm Thuli down.

Counsellor Dube clasped her fingers. A large gold ring was shining in one of them. She looked at Thami for a second.

'But do you know that this might have serious consequences for your relationship with the children?' she asked

'Yes. It is the risk that I'm willing to take'

Counsellor Dube widened her eyes and nodded her head. About thirty seconds passed without a word from them. Thami looked at Thuli. Her face was already frowning a warning. She was not sure that going for a blood test was a good idea. There were some few mistakes she had also made in the past. The blood test might expose that, she thought.

'Yah, why are you running away from your responsibilities?' shouted Thuli impatiently, her eyes searching Thami's face. 'You might as well forget about it. I don't need your money. You can keep your dirt anyway. The children and I can survive without your help like we have been doing all these days. You must forget about us, we don't need you in our lives anymore.'

Counsellor Dube looked at her watch. She stood up with some papers in her hand.

'I'm just going next door to consult the magistrate. I'll be back in a minute. I want you two to behave when I'm gone. don't shout at each other inside my office,' she said as she opened the door and stepped outside.

The tension between Thuli and Thami continued. There was no single word spoken between them. They shied away from looking at each other. Thami's eyes remained downcast with his chin balanced on both his hands. Thuli tapped her fingers on the

table rhythmically. They remained like that until Counsellor Dube came back about ten minutes later.

‘Well, both of you will be appearing before the magistrate in room four in about thirty minutes,’ said Counsellor Dube in a new tone of a voice. ‘I had thought that your problem was only about paying maintenance. Unfortunately, it seems it is more complex than that. I don’t have the authority to ask for your blood samples. But the magistrate has, and that is why you have to go in there. Oh, again the unfortunate part of it is that all five of you,’ she said, as if to soften her words, ‘I mean you and your three children, will have to undergo that blood test. We want to compare all your DNA’s and make sure that the outcome of the blood test is hundred percent correct. Is there any question that you two would like to ask?’ she concluded while looking at each of them with a feigned smile.

Thuli shook her head. ‘No. I can’t subject my children to such torture because of him. What would they think?’ protested Thuli.

‘But believe me; it is for their own benefit,’ said Counsellor Dube. ‘Besides, the matter is now in the hands of this court. We have to be fair. This court is required by law to solve this matter in the best interest of the children. And since the matter is already brought to this court, we are not allowed to leave it hanging. We must solve it. Oh, one more thing: you Mr Maphela will be the one who will bear all the costs incurred for the blood test. But most of that will be confirmed by the magistrate.’

Thami and Thuli watched each other, not moving, not moving, and their eyes met. They both stood up and carefully slid the chairs under the table. Thirty minutes later they appeared in front of the magistrate. The case lasted for only ten minutes as Thami maintained his original position. A court order was issued by the magistrate saying that Thami and Thuli, as well as their three children, must go to the nearest Braamfontein Laboratory to have their blood taken. The next court date was in two weeks time.

Inside the 24HOURS Tavern, Thami tried to catch the waitress’s attention by waving his right hand. He was thirsty for another beer. As soon as the waitress came, he gave her a fifty rand note and ordered two Castle Lager quarts. Most people were watching a derby soccer game between two South African teams: Kaiser Chiefs v Orlando Pirates.

'Pirates have to win this game if they are serious about winning the league trophy this year,' said Thami.

'I think today is Pirates' day man . They are playing very good.'

The waitress came with four beers and put them on their table. Vusi opened a bottle with his teeth.

'The next round will be on me,' said Vusi

'Thanks man. Very soon I'll not afford to buy you one beer my friend . All the money will be going towards the maintenance,' teased Thami

'When are you going to know about the outcome of your blood test?' asked Vusi, a glass of beer in his hand.

'Day after tomorrow in Court'

'What are you going to do if it turns out that all the children are yours?'

'I'm ready for any results, man. Whatever comes. I'll have to act like a man.'

Magistrate Zodwa Khumalo presided over the court proceedings that Friday morning. Thami and Thuli arrived early before the start of their case at nine o'clock. Thuli was accompanied by her mother and her friend. Thami had come with Vusi. There were already about twenty people seated on the benches inside the courtroom. Everybody remained quiet.

'This is the case of paternity between Thami and Thuli Maphela,' said Magistrate Khumalo after clearing her throat. 'May the two parties step forward please?'

Vusi gave his friend a big wink and raised his thumb. Thami and Thuli stepped forward in front of the magistrate.

'We will start with Leleti Maphela, a female, born on the 17th of July 1997. For the case of paternity you brought before this court, you are excused. You are not the father,' said the magistrate while looking at her files. Thami's palms were already sweating. 'The second child is Zolani Maphela, a male, born on the 10th of October 2000. For the case of paternity, the court excuses you as the father. The third child is Zandi Maphela, a female born on the 2nd of January 2003. For the case of paternity, you are the father. You are therefore required by this court to maintain your child by paying the amount of R750 every month.'

24HOURS Tavern was crowded that Friday evening . Thami and Vusi sat at the corner next to a large speaker that was blurring out Kamazu's popular old song called *Korobela*.

African woman, why give me korobela

Oh, korobela

Thami sang along to the song. His head was moving rhythmically with the song.

'This song speaks to me, man. I think Thuli gave me the love potion to blind me with love. How come I didn't see that she was cheating on me all along?' said Thami as soon as the song ended.

'I don't blame you, man. It's difficult to see this *korobela* ointment. I heard that most of the women use *korobela* to control their men. My father told me to be careful because most of the women apply it on their arms, thighs, genitals and chest before sex. When a man is busy dancing between his woman's legs and enjoying it, the potion is transferred.

'You see me married again, you cut my throat. I have had enough of women,' Thami said in a drunken tone of a voice.

'You just chose the wrong woman, man. Thuli was a bitch, man. I felt for you that day when you exchanged your vows in the church. I think you should have said to her, *I'll be with you until further notice* instead of the usual *till death do us part*.'

.....THE END.....