

**Yamkela TYWAKADI**

### **Things We Kept for Monday**

#### **Jacqueline**

Jacqueline stepped out of the car not believing that this was indeed the school she was coming to. It didn't look like a school; it looked like something she had never seen before. The school buildings - she was not even sure if she should call them buildings - were mud houses that were tinted with white limestone powder to bring colour on them. The white tint didn't cover the whole building, it ended just at the bottom and a strip of mud took over to do the finishings. But the tint had worn off from the building now, leaving an art of patches on the walls, not beautiful art, but art that shouted poverty. There were seven buildings. Six of them were the mud houses and only one was a nice brick building that had five classrooms in it. The brick building was separated from the rest of the buildings and it was even fenced while the other ones didn't have any fencing. This nice building was clearly part of the government project to build schools in the rural areas.

It was quiet outside the school with only few goats roaming around in between the classes. Just then she saw a girl coming out of the mud classrooms running to the toilets. The toilets were also made out of mud and they didn't look pleasant at all. In fact, there wasn't much privacy as there were no outside doors. She looked at the girl. She was wearing a white shirt that was no longer that white. She had a black tunic on top and a black and white belt that was tightly tied on her waist such that she looked like she was going to cut into half – she had a very small waist. She had black and white school socks that looked so old, they were no longer tight on her calves and her shoes were showing signs of nearing the grave. The girl stopped abruptly and stared at Jacqueline. It was as though she had just seen an alien, something that she didn't expect there, something that didn't belong there. But her face relaxed after a few seconds and she smiled and waved at Jacqueline. Jacqueline smiled and waved back.

*“Ingaba sele uncediwe?”* The girl asked but Jacqueline didn't understand even one word coming out of the girl's mouth.

“I am sorry, what?”

The girl looked at Jacqueline and tried to say something but could not. She didn't know how to ask the question in English, so her lips kept on moving trying to say something but nothing came out of them. In defeat, she waved goodbye to Jacqueline and ran to the toilets. Jacqueline waved back with a smile and continued to look around the school.

There were few trees surrounding the school, big gum trees. Outside the nicer building were two cars and there was not even one car in the area of the old six buildings. She wondered how the teachers transported themselves to and from school. Poverty was written all over this place. It weighed down on Jacqueline's shoulders like a bag of mealies on a donkey's back.

*“All the best Jacqueline. You are a brave woman to be travelling there. Those people are poor, they live like animals,”* Judy, her colleague had said when she had told her that she will be travelling to the Eastern Cape for her thesis research.

She had not responded to Judy but she knew that she was not travelling there because she wanted to, but she had to finish her PhD and it involved field research and unfortunately, this was the field she was supposed to conduct her research on. What Judy had said was true, even though Jacqueline

didn't like the simile she gave. No one should be likened to animals. Yes, black people were poor, especially the ones in townships and rural areas but they were not animals. She had seen their townships while driving on the highway every day from the university or from work. Khayelitsha, Langa, Emfuleni - she had seen them but she had gotten used to it. She no longer asked herself questions like 'how did they live in such shacks?' 'How did they survive?' 'Why did they choose a life like that?' 'Were they happy there?'

She remembered the lady who used to work for them for so many years. She also stayed in the township and even though she had worked for them for seventeen years, she still refused to leave the township. Jacqueline never understood why one would choose to stay in such dungeons. She tried to remember her name but she couldn't. She remembered the one her parents had given her because they could not pronounce her real name. Francine; her parents had given her that name but Francine would insist that Jacqueline calls her by her real name when her parents were not looking. But how come she could not remember the name now? African names have always been difficult for her, she thought.

Francine had raised Jacqueline since she was born until she was seventeen. Her parents had fired her because she had stolen mangoes from their garden. Also because she was using the phone excessively; that is what her parents said at least. She remembered the day Francine left. Her parents had called her to the sitting room and shouted at her. They told her that they had been good bosses and they don't understand why she didn't ask for the mangoes but instead chose to steal them.

*"I didn't steal the mangoes madam. I plucked out three of them, but I was not stealing them."* Francine was looking down all this time she was talking.

*"Then why did you put them in the maid's quarters? Why did you hide them?"* Mama was furious, her blue eyes dashing left and right and Papa was sitting next to Mama brushing her hand but not saying a word.

*"Madam, I just put them in my room but I was not hiding them,"* Francine's voice was now shaking. Jacqueline was not sure if she was shaking because she was scared or because she was angry.

*"You people are so ungrateful. We give you a job so you can have a better life and you turn and steal from us. Ah, and I know everything else that you do when we are not around here. You stay on the phone the whole day and do nothing. Your friends called the other day and they wanted to speak to you and I wondered how they got our number and it was not soon before I figured out that it was a ritual that you did with them whenever we are not around. You sit and chat away on the phone. No wonder the bills are getting so high lately."*

*"I have been working for you for all these years Madam, and you do not expect my friends and family to have my employer's number? How were they going to get hold of me?"* Francine's voice was still low and respectful but her whole body was shaking.

*Papa was still brushing Mama's hand while Mama was talking to Francine. Jacqueline was sitting in the dining room, hearing everything. She was at home most of the time with Francine and she had never seen her chatting on the phone but she couldn't tell her mother that. Her mother knew better.*

*"I could hand you to police Francine but I will have mercy on you. Instead, I will ask you to leave our house. I no longer have a need for you."* Jacqueline jumped up in shock. Who was going to take care of her now? Who was going to clean her room and do her laundry and make sandwiches for her? She looked at Papa and he was still busy brushing Mama's hand. He didn't look like he was going to change Mama's mind at all, but then Papa always agreed with whatever Mama said. He never stood up even for himself when he was being bullied by Mama. Mama ran the household and Papa's job was to brush Mama's hand every time Mama's anger shot up.

*Jacqueline looked at Francine to see if she was going to beg for the job but Francine still had her head down and she didn't say even one word begging for her job. Instead she lifted her head slightly and looked at Mama straight in the eyes and said, "Thank you."*

*Jacqueline did not understand what was going on. All the adults in the room were not thinking straight. They were not thinking of her. They were not thinking that without Francine, her life would stand still.*

*Francine stood up and started walking towards the door before Mama stopped and asked her where she thought she was going.*

*"I am going to collect my clothes in my room and leave madam," Francine responded. She was still obedient, looking down and with a downcast voice. But she didn't look nor sounded sad. She was still calling Mama 'madam' even though she had just been fired.*

*"No! No! You are not going to do that lest you steal more of my things. Sit here and Jacqueline will go fetch your stuff for you." Mama was so determined that she started calling Jacqueline to go pack Francine's belongings.*

*"But Mama, can't she stay? Who is going to clean for me..." Jacqueline did not finish and Mama shouted back.*

*"Jacqueline this is none of your business. Go now!"*

*"Why don't I go with her and she packs her stuff herself? I won't know how to pack them," Jacqueline said with so much sadness.*

*"Ok then. Off you go!"*

*Jacqueline and Francine left the room and started for the maid's quarters. They did not say anything to each other. Jacqueline felt like she needed to say something but words couldn't come. She looked at Francine as she was busy packing. She tried to read her emotions but Francine was as indifferent as always. She showed no emotion. Jacqueline was frustrated. She needed Jacqueline but what could she do? Her mother was not going to listen even if she tried talking to her.*

*"What are you going to do now Francine?" She had asked. Francine kept quiet for a long time that Jacqueline was feeling bad for asking. After she finished packing her clothes, she zipped her suitcase shut and responded, "I am going to be with my family". She then put the suitcase aside and started packing other things.*

*Francine had raised her for seventeen years. She was like a mother to her even though her parents called her a 'girl'. She remembered how when she was seven years old and she was playing in their dining room with her tea set. She was sitting with her mother and Francine was dusting the table, preparing to serve lunch.*

*"Mama," she had called out to her mother.*

*"Yes my angel," Mama responded without looking at her. She was busy knitting something that Jacqueline hadn't figured out what it was or what it was going to become once Mama was finished with it.*

*"Are you a woman or are you a girl," Jacqueline asked.*

*Mama laughed slightly before she answered.*

*"I am your mother honey. So, I am a woman."*

*"And...and am I a woman or am I a girl," Jacqueline asked again.*

*"You are Mommy's little girl. You are my angel."*

*"Is Francine a woman or a girl?"*

*Francine stopped dusting the table abruptly. Mama stopped knitting whatever she was knitting and looked at Jacqueline, then Francine, then back at Jacqueline. She seemed like she had been caught stealing sweets. She looked at her wool and knitting needles for few seconds and started knitting again.*

*"Mama," Jacqueline started again.*

*"I think you should go wash your hands Jacqueline. Lunch is going to be ready soon," Mama said hastily.*

*"But Mama you have not answered me yet. Is Francine a woman or a girl?"*

*Mama lifted her eyes and looked at Francine for a long time as though trying to assess if she if fit to be a girl or a woman and turned and looked at Francine.*

*"She is a girl. Now go wash your hands."*

*Jacqueline turned to go to the bathroom. She was about to pass Francine by the table when she saw a tear from one of Francine's eyes drop to the table. She was crying. She was upset. She was about to ask Francine why she was crying when she hurriedly went to the kitchen. Jacqueline stood there for a moment confused and then she started for the bathroom. They were in the middle of lunch, her, Mama and Papa. Francine never sat at the table with them even though she was the one who prepared their meals every day. She would finish cooking and set the table for the family. Afterwards she would take her food in a lunchbox to her room.*

*"Mama," Jacqueline started again.*

*"Yes." Mama answered in between chewing.*

*"Doesn't Francine have children of her own?"*

*"She does."*

*"She is married, right? I saw her husband the other time."*

*"Yes, she is married. Now eat your food." Mama was starting to get annoyed with Jacqueline's questions and Jacqueline could sense it, so she went back to eating. She had only taken three spoons when she started again.*

*"Mama."*

*"What is it Jacqueline?"*

*"If Francine has children and if she is married, then why do you call her a girl?"*

*"Because that is what she is Jacqueline. A girl. Now eat your food, no more questions about Francine, ok? Get it in your head she is a girl in this house. She will be a woman when she is there in the township with her husband and her people. No more questions, now eat your food or you will get time out!" Mama was almost shouting now. Papa was starting to brush her hand.*

\*

“Miss Strydom,” Jacqueline was startled by a voice behind her. She jumped up and turned.

“My name is Miss Gqwethe,” the lady extended her hand for her to shake it. Jacqueline extended hers back in embarrassment. She had not realised that she was still standing outside her car while she was deep in thoughts.

“Yes. Yes. I am Jacqueline Strydom.” She said quickly.

“Welcome to our school ma’am,” Miss Gqwethe said with a warm smile. “The girl you are going to interview is ready for you. I hope she will be a great help for you and your paper. This way ma’am,” Miss Gqwethe said pointing Jacqueline to a classroom. Jacqueline had hoped they will take her to the new looking building made out of proper bricks but here she was being escorted to the mud classrooms. She forced a smile and said thank you to Miss Gqwethe and entered the classroom where she found a young girl waiting for her who immediately stood up when Jacqueline entered the classroom and said, “Good morning ma’am.”

## **Noma**

Noma sat with her hands under her thighs on a wooden bunk stool that looked centuries old. It made squeaky sounds when she moved her body or shifted. It was no longer strong, but it used to be. Now, it followed the movement of the one sitting on it. If one’s body tilted to the left, it also did and if one tilted to the right it would to the same. Elders avoided the bunk stool but kids did not because it afforded them the opportunity to play while they sat. So, they would purposely tilt their bodies left and right so the bunk stool could do the same. It was like a swing for them, a game to be played while sitting down. But Noma sat still not making the left and right tilting movements she would have made if she was not nervous or if she was not sitting across a white person. White people made her nervous, in fact, white people made everyone in her village nervous. They were either shy when they were around white people or they had nervous smiles or spoke too loudly than they usually did on normal days or when they were with people of their colour. Noma knew that the loudness was to hide the nervousness but it never really hid it. It was always there, showing itself like when they would play hide and sick with her friends. Everyone knew never to hide under the blankets or behind the curtains because as much as you were under the blankets but one could always tell that you are there because your body always sold you out with its up and down movements as you breathed.

The white lady looked really nice and clean. She was wearing a red blouse and a red lipstick. She was also wearing a white pencil skirt and bright red heels, as red as her lipstick. She looked like those dolls that Noma usually sees in town when her grandmother decides to take her with. Those dolls are clean and they have a red lipstick just like the lady’s. The lady’s hands were super clean too, like she never uses them. She had nice short nails and her skin on her fingers was intact, unlike Noma’s and everyone else’s in the village. The skin on the upper part of their fingers, just before the nails start was ruined because their hands were constantly working, washing dishes, cooking, cleaning, tending the garden, playing with clay etc. But the lady’s hands were like a little baby’s hands, soft and unaffected by work. Why do her hands look so clean? Doesn’t she work where she comes from? Noma wondered. The lady represented perfection.

The lady had a nice clean white and blue file on top of the table too. The file looked too clean, like it was not supposed to be touched. It looked pretty too, Noma thought, if it was hers it would be a prized belonging. She would keep it in her trunk at home and only take it out once in a while to admire it and

put it back again. The file looked like it was for rich important people and it only held important documents that could only be read by rich important people. The file had big words on the right bottom corner – University of Cape Town. Her teacher had told her that the white person she was going to talk to was from Cape Town and she was going to interview them and if she liked them, they might also appear on BBC News in America. Noma had never heard of a name like that for a TV, the only name she knew for a TV was SABC because that was what her parents watched when she used to visit them in Johannesburg but now she no longer visits them because her mother died of smoke back in eGoli and they never found her body. Grandma however insisted that there be a funeral for her and that there will be a grave even if it was empty inside. So, it happened. Her father was not really her father, he was just a man her mother stayed with and they used to call her ‘father’ because that is what other children called the men their mothers lived with. She never saw ‘father’ after her mother passed away; he vanished – just like that. Makhulu says men cannot live alone; they always need a woman to take care of them. To take care of their needs. Maybe father had found another woman to take care of him.

“What is your name young lady?” The lady across her on the table asked with a smile after Noma had sat down after greeting her and after she had noticed all these things about the lady. Hers was not a nervous smile but it was also not her real smile. Noma didn’t know her. This was her first time meeting her but she knew without an air of doubt that this was not her real smile. It was a big smile, wide even, and you could possibly think that it was her real smile but it was not; Noma just knew. It was... it was... it was that smile that you give if you are scared, or meeting someone for the first time or that smile you give to assure the other person that you are here for peace. Makhulu said some people smiled with their teeth but not with their hearts; teeth smiles were not real smiles; Makhulu said. Noma had never understood what Makhulu meant because she had never seen a teeth smile before but the lady’s smile was a teeth smile, Noma just knew. Her teeth looked weak through her smile; that was the only thing that was not perfect about the lady. Her teeth looked like they would break if she ever tried to chew on a chicken bone like Noma does after eating chicken. She would chew that bone to fine particles as though trying to find out what killed the chicken in the first place. But Noma had not had chicken in a long time now. Makhulu had plenty of chicken running in the yard but she had not yet summoned them to chase and kill one. The lady’s teeth were yellow too. It was a bit surprising and weird too because Noma thought her teeth would be purely white like her skirt, but no, the lady’s teeth were yellow, like grandpa’s. Grandpa used to smoke pipe and it made his teeth yellow. But grandpa was dead now; they had buried him the previous winter. But she would never use the word ‘dead’ in front of Makhulu. To Makhulu, grandpa was not dead. He was sleeping. She spoke about him as though he was still alive.

*“My husband brought me this jug when he used to work at the stainless steel company in Johannesburg... See, read here, it says stainless steel... It’s strong this one... It is a very strong jug... My husband bought it for me... Careful, careful Noma... Don’t handle it anyhow! Gudistaf will not like it if that jug broke.”*

But Grandpa Gudistaf was dead. Even if the jug got lost or broke, he would not notice. But not to Makhulu, her husband could still see and feel everything. Gudistaf is the name that the villagers gave Grandpa because he liked saying ‘good staff, good staff’ every time he had a conversation with people. People then started calling him Gudistaf.

“My name is Noma, ma’am,” Noma responded to the lady’s question.

“Aaaahhhh, that’s an easy one. Finally, an easy name. NO-R-MA...” the lady across Noma said with a huge smile while writing Noma’s name in one of the papers inside the file. The paper didn’t have lines, just like the papers that the principal uses when he prints something in the typing machine in his office. The principal always looks so serious when he is behind that typing machine, like he is some secretary in some important firm. Noma always looks at him and thinks to herself that she would like to look

that important one day but minus the typing machine because as much as it made one look important, it made too much noise than what Noma could bear. The lady was not typing though; she was writing with a very fancy blue pen on the line-less paper. The pen was not the usual pen she saw at her teacher's desk and even the principal did not have such a pen. The pen had a glowing gold colour; it was fat and big at the bottom but thinner at the top. It just looked like the carrots they just harvested from the garden yesterday. Noma couldn't imagine how whatever else she was going to write on that paper was going to look neat without lines. Mrs Gqwethe, her IsiXhosa teacher always shouted at them if they didn't write within the lines on their exercise books. Now, here was this lady who dared to write on a lineless paper. She surely would not be Mrs Gqwethe's best student this one. Mrs Gqwethe liked neatness.

"It is Noma ma'am. Not Norma," Noma said insisting on the 'r'. She felt guilty afterwards. Was she supposed to look at what the lady was writing? Didn't Makhulu tell her not to pry on adult's stuff? She wanted to apologise but thought the better of it. This was her name and she was not going to allow it to be spelt incorrectly. If it was spelt incorrectly, it would not be her name and that would mean it would not be her. Norma was someone else somewhere. She was Noma.

"Uuhhmm, I'm not sure I understand young lady," the lady said with a nervous smile now and scratching her forehead.

"It's Noma, not Norrrrrrma. My name does not have an 'r'" Noma corrected folding her hands on her lap. She hadn't meant to drag the 'r' that much but she didn't know of any other way how to explain it. She could speak English way better than other children in the village but she still thought in IsiXhosa, her home language and she had to first translate her thoughts into English before speaking them out.

"I see. I see. I am sorry about that," the lady said, nervously scratching out 'Norma' and replacing it with 'Noma'.

"NomaWushe Soginga," Noma said after realising that the lady was not asking for her surname. Mrs Gqwethe always says that when writing someone's name, you write it in full. You only use nicknames when you talk to people.

"That's my full name, ma'am," Noma explained seeing confusion in the lady's eyes.

"But you said your name was Noma when I asked, now you are telling me something else," the lady shot out not realising that she is getting agitated. Noma didn't understand why the lady looked a bit angry over a name. She just wanted her name written correctly and in full.

"Noma is my name in short ma'am. NomaWushe is my name in full. It is derived from my clan name which is oMjoli, oQubulashe oWushe, oHlathi, oNonina..." she explained to the lady with a half-smile, proud to recite her clan names but feeling bad at the same time that she just made the lady angry.

"And how do you write that one?" The lady asked, now looking more confused and a bit annoyed. She looked like she didn't like Noma's full name nor understood everything else that Noma just said. She seemed not to care for Noma's pride in her clan names. Noma felt some heat in her chest. She was not sure if it was anger towards the lady who was showing signs of not liking her identity or it was guilt for making the lady angry.

"Don't you like my full name ma'am?" Noma asked shyly and apologetically.

"No, no it's not that. Your name is your name. It's just that your names are ridiculously long. No one can pronounce or keep up with them."

"We can pronounce them ma'am."

“Well...”

“And I can pronounce yours too, ma’am. J-A-C-Q-U-E-L-I-N-E,” Noma said looking at Jacqueline’s black name tag pinned on her red blouse on her left side of her chest. “I can also pronounce Barbara. Elizabeth as well. I can pronounce Lizelle, Suzanne, Catherine, Lyllete. I can pronounce all English names when I am told about the name.”

“I am sorry Noma, I didn’t mean to upset you,” the lady was blushing now. There was an air of feeling ashamed on her face. Noma felt bad.

“I am sorry ma’am. I am not upset. I am sorry,” Noma said feeling bad that she was upset at an adult. But she just didn’t like how Jacqueline suddenly got offended when she found out that Noma’s name was actually not as easy as she thought it was.

“It’s ok Noma. Let’s stop with the apologies now. Back to your name. Can you spell it for me?” The lady pointed her fancy pen on the paper preparing to write as Noma spelt her name out for her.

“N-O-M-A-W-U-S-H-E,” Noma spelt out the name as slow as she could to make sure that the lady doesn’t miss a letter or add her own like she added ‘r’ to her name before. When the lady was done writing the name, Noma started spelling out the surname for her – S-O-G-I-N-G-A.

“I am sorry, but I will not be able to pronounce your full name. It’s too long and difficult. So, I will just call you Noma,” the lady said fiddling through her papers in the file. She was looking for a certain paper in the file and when she found it she pulled it out of the file and placed it on her right hand side on top of the old dusty-looking table. But Noma knew the table was not dusty, it just looked like it had lots of dust. She knew this because every day after school, they cleaned their classrooms and because the floors are not cemented, there is a lot of dust when they sweep the floors and so they also need to wipe their desks and teachers’ tables with wet cloths to make sure all is clean for the following day’s lessons. When they clean the tables with wet cloths, the wood would change colour to dark brown because of the water but once it starts drying up, it would go back its dull dusty look again. When Noma used to visit her mother in eGoli, just before she died, her mother used to spray polish on her table and the table would look shiny and bright all the time. Noma knew that her mother’s polish would do wonders to their tables at school but then again she knew the polish was not a need. The only thing it needed was water to clean the dust, anything else would be a luxury for the table.

“Ok, my name is Jacqueline Strydom. I am a sociologist and I am currently busy with my PHD which brought me here today. My topic is on how poverty affects children in the poor desolated rural areas in South Africa. I am still working on a title for my PHD but my creative brains cannot seem to be working lately,” Jacqueline laughed out very loud, like she had told the funniest joke she could find. Noma felt lost. First of all, she was not sure if she understood everything that Jacqueline had just explained. She didn’t understand what PHD was and because she didn’t understand it, everything else that Jacqueline said, seemed to not make sense to her. Now Jacqueline was laughing so hard and Noma was afraid that she didn’t get the joke Jacqueline made and now it was awkward in the room because Jacqueline was laughing and she was not.

“I am under the Schoeman & Schoeman Bursary scheme and they surely will not be impressed that I still don’t have a title for my paper. My supervisor is not impressed at all,” Jacqueline laughed again but this was a short and not so loud laugh.

“I am also a researcher for the BBC News. I however do not work for them full time; I freelance for them. And should they like this work, it will be aired on their channel and your story will be known all over the world.” Jacqueline smiled proudly, clapping her hands softly with excitement and looking



straight into Noma's eyes as though expecting Noma to jump up with excitement. But Noma didn't know what to do. Jacqueline kept nodding her head as though she wanted to say it's ok to jump up with excitement, but Noma still sat down feeling a bit awkward. She didn't know what it was that was supposed to excite her. They sat like that for a few seconds, Jacqueline beaming with a smile and she kept on nodding to Noma thinking she will get it. She will get that she will appear on TV. She will get that her story and that of the village will be seen by the whole world. She will get that when people see their story, they will feel pity for them and come and donate some food parcels, clothes, toys and everything else that they needed. She sat there beaming with a smile but Noma still didn't get it. Noma sat still, with one hand on her cheek, another on the table looking at Jacqueline, studying her, as though the answer to what she was supposed to be happy about would come out jumping out of Jacqueline's eyes. But it didn't, so Noma kept looking and the awkwardness in the room kept increasing. Jacqueline finally cleared her throat and assumed a serious posture. Noma looked away so that their eyes do not meet. She didn't want any further awkwardness between them too, especially now that Jacqueline seemed so happy.

"Ok, so I am going to ask you some few question about yourself and your family. It's not long questions, so don't worry." Jacqueline said, apologetically.

"Ok ma'am," Noma responded, relieved that the awkwardness was leaving the room.

"Who do you stay with at home?" Jacqueline started with the questions.

"I stay with my grandmother and two brothers and a sister," Noma responded. "They are my cousins actually but we are sisters and brothers," she felt the need to explain. Jacqueline seemed to understand and Noma felt relieved.

"And your parents?"

"My mother died last year."

"What was the cause of death?"

"Smoke. The firm she was working at in Johannesburg was on fire and she could not get out on time, so she died."

"Do you miss her?"

"Sometimes. But my grandmother takes care of me."

"Does your grandmother work?"

Noma wanted to laugh. How can a grandmother work? She didn't know of any grandmother who worked in her village. They kept themselves busy by tending their gardens, taking care of their houses, cooking, shouting at the kids when they do wrong, attending imbizo's, attending parents' meetings etc. But not working. Parents worked in Johannesburg, Cape Town, Durban, Umthatha – but most of them were in Johannesburg, eGoli.

"No, she doesn't work. Grandmothers don't work," Noma replied with a straight face that hid how she thought of Jacqueline's question.

"All the grandmothers in the village don't work but they are the main providers?" Jacqueline asked, looking shocked while she was writing on her lineless paper as Noma gave her answers.

"No," Noma answered shocked at the look of shock on Jacqueline's face. "Do grandmothers work where you come from?" she dared to ask.

“Well, no. But they have everything they want. They are not poor.”

“But our grandmothers are also not poor. They have everything they want.”

“Do you have food? For every meal of the day?”

“Yes. And if we don’t, we go to Theko’s house or Nofixi’s house or Mpuxe’s house to ask for whatever we don’t have at that moment.”

“So, you do run out?”

“Yes.”

“But you said your grandmothers have everything they need.”

“Yes.” Noma could not understand how running out of sugar or salt was linked to grandmothers not having everything they need.

“So, why do you ask from neighbours?”

“Because that’s what people do when they do not have something. The neighbours do the same. It’s how we do things here. Don’t you go ask from your neighbours when you need something?”

“No.”

“What do you do then?” Noma looked surprised and confused at the same time. What kind of place was the lady living at? She suddenly did not like that place.

“We go buy what we need.”

“All the time?” Noma asked with a pitiful sounding voice. She felt sorry for the lady.

“Yes.”

“Ok.” Noma looked at Jacqueline like she was from another planet. A very poor planet, that is. What kind of people lived together but could not help each other?

“Ok, let’s go back to the question?” Jacqueline said looking at the paper with questions.

“But ma’am,” Noma said... She did not remember what the question was in the first place or if she had been asked a question at all. She raised her right hand. Mrs Gqwethe always said if you have a question it’s polite to raise your hand and be given permission to ask. It is rude to just blurt out a question. She just had to ask the lady; her chest was bursting with the need to know.

“Yes.” Jacqueline said with a smile that was almost a laugh. Noma was a weird one. How does she raise a hand when it’s just the two of them in the room?

“Are you poor in your community?”

Jacqueline’s eyes shot out as though Noma has just said the most improper thing to say to another human being.

“No! No! Definitely not. Why do you ask?”

“Because ma’am... because you cannot help each other. If you cannot help each other then it means all of you do not have enough things to help each other with.”

“No, we do.”

“But you still don’t help each other?”

“Yes, we just don’t want to bother other people.”

“So, you are not poor but you still can’t help each other because you don’t want to bother each other?”

“Yes. See, now you get it.”

Noma did not definitely get it.

“To me it sounds like you live like poor people who cannot help each other. Difference is, poor people cannot help each other because they do not have but you do not help each other even though you have.”

Jacqueline’s eyes shot out again but this time she was also studying Noma. It was as though she was sitting with a different person from the one she had initially sat with a few minutes ago. She cleared her throat and went back to her questions, this time determined not to be distracted.

“Tell me about your grandmother.”

Noma didn’t understand what she was supposed to say. Did she want grandmother’s name? Age maybe? Or how she looks like? Or how she walked? She kept quiet for a while before posing a question back to Jacqueline.

“I am not sure what you would like to know about my grandmother.”

“Tell me anything you want to tell me. Is she nice? Where does she get money to take care of you and your cousins? If she doesn’t work, what keeps her busy?”

“Yes, my grandmother is very nice. She is strict too. She doesn’t like nonsense. If you do something wrong, she will beat you up. She likes to plough her ga....”

“She beats you and your cousins up?” Jacqueline asked shocked, like something was really really bad. She half rose from her chair and then sat down again when she saw the confusion in Noma’s face. Noma didn’t understand what she had said that has shocked Jacqueline so much and she also didn’t understand why she kept referring to her brothers and sisters as cousins. Yes, they were cousins but they do not call each other cousins. In fact, they do not see each other as cousins. They are brothers and sisters. She regretted why she had told Jacqueline they were cousins. She should have just said they were brothers and sisters.

“Yes, when we are naughty.” She answered with a nostalgic smile as if remembering all the times she had been naughty.

“But can’t she just talk to you nicely or send you to a naughty corner or give you chores to do? Why does she beat you up? And you say she is nice when she abuses you?” Now Jacqueline was angry. She instantly didn’t like Makhulu.

Noma didn’t understand why she was all of a sudden so angry. What was she talking about? Abuse? No, Makhulu was not cruel. She was very nice. And what was Jacqueline talking about the naughty corner? What was a naughty corner?

“Makhulu is very nice. She does also make us do chores. But chores are an everyday thing. They are not for punishment. But she doesn’t send us to a naughty corner. We don’t have naughty corners in our village.”

Noma was actually glad that there were no naughty corners in her village. Why would a parent send their child to a naughty corner? That sounded cruel. You beat up the child and let them stay in the house and eat. You don't send them to naughty corners. Noma vowed that she will never visit Jacqueline's community. Not that she was asked.

"But why does she beat you up?"

"Because we are naughty. Don't you beat your children up when they are naughty?"

"I don't have children and if I did, I would not beat them up."

"Ok." Noma, could see that they will never understand each other with Jacqueline. So, she waited for next question.

"If your grandmother doesn't work, what do you eat?" Jacqueline asked this with pity in her eyes.

*This was the same look that Mr and Mrs Colbat would give Noma when she visited her mother in eGoli. Her mother worked two jobs. One during the week where she died of fire and one during the weekend where she worked as a domestic worker for Mr and Mrs Colbat. Whenever they would look at Noma, they looked at her with pitying eyes. They would then give her lots of clothes and ice cream. They taught her how to speak English because she seemed like a bright child who didn't deserve to be staying in those rural areas with poverty and all. Noma was young then but she knew that she was not poor. She just didn't tell Mr and Mrs Cobalt. She took the clothes and ice cream and kept the truth inside her.*

*Mr and Mrs Cobalt had a daughter the same age as Noma. Her name was Amanda. Noma remembers because when she first heard the name she thought Amanda was Xhosa. The name had a Xhosa taste about it until her mother told her that the name was not Xhosa because there is not Xhosa name like that so it will have no meaning in Xhosa. Noma like Amanda nonetheless but she felt pressure every time she was with her. Noma didn't understand English at the time, the only language she understood was isiXhosa and other Nguni languages like IsiZulu and Siswati. Amanda did not understand isiXhosa but that didn't seem to bother her. Noma felt this uncommunicated pressure that she was the one who needed to learn English, a language that Amanda understood, in order for them to be able to communicate. Noma had seen this with Amanda's parents as well. They always spoke English to her mother and her mother never spoke isiXhosa to them because, as Noma could notice, it was useless because they didn't understand the language and they were not interested in learning it.*

*Noma was about eight years old at the time and so was Amanda. Amanda would call her to come and join her in the garden to play. Amanda would speak English and Noma would not understand, so she would just keep quiet. At first though, she would respond to Amanda in isiXhosa but Amanda would either have a blank look on her face or just start shouting, repeating whatever she was saying to Noma in English. Noma often felt stupid when she was around Amanda.*

*"Mama, I want to learn English," Noma told her mother one day. They were on their way to catch taxis back to the township after a day's work at the Cobalts.*

*"Why?" Her mother asked, not looking at her. She was holding her by hand and walking very fast. Noma didn't like walking fast. She liked it when they strolled down the streets with her mother because she knew there were chances of her mother buying her sweets, chips or ice cream when they were walking slowly. But when they were walking fast, she knew there was no way her mother was going to buy her anything.*

*"Because I want to be as smart as Amanda," Noma said trying to catch up with her mother's big footsteps. Yes, her mother was holding her by hand but her steps were still behind her mother's and she was not walking naturally; she was being dragged.*

*"You are smart Noma," her mother responded still not looking at Noma and not slowing down. Noma could also tell that she was just responding but she was not digesting what Noma was saying. She was not having a conversation with Noma. She was making this a chore – kids speak, parents respond; parents speak, kids do - that's how it is. Noma didn't like it but she continued anyway.*

*"But not as smart as Amanda," Noma said now really dragging her feet. She could not keep up anymore.*

*"Come on Noma, we are going to be late for taxis. And I am certain that you do not want to walk to Tembisa," her mother said pulling her by the arm.*

*"But I am tired and I don't like the way you are pulling me and you are hurting my wrist," she said irritably.*

*"Well, I am not about to let go of your hand young lady, get used to it. It's getting dark and we need to get to the taxis." Her mother was feisty too.*

*Noma kept quiet and endured the dragging by her mother until they got to the taxis. They took a taxi to Phomolong and within few minutes the taxi was full and on its way to take them to their different destinations. Noma was sitting right behind the driver, not on a seat like adults but on that area where all kids seat. The parents called it the "heater". Noma was facing her mother and she was still irritated at her but now that she was facing her, the anger evaporated. Her mother was beautiful. She was tall with a black afro. She had distinct jaw bones that made her look very strong but very unique at the same time. She had an oval shape and warm eyes that made Noma to fall in love with her immediately.*

*"I still think Amanda is smarter than me," she said, now looking outside the window. The streets of Johannesburg were starting to be empty and those who were still on the streets were walking very fast to go catch whatever form of transport to take them home.*

*"Why do you keep saying that?" Noma's mother asked but now she was not just responding, she was really listening to Noma.*

*"Because she can speak English."*

*"Noma, do you know what English is?" Her mother asked. As much as Noma was happy that her mother was finally listening to her, she was starting not to like the questions because she knew that he mother was going to say something very deep, that was going to take every cell in her brain to break it down and understand it.*

*"I don't know because I can't speak it Mama."*

*"I didn't ask if you can speak it. I asked if you know what English is."*

*"I don't." Noma was now pressing her face against the window, wishing she was those people outside not being grilled by her mother.*

*"English is a language. Do you know what isiXhosa is?" Her mother followed up with another question.*

*"A language?" Noma answered with a question.*

*"Exactly! And you know what that means? It means English is no better than isiXhosa. They are both languages and none is better than the other and none of them is a measure of intelligence."*

*"But Mama, you speak English with Amanda's mom and dad..."*

*“So, you think I am smart?” Mama asked with the I-hope-you-don’t-think-I-am look in her eyes. Noma didn’t understand why she would think she is not smart. Mama understood a lot of things Noma didn’t understand. She knew how to navigate the streets of Johannesburg, she had two jobs, she knew where to get taxis even though Noma had gone with her mother to the taxi rank several times, she still didn’t know how to get there, her mother understood important documents – just the other day she received a letter that looked very important and it had tables that had a lot of numbers. Mama read it with so much ease and after she was done, she said, “I forgot about this account. Tomorrow we need to go and pay it up.” Mama was very smart. She could speak to the Cobalts with ease; English came out so easy out of her mouth.*

*“Yes, you are smart. Everyone who can speak English is smart.” Noma responded.*

*Mama took out a packet of chips in her bag and passed them to Noma. Noma smiled and said thank you. She didn’t know that her Mama had something for her in her bag and they were her favourite flavour – tomato. She liked tomato flavoured ones because they turned her tongue and lips red and she looked like she was wearing a red lipstick, just like Mama when she is not going to work but going to town or when she goes to see her friends.*

*“Thank you for the compliment my child,” Mama started, “but I am not smart because I know English. I am smart because I have allowed myself to exercise my brain power on a number of things around me. I am able to deal, solve and face problems. I have not much schooling, I cannot understand numbers, I cannot understand much of the stuff you read at school but I am smart because I am able to apply my brain power when I am needed to.” Mama took a sip of water from a bottle that she always carried with her. Mama had always said that water is like fuel to the body as petrol is to the car. She had always said you can eat all you want but without water, your body will break down.*

*“Do you hear what I am trying to say to you my child?” Mama never used Noma’s name when addressing her or making her understand a certain concept; she always called her ‘my child’ or ‘young lady’. She only used her name when she was angry at her and when she was really angry, she would use her full name – NomaWushe Soginga!*

*“Yes Mama,” Noma responded still chewing her tomato flavoured chips and licking her lips to make sure they get dyed by the chips so she can look like she is wearing a red lipstick. She understood her mother clearly but she still wanted to learn English. She still wanted to be able to hold a proper conversation with Amanda Cobalt. She loved Amanda. She was beautiful with blonde hair while Noma’s hair was kinky. She had nice white skin while Noma had a very dark skin. Amanda’s knees were the same colour as the rest of her leg while Noma’s knees were so dark and had lines from all the kneeling to clean the house. Mama had always gotten angry with her and told her she needed to love herself as she is.*

*“God created you just the way you are Noma. You are beautiful in your own skin. Your hair is beautiful. You are my daughter and I love you just the way you are. You always say I am beautiful; did you ever realise that you look like me?” Noma smiled when Mama said that. If she looked like Mama, then that meant that she was also beautiful.*

*“Good. Good, let that smile stay because you are beautiful. Stop comparing yourself to Amanda. Amanda is beautiful in her own skin and you are beautiful in your own. No need for comparisons.”*

*Noma loved and envied everything about Amanda except her parents. They treated her like she was a poor somebody, someone who needed to be handed second hand clothes, food, toys, books – even though she loved getting books from them. All the books they gave her had white characters and big houses with rich people who always had plenty. Noma didn’t relate to the people in the books the Cobalts gave her but she loved reading nonetheless.*

\*\*\*

“Noma!”

Noma woke up from her thoughts as Jacqueline called her name.

“Yes maam,” she responded feeling embarrassed.

“I asked you a question.” Noma looked lost. What was the question she had been asked? She could not remember.

“Are you hungry Noma? Did you have breakfast this morning?” Jacqueline asked worried that Noma was probably hallucinating about food.

“No ma’am, I am not hungry. I am sorry, I forgot what you asked.” Noma was feeling embarrassed.

“If your grandmother doesn’t work, how do you survive?” Jacqueline repeated the question to Noma. Noma was surprised that Jacqueline was not angry at her for not paying attention and for making her repeat her question. Makhulu was not going to be as patient.

“We plant in our field. We have lots of vegetables and maize. We have lots of chickens too, even though we don’t slaughter all the time.” Noma said realising that she really missed the taste of chicken. Grandmother really needed to do something. They have never stayed this long without chicken.

“What about other things?”

“Things like what?”

“Things like fruits, sweets and other nice things a little girl like you is likely to crave now and then?”

“We have lots of fruit in the forest. After doing our chores we go and pick different types of juicy fruit in the forest.”

“What type of fruit?”

“Berries, prickly pears and kei-apples. Don’t you have fruits where you live?” Noma asked.

“We do, but we buy them from the shops.”

Noma could not understand why they liked buying everything where the Jacqueline lived. Didn’t they have gardens? Didn’t they have forests with fruit or were they just too lazy to work in the garden and too lazy to run to the forest and get fruit? She would not ask the lady if they were lazy in her community. The lady did not like her asking questions about her community; when she had asked if they were poor in her community, the lady had not been happy at all. So she won’t ask.

“My grandmother also brings us fruit and other things when she goes to town to collect her grant money.”

“How often does she go to town?”

“Only once a month because she only gets grant money once a month.”

“So, you only have sweets and fruits once a month?”

“Sweets, fruits, juice and purity. She always brings us those,” Noma said with a smile.

“Purity? The baby food?”

“Yes.’

“Why?”

“Because my grandmother loves purity and so she also brings us. It’s nice and smooth. But I like it most when it’s cold. Mama used to buy me and put it in the fridge when I visited her in eGoli. It would be so nice when cold...” Noma looked longing and she unconsciously licked her lips, like she is reliving the moments of cold purity. “I still like it though even when it’s not cold. We don’t have a fridge, you see. So, we eat things as they are even if they would be nicer when cold. But all us kids, we always keep all our things for Monday for school.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Grant day is always on Fridays. So all the grandmothers in the village go to town to collect it. They come back on Saturday with the nice things for us...”

“They sleep in town?”

“Yes. No. Not exactly, they sleep in the nearby villages and come back on Saturday.”

“Why do they sleep in other villages?”

“Because town is far. So they have to sleep somewhere in order to not sleep outside.”

“Ok, I see.”

Noma kept quiet, she seemed like she had lost her train of thoughts.

“Ok go on,” Jacqueline could see this and she reminded her. “You were telling me that you keep things for Monday? Why do you keep them for Monday and not eat them the same day?”

“Because if you eat them the same day, the other kids at school will have theirs on Monday and you will be watching them eat and you will have nothing. You see, our grandmothers come back with all these things. We then keep them in our school bags, for Monday. But we keep the juice and the purity outside under the ground to keep it cool because if it sits in the school bag the whole weekend, it will be too hot like tea and it doesn’t taste nice. It has an after taste. Each of us then will go outside and find a secret spot where we dig and bury our juice and purity. They do not get cold like things used to be in Mama’s fridge but at least they are not hot as grandmother’s tea,” Noma giggled a bit and caught herself and tried to behave again. “Come Monday, we wake up and bath and on our way to school, we go to our secret holes where we buried our juice. We dig it out and run to school. We then cannot wait for lunchtime to take out what our grandmothers brought us from town on Saturday. We eat our sweets, apples and drink our juice but we eat the oranges last.”

“Why do you eat the oranges last?”

“Because they elongate the feeling of having something nice.”

“How?”

Noma’s face glowed with a bright smile and then she explained. “It’s in the way you eat it ma’am. You see, you first play with your orange. You can either play ‘catch’ with your friends or you can hit it against the wall like you would a tennis ball. This goes on for a while. And if the lunch break ends, even



better because then you still have something nice in your bag and you will eat it after school. Once all the playing is done, you prickle it with a thin sharp stick. You need to make sure the stick is really thin because the orange juice needs to come out slowly so that you don't quickly finish it. Sucking the juice out of the orange usually takes around 15-20 minutes. The orange need to be really dry. Once that is done, you open up the dry orange and start eating it really slow. You then finish off with the white inside layer on the orange skin. The only thing that needs to be left of the orange is the skin. That is why we eat oranges last ma'am."

Jacqueline looked at Noma like she was telling her an ancient African folktale that was a legend. This cannot surely be true, she thought. But Noma was still smiling, thinking she cannot wait for the lunch break.

"I see. What else do you keep for Monday?"

"That's all ma'am."

"When do you eat your purity?"

"It's the first thing we eat because other children steal them. So, you need to eat it first."

"Why do they steal purity?"

"Because it is very nice. So they want to have lots of it."

"I see. And you still think you have everything you need?"

"Yes ma'am. Everything. We have each other."

"Do you have toys Noma?"

"No ma'am. No one has toys. We make dolls out of stones and plastics. But we don't really play with dolls."

"What do you play with?"

Noma was very free now. She was speaking louder and she was starting to make the left and right tilting movements that made the bunk stool to also move left and right with squeaky sounds.

"We play *umachelu*. We play *umgusha*. We go down the river to swim. We collect clay when we are done to design cows, houses and tea sets with them. We collect old plastics and make fashionable clothes from them. You should see the clothes I make; they are really beautiful. Mama used to say I could dress Karabo and Queen from Generations. Mama used to love watching Generations. She used to say if she had gone to school, she was going to be successful like Karabo," Noma paused realising how much she really misses her mother. She has however taught herself not to cry when she missed her because it was pointless to cry; Mama was not going to come back. "We also help the boys to make wired cars. We do a lot of things me and my friends ma'am," she continued trying very hard not have any more thoughts about Mama.

"I see. So, you don't need toys."

"No ma'am. Our grandmothers do not have money for toys."

"But you still say you are not poor?"

"No ma'am. We are not poor. You don't have to buy something you don't need."

Jacqueline looked at Noma for a long time and Noma started feeling shy.

“You miss your mother, don’t you Noma?” Jacqueline asked looking Noma straight in the eyes which made Noma very uncomfortable. She had never been confronted like that about Mama’s absence in her life, not even by her grandmother. They all missed her but they never spoke about it. Noma would see tears down grandma’s cheeks when she was praying to God and asking Him for strength to take care of them. Grandmother would tell God that Mama was a good child and ask God to set aside a good place for Mama in heaven. And grandma would keep quiet, swallowing hard and then quickly change the prayer and pray about something else. Noma understood grandma. She also used to cry when she was alone and thinking about Mama. She would miss her so deeply that she would sometimes run to her empty grave which was under the big gum tree in their garden. She would get there and talk to Mama and ask her to come back. Sometimes she would be unable to speak, so she would just sit next to the grave and cry. Sometimes she would get so angry at Mama for leaving her that she would curse her and kick the grave. But she would still not be satisfied and the pain would go stronger inside her heart. So she decided to stop. Stop the crying, stop the cursing and stop visiting Mama’s empty grave. She just stopped but the pain inside her never stopped.

“I miss her,” she quickly answered and did quick movements to the left and right to try and distract herself from feeling the pain. The bunk stool did those squeaky sounds more louder this time but Noma didn’t care that she was making noise. She needed distraction from what was starting to happen inside her heart.

“I see,” Jacqueline seeing the turmoil inside Noma’s heart, she changed the subject. “What will happen with you and your cousins when your grandmother dies?”

Noma stopped moving left and right on her bunk stool. Her eyes shot out. She looked at Jacqueline like she has just told her a nightmare. She said ‘when’ not ‘if’. She knew Makhulu will die someday but the way Jacqueline said it, it was as though Makhulu was dying tomorrow.

“Who will take care of you? Who will buy the nice things once a month?”

Noma looked away. She could feel tears gathering fast in her eyes. She could feel anger building up in her chest. Who did Jacqueline think she is? How does she come here and dictate that Makhulu is going to die?

“Makhulu will not die ma’am,” she shot out still looking away, trying very hard not to cry. “She will not die.”

“I am sorry Noma. I did not mean to upset you. I just wanted to find out if you realise that the situation that you are in is really sad because Mkhulu is the only person taking care of you and one day she will die or get sick and will not be able to take care of you. Who then will take care of you?”

Noma turned and looked at Jacqueline. She had just apologised but her face didn’t show that she was feeling bad about what she had just said. Noma could sense that Jacqueline was actually happy that Noma was suddenly worked up. She was probably happy that finally Noma will see that they are poor. She had just been blinded about god-knows-what and the nice things they got once a month and kept for Mondays. Those were the things Noma was thinking about all her life and that is why she never noticed they are poor. Now, Jacqueline had just opened her eyes to reality and Noma was finally waking up.

“Others will take care of us. Theko’s mother will take care of us. Or Nofixi’s mother. Or Mpuxe’s mother. They are like family to us. They will not leave us alone.”

“Oh, how sure are you that they will take care of you? They have their own children, don’t they?”

“They do but every child in this village belongs to every adult in this village. My sister and brother are not my grandmother’s. Their parents passed away and my grandmother took them in. Now they have family. No one ever goes without a parent here ma’am. No one.” Noma said still feeling angry but she just could not express it.

“So, there are no orphans here?”

“We never use the term orphan ma’am.”

“I see...Tell me Noma, how would you describe life here.”

Noma kept quiet for a long time. At first her face was still angry and her eyes filled with tears. But the more she thought of an answer to Jacqueline’s question, her face started transforming. Her eyes lit up. Her mouth opened up to a smile, revealing a gap between her front teeth. She then answered.

“Ma’am, I think you came to a wrong place. Life here is everything but not poor.”

Just then the lunch break bell rang. Noma jumped up and started for the door. All of a sudden there was noise all over the school ground. Children shouting, playing, eating and outside the window, Jacqueline could see Noma. She was pushing a disabled boy on a home-made wheelchair. The boy was laughing so hard as Noma pushed him that way and the other in his wheelchair. The boy didn’t have legs but the smile in his eyes didn’t communicate sadness. Noma started spinning the boy faster and faster until the child was screaming with laughter. Noma stopped when she got tired, also laughing hard. She bent down and said something to the child and the child smiled broadly and nodded his head. Noma then pushed the boy to a nearby tree. They sat under the shade and opened their bags. Out came an apple, purity, juice and lastly an orange. Jacqueline looked around and almost every child had the same pack. And almost every child had a smile on his and her face. Jacqueline went back to the dusty-looking table, packed her clean file into her brief case and went out the door. As she drove out of the school gate, her and Noma’s eyes met. She smiled. Noma waved. Jacqueline understood.

\*\*\*