

*“Who can find a noble wife?
For her worth is far above rubies.”*

1.

The river of love overflows. The river of love can never be stopped by any force. The river of love reaches the driest of sands, like when the ocean meets the desert. The rain that comes from this river nourishes and feeds lands that are barren and lost. And yet, for humankind, the river was been canalised by societal order and traditions in an attempt to control it.

The river of love can never be contained. This was something Tshepo learned seven years into his marriage with Palesa. Palesa: a befitting name for the beauty of his life. Palesa was a modest woman who grew up in the hills of Naledi Village in the Sotho enclave of the Free State Province. Her skin was toned by the hard labour of working the land with her grandmother. Her complexion was coated by the smooth tan brown of the soil she toiled day in and day out in her youth. She was a beautiful lady who wore dresses and nothing but. She did not own a single trouser in her clothing. She was rooted deep in traditional traditions, even though she had the tattoo of her son's name written on the left side of her body, along her ribs resting close to her heart.

“Tshepo, sorry to bother you, but Thabang needs his milk. When will you be able to buy it?” She asked her husband. They were sitting outside, basking in the warm sunlight of the Free State morning sun. It was cloudy that morning, but the sun was fair on their skins. Tshepo, during the early months of the year, lost his

job. He still remembered the meeting vividly as they called him into the office. The management of his organisation was extending operations. In doing so, they were streamlining the organisation to meet the requirements of the expansion. And so, the department he worked for, for six years, was no longer required by the organisation. Like a flash of lightning, his career ended instantly.

“I’ll go now now. Will it be okay? I have an interview in town today. I’ll buy the milk after the interview. That’s okay? Tshepo responded.

“Okay my Love, it’s okay,” Palesa responded.

“Unlike me, you have to go to work. Thabang is still asleep so I think I’ll nap here on the porch for a while,” said Tshepo as he slouched deeper into his white picnic chair. The warm sun gave him sweet kisses that caressed his worries away.

The weight of unemployment weighed heavy on his chest. Even though he tried his best to have an identity outside his work, his work gave him a reputation. A junior business analyst sounded better than saying “I’m hustling.” In his hometown, someone who was “hustling” or considered himself an entrepreneur was unemployed.

After all, that’s what people first ask when they meet: ‘what do you do?’ This question has become a norm in our conversations. This question aims to scale the respect that a person will receive or give in a conversation. There is no respect for the unemployed

man in society. A man's handsomeness is directly correlated to the depths of his pockets. Well, that's what his uncles taught him. However, he knew that he could not worry about what people thought about him. He had to be strong for himself, Thabang and his wife, Palesa.

Palesa smiled at her husband's remark and got up. She hugged him over his head and walked into their four-bedroom house. The house belonged to Tshepo's parents. His parents moved from Elite, a suburb in their hometown of QwaQwa, to the Bloemfontein two years back. His parents felt that it was time they bought a property in a retirement village as their three children, including Tshepo, were extremely busy with their own lives to care for them. When the news was announced that Tshepo was retrenched, his father offered him the house to his care. Tshepo agreed and was able to convince Palesa about the idea of staying at his parents' house. She eventually agreed and figured that the house was a better environment than the studio apartment they rented out for their four-month-old baby boy Thabang.

Thabang; the happiness of her life. He lay on the sofa in the TV room fast asleep. She looked at him in a way that only a mother could. She looked at him with an unconditional and undying love that only a mother possesses. She was tempted to raise and embrace him before heading to work. But she knew that once he woke up, Thabang will not fall asleep again. Especially if he sees

her leave. She quietly walked over to him and gently kissed him on the forehead.

“Mommy loves you,” she whispered softly into his tiny ears.

Thabang was their second baby. The first baby remained unnamed as God called it back when it was still being formed in her womb. Through the death of their unnamed baby, her marriage with Tshepo was birthed. Tshepo was the first and only man she had slept with. She felt that Tshepo gave her enough sexual pleasure that there was no need to find another man. Her church “mothers”, who were older women at the church, told her that she should not entertain any other men. The metaphor they used is that she must love beef and beef alone. Because the moment she tasted mutton, she would want chicken and pork too.

She pledged her body to Tshepo. In her heart, she wished that they had married because they wanted to and not because they had to. Their traditional parents (even her own parents who were absent during her teenage years but made their presence known during the lobola negotiations) forced them to get married a month after they learnt that she was pregnant with her first child seven years ago. Her wedding, she felt, was an elaborate cover-up for her pregnancy.

But she knew that her marriage was real and true. Because Palesa felt loved by Tshepo. She trusted in him. They were married for seven years but they have been together for eight years. In that

eight years, Tshepo never cheated on her. Going into their ninth year, she hoped that it'll continue so. Even though Tshepo would remark about other women and compliment them, he knew where home was. He knew to whom his heart belonged too. He would never hurt her with another woman. So, she believed.

She found comfort in that when faced with the challenges of her marriage with Tshepo; they faced them together. Not once was there a challenge in their marriage that involved another woman. She was taught that infidelity affects the victim while the instigator moves on. The instigator is the one who moves on and the victim stays in the trenches of the emotional war of betrayal. It was because of this that she too never cheated on Tshepo. She loved him too much to inflict that much pain on him.

Besides, she wouldn't have an affair with another man even if she wasn't married to Tshepo. Regardless of what her church mothers taught her, to her the act of cheating and entertaining another man while committed to one defiles the integrity of a woman. She had an image she had to protect for the sake of her dignity and that of her family. Her grandmother taught her that reputation is what people think of you. She held on to this belief. She acted in a manner that people could never say anything bad about her or her family.

In the eyes of the church, she was a praying and powerful woman. In the eyes of her superiors at work, she was a hardworking and diligent employee. In the eyes of her husband, she was a loyal and

faithful wife. She hoped that to her son, she was a caring and loving mother.

As she walked out the door, she looked at Thabang one more time. Still out cold, he lay fast asleep lost his dreams. His tiny fingers clutched into a tiny fist, looking like a round dumpling. She could not resist her eyes from getting teary looking at her son. She quickly composed herself and walked out the door.

The car was already parked in the driveway. Stepping outside the main door, she looked at her husband. Unlike Thabang, her husband was already drooling on his chest. Slight snoring accompanied each air he exhaled. Unlike Thabang who even in his sleep looked like a ball of energy, Tshepo looked like a deflated ball that was kicked around to its ends. It was in moments like these that she saw how exhausted her husband was from working hard all these years. Perhaps, she thought, the retrenchment was a blessing in disguise.

She walked over to her husband and kissed him on the forehead.

“I love you,” she whispered in his ears. She left her two boys for work.

2.

A sharp sound stunned Tshepo in his slumber. He vaulted into motion as if someone poured ice-cold water on his spine. The sounds of Thabang's cries pierced his soul. He ran into the house, panicking about his boy. He was deathly worried something had happened to him. He rushed into the TV room and saw Thabang crying.

A sigh of relief wheezed through his mouth as he realised that it was Thabang announcing that he had woken up. He walked over to his son and raised him. He hugged him tightly. The contact of his skin on his son soothed Thabang. Thabang quieted down and lay still in his father's embrace.

The apple of his eye. The source of his strength. In the immense stress of retrenchment that he was experiencing, Thabang offered him the solace he needed. Through Thabang, he felt strong.

Through Thabang, mountains become pebbles.

As he held his son, his phone pinged a text message:

“11:30 am. Don't forget. See you soon”

He looked at the time on his phone's home screen and realised he had three hours to get ready. He returned his phone to the pocket of his shorts and firmly held Thabang.

“Ok Thabang, let’s see if I can’t clean you up today. Two days without bathing isn’t life buddy.”

He switched Thabang to his left chest and held him firmly with one hand. Thabang was still groggy from his nap. With Thabang in his arm, he walked into the kitchen. He walked to the kitchen counter to prepare his son’s milk. There were two servings left in Thabang’s baby formula container. Thabang drank the formula like a fish. He realised that the formula will be finished during the day.

At this stage of fatherhood, he had mastered the art of using one hand to prepare his boy’s milk. He carefully poured the sterilised water into his son’s bottle. He then proceeded to carefully add six scoops of the baby formula into the bottle. Like a surgeon operating in the theatre, he carefully sealed the bottle with the bottle tit. He picked up the bottle and began to shake it until the baby formula dissolved fully with the water.

“Right, let’s go eat”, He said to Thabang as they walked into the TV room. He sat on the large sofa that sat across the TV. He carefully sat on the left side of the sofa, so that he can rest his arm on the sofa arm. This was to provide extra support for Thabang as he drank his milk. Tshepo carefully placed the tip of the bottle on Thabang’s small lips. Like a suction cup that holds phone holders on car windscreens, Thabang sucked the milk from the bottle. The force of Thabang’s gulping of the milk forced Tshepo to firm his grip on the bottle.

“Easy buddy, easy. Easy champ!” Tshepo said to Thabang.

But the words fell on deaf ears. Within no time, Thabang finished the whole bottle of milk. Shortly thereafter, Thabang let loose a deep, loud and long burp.

“Hey now! Easy Champ, easy!” Tshepo chuckled as he spoke with his son.

He sat looking at the TV screen. He wasn’t really watching as he was pondering about his situation. The fact that he lost his job was not what bothered him. What bothered him was how unceremoniously the organisation that he pledged his budding young adulthood for let him go. They discarded him by employee number. The retrenchment letter was generic with generic condolences. The HR officer who hired him with an enthusiastic charm delivered the death blow of his career with a stone-cold face. He was discarded like a used condom. The pain scarred deep into him.

No one taught him that the world of employment is the world where your name is replaced by 6 numbers. No one told him that the world of employment views their employees as disposable entities that can be replaced or retrenched all in the name of profit; profit that is enjoyed by the higher up who claim to have worked to be in that position.

His higher up was the son of the wealthiest man in the province. The business was a 21-year-old birthday gift that he received from

his father. He did not work his way up to the position of CEO. The CEO was merely two years older than him. Yet this same person would rally his workers to work hard to reach the same successes he has, failing to mention the millions in bailouts that his father bestowed to the business on a yearly basis. These bailouts were because his son's used company resources for his own frivolous lifestyle. It was the son's misuse of company resources that the business had to implement retrenchments in the business in order to save it from bankruptcy.

He came to learn this truth about the CEO after he was retrenched. He felt betrayed and defeated to have believed in the "work hard" narrative. However, looking at his son, he knew that he had to conquer the pain. He knew he had to find a way to rise out of the disappointments of false promises that come from being educated.

He knew that whining about his retrenchment would not change his situation. He knew being angry towards his former boss who was living at the expense of people's lives could not change his situation. He knew being frustrated with his teachers who preached about how education will give him a better life would not change his situation either. Because to some degree, there was some truth in it. Through the job that he slaved for in his young adult life, he was glad that along with his provident fund, he had saved enough money to keep him afloat for a few years. His financial discipline was paying dividends.

He remembered that in the name of saving money, he negotiated with his family and Palesa's family to invite only close family members to their wedding. He also remembered how for most of his employment years he walked an average of 12km a day, to and fro, from work. The only reason he bought a car was when he started noticing taxi drivers beginning to pursue his wife; pursuing her with violence when they got rejected. This was a powerful enough motive to buy her a car.

As he sat on the sofa with Thabang, the day when he bought the car came to mind. He remembered that for months prior to that, he would ask Palesa which car she liked. His wife was not into cars. She would joke that a village girl like herself just needed a good pair of shoes even though she had her driver's license. However, whenever the chance occurred, Tshepo would ask his wife which car she liked. He assumed Palesa never caught on that he wanted to buy a car for her because she never indicated what car she liked, or which car she'd like to have. To find this information, he paid close attention to his wife's transport needs.

Palesa would sometimes complain about taxis being too low. So low that at times, she could feel the taxi hit a pothole. She would complain about how sometimes she had to divide her grocery shopping into two trips or pay for additional seats because some taxis would be too small to accommodate her goods. She said that for her a safe car was more important than a fast car. He

remembers that she said that a few months after the doctor confirmed her pregnancy with Thabang.

Armed with this information, Tshepo went to work. He called various dealerships with these three primary areas of concern for his wife. He found luck when one dealership offered him a white 2017 Volvo XC90 T6. The car was perfect for his wife; big, modern, spacious and safe. His financial discipline paid dividends as he was able to pay 70% of the total cost of the vehicle upfront. As a father and husband, he felt proud to have bought his wife a car. A crowning highlight of his existence as a man.

Palesa was stuck in traffic. She miscalculated how late she would be. The issue with QwaQwa traffic is that it is caused by poor infrastructure and poor drivers. What caused her to be stuck in traffic in that instance was that the traffic lights were not working. It seemed earlier in the day one driver got into the junction thinking it was their turn. Unfortunately, the other driver from the right of the junction thought the same. It seems that the driver who was driving straight did not stop but, rather yielded as he approached the junction. In doing so, he did not see that the other driver from the right who was already making his turn into the junction.

Luckily both drivers were not injured. They were waiting for the officials to arrive and sort out the issue. They were surprisingly calm for individuals who were involved in an accident. But judging from their cars, she could tell this was not their first time

in an accident. The one car was a KFC. This was the nickname given to a 1998 Toyota Corolla sedan. It was all shades of blue with dents embellishing the entire body of the car. The other car was a foreign car. She could not make the model or the manufacturer of the car. The license plate was a solid orange similar to the old OFS Apartheid license plates. It too was beat up with a faded silver coating its exterior.

As she sat in the car waiting for the accident to be resolved, she felt awful about asking her husband to buy the baby formula. knowing his financial situation, she knew better than to ask her husband for financial tasks. She felt ashamed that she had taken the car when Tshepo said that he had an interview today.

However, she found solace in Tshepo's words when he arrived with the car at the house. He told her that the car is hers. That the car is a token of appreciation for her being an amazing woman and for being a wonderful wife.

Something in those words enabled her to drive the car with confidence and with peace of mind. She texted her boss that she will be late. She took a picture of the accident and sent the picture to her boss. Afterwards, she sent Tshepo a text that stated that she'll get the milk and not to worry about it. Even though Tshepo did not like being robbed of the ability to provide, even if it was purchasing baby formula, she wanted to be his peace. In all areas of his life especially now as he was going through a lot financially. She ended a text with a promise to cook him his favourite meal

and a very sweet dessert later that evening. After all, those were the things that make a woman a good wife.

He was about to bathe Thabang when he saw the text on his phone. Even though he did not want to admit it, he felt relieved whenever his wife took over any financial responsibilities during this period of his life. He was thankful that his frugal ways placed him in a better position than his friends who were also retrenched. However, his financial situation still required that he stayed frugal. Even though it ate at his pride, he appreciated Palesa saying that she would buy Thabang's baby formula.

The time on his phone stated that it was 9:45 am. He realised that it was best to bathe Thabang quickly. Only thereafter would he be able to prepare himself for his appointment at 11:30 am.

He rushed to get Thabang's wash basin and special soaps for his baby skin. Meticulously, he poured hot and cold water to get a temperature that Thabang would enjoy.

"Okay Buddy, let's go," Tshepo said to Thabang. Thabang's tiny legs were floating in the air as his father gingerly lowered him in the wash basin. As fast as time was encroaching on his forthcoming appointment, he would not rush washing his boy. For him, washing Thabang was spiritual. The water not only washed away his boy's soft skin, but also any evil spells that might be on his boy.

The death of his unborn boy haunted him. Like a fiend in the night, the ghost of his unborn baby lived in his dreams and in his nightmares. Palesa never told him how she felt about her miscarriage. She would say that it was God's will. She would say that it was retribution for having sex before marriage. Tshepo was still to find the scripture that explicitly stated that sex before marriage is a sin. But for the sake of his wife, who he took her virginity, he chose not to argue with her. He chose not to question her beliefs about the death of an unborn baby. He chose to keep the feelings to himself.

After 13 minutes, he finished bathing Thabang. Thabang, after he baths, without fail, always fell asleep. Tshepo knew that after 10 mins or so, his boy would fall into a deeper slumber and wake up again in the afternoon. This would give him more than enough time to get ready. As predicted, after 12 minutes, Thabang began to doze off. 9 mins later, Thabang was in a deep sleep. Tshepo gently rocked his boy for a further 10 mins to seal his sleep, and then he carried him to his cot. Like an angel gliding from the heavens to Earth, Tshepo gently and cautiously laid his baby boy in his cot.

"I love you, my boy," Tshepo said as he kissed his boy on the forehead.

He looked at his boy with an unshakable strong love that only a father possesses. He could not help but be teary as he looked at his son lost in his sleep. His tiny fingers formed a tiny fist that looked

like a miniature boxing glove. He took out his phone to take a picture of his son. In doing so, he realised he had little under an hour left to prepare.

He rushed to the shower, wasting no time cleaning himself as quickly as possible. Even though it was not necessary as Palesa had already done it, he decided to iron out his shirt for the 11:30 am appointment. He had to look sharp he thought to himself. Even if it did not call for it, he did not want to compromise his appearance.

He brushed his hair. He folded his collar. He applied some cologne around his neck. At 11:17 am he was done. With a final check in the mirror, he approved what he saw. He was ready.

3.

After about 12 mins after he was done preparing himself for his 11:30 am appointment, there was a knock on the door. Tshepo, opened the door and there she was.

“Hey,” Ntombi said.

“Hey Babe,” Tshepo responded.

He ushered Ntombi into the living room. Ntombi was Tshepo’s former colleague from work. She was an intern, during Tshepo’s final months, in his department. As the head of the department, Ntombi was under Tshepo’s direct guidance. She was a B. Com Honours graduate who was fresh from university when she joined the company. Tshepo was 31 years old at the time. Ntombi was 22 years old. In the span of 7 months, Tshepo and Ntombi’s relationship began to blur the lines between being professional and being cordial.

Ntombi was a focused woman. However, because of her lifestyle in university, many doubted that she would graduate, let alone be one of the top students in her class. She was a city girl who originally came from Pretoria before enrolling in the local university in the heart of the Maluti mountains. Her aunt lived in QwaQwa and to save on costs, her parents enrolled her in the local university.

Her friends were all going to universities and other colleges in various cities across the country. She was going to a rural campus. Surprisingly, the new chapter in her life excited her. It sparked intrigue in her. Her life had plateaued by the fast life of the city. And so, the simplicity of a small town inspired her to look forward to the new chapter of her life.

However, rural life did not stop her from living the life she was accustomed to. She had a following of 30k followers on her Instagram account. Her Twitter account had a following of more than 100k. Her posts, on both platforms, were mostly of her in exclusive locations around the country and outside the country. These trips to these exclusive locations were sponsored by men with such deep pockets that her trips did not cause a ripple in their bank accounts.

She realised that even in the “bondus”, as her friends called QwaQwa, there were young wealthy men looking for young women to spoil. She thrived on men’s frail egos. She thrived on men who attached their ability to love a woman to their bank balance. As opposed to her aunt who was a multi-level marketer for cosmetic products, this was her side hustle. And she loved that it paid way more than any cheap cosmetic commissions ever would.

She was a sugar baby to two men in QwaQwa and one man in Johannesburg. At 19, she visited the Maldives twice and Dubai

countless times. In her last year of study, her 42-year-old doctor sugar daddy blessed her with a trip to Greece.

What people thought of her was irrelevant. At her age, she had already accumulated enough money from her sugar daddies to pursue a business of her own. But she knew that she was still too young and inexperienced to start a business. After completing her studies, she saw an internship post at a local marketing agency and she applied.

Her relationship with Tshepo started one morning when she was in his office to provide him with the report of a project the department was working on. Traditionally, Tshepo kept his door open as a policy. On this day, however, there was a strong wind that blew across the office that kept closing the door.

“Close the door or else it will break,” Tshepo told Ntombi as she entered his office.

She followed the instruction and sat by Tshepo’s desk. She pulled a chair close to Tshepo in order to explain key areas of her report on her laptop screen. She was wearing a typical intern’s uniform; a white oxford shirt that she had buttoned slightly above her bust that was tucked into a pencil skirt which rested above her knees. The uniform accentuated her waistline which gave her the figure of a model. She looked extremely petite as she sat on the chair.

Tshepo gazed into her eyes through the lenses of lust. He began to undress Ntombi with his eyes as she presented her report. He

began with her hair that she had tied in a bun. It was one of those rare days that she wasn't wearing a weave. The bun pulled her hair above her, slightly above the crown of her head. He slowly gazed passed her right ear, down her firm yet soft looking neck. He envisioned his fingers clutched around it.

Tshepo was not listening to her and she knew it. But she did not mind. She enjoyed his company. She had seen his marriage ring that, in her eyes, choked his finger. To her, she figured she'd be the one to give him a fresh breath of air.

She took advantage of the situation. She looked behind her to ensure the door was closed. In doing so, she held her phone to her mouth, gently kissing the left corner of her phone. The kiss lingered and she hoped Tshepo saw the lingered kiss.

Indeed, he saw it. The pulses in his loins clouded Tshepo's judgment. Images of a pregnant Palesa kept flashing in his mind. He remembered the marriage counsellor telling them that Rome wasn't built in one day, but Pompeii burnt in one. He remembered his father telling him that it is the hinge that opens the door; that it is the crack that breaks the window. A single moment with this young lady, who was clearly flirting with him, could - no - would destroy his marriage.

Then the unthinkable happened. As if by mistake, Ntombi dropped her phone. She froze for a moment. She did not know what to do. But it was her phone and couldn't expect Tshepo to reach for it.

And so, she bent over to reach for it. In doing so, the top button of her shirt popped.

Tshepo saw this as it unfolded. For a moment, Ntombi seemed embarrassed by the wardrobe malfunction. However, it seemed as if it did not bother her. Instead, she paused and analysed the shirt. In doing so, she kept adjusting and readjusting her shirt and her bra underneath her shirt. Like freshly prepared jelly, the motion of Ntombi's breasts aroused Tshepo to the point of no return. He stood up from his chair.

She did not expect this to happen. She was slightly embarrassed by what happened. At first, she tried to fix herself by concealing herself. However, she felt Tshepo's lustful eyes burn into her. This was what she wanted. She took advantage of the situation. She exaggerated her actions. She even forgot that she had dropped her phone. Suddenly she felt a firm, yet warm hand grab her by the shoulder. The warmth of Tshepo's hand filled her body. She raised her head and saw Tshepo looking at her. She could tell that he was not looking at her as a colleague. She could tell that he was not looking at her as a young lady beginning to blossom in her adulthood. She could tell he looked at her with eyes that confirmed that she was worthy of him. In his other hand, he held the office key. He gave it to her.

"Lock the door," he told her.

She gladly obliged.

Since that day, Ntombi became Tshepo's second woman. An affair that remained a secret to Palesa. Palesa never suspected him to be cheating. He never altered his habits. He treated Palesa with the same courtesy as always. During the first few months of the affair, he felt guilty about the affair. But as time progressed, he was comfortable with it. Ntombi offered him the rejuvenating youthful sexual energy that he needed.

He loved Palesa and he knew that would never change. However, Palesa was too serious. She was too focused. It was these virtues that, for him, made him feel that she was good enough to marry. And this, he believed, was what he wanted from a wife. And he felt fortunate to have found these virtues in Palesa.

Ntombi on the other hand was not the wife he'd ever want. She lived life moment by moment. She was intelligent too for him. Not only in terms of her studies, but she knew the streets. Unlike Palesa, Ntombi had multiple partners before him. She was a woman marked with emotional scars from past relationships. As young as she was, she was sexually more mature than his wife. And this excited Tshepo. He loved being with her. It seemed that Ntombi had the combination of being a young woman with the spirit of an older one. This sweet combination intoxicated him. He was addicted to it.

"I'm guessing Thabang is asleep," Ntombi said as she saw the empty milk bottle on the table.

“Yeah. My poor champ. But, anyway, how are you today?” Tshepo responded.

“I’m okay, just tired. Don’t feel like going to work today but what’s new?” Ntombi said.

“Yeah what’s new?” Tshepo said.

“I know you are not offended by that,” said Ntombi.

“Yeah, I’m not,” Tshepo chuckled, “I’m actually enjoying this time. I have time to be a family man.”

“A family man with a mistress,” Ntombi responded as she launched herself on him.

She landed flush on his lap. Her weave flowed all over him and the couch. Her petite, heart-shape face looked directly at him. Two beautiful mocha-coloured gemstones she called eyes looked at him lovely. He did not regret giving her money to purchase the hairpiece from Hair Majesty.

“You know this is weird,” She said. She had an accent that had nuances when pronouncing certain words. Whenever she was about to say something, it sounded as if she pitched her nose. The slight baritone undertone in her voice filled the air as she spoke.

“What is?” Tshepo responded.

“I know you are married. I know you have a son. There they are looking at me,” she pointed at the family picture that hang over

the sofa that they were sitting on, “and yet I love you. I love you Tshepo and I don’t know why. And you not even my type!”

Tshepo processed what she told him. The fact that it he was not her type did not bother him. He knew her type. Her type were the rich type. Her type were the middle age men who got promotions early in their careers that enabled them to buy sports cars that he dreamt of. Her type were the middle aged men who got divorced and were making up for living a life of monogamy. He was young married man who was unemployed. He was young man that lived in his parents’ house. He was not rich, regardless how disciplined he was with his finances. He knew that he was not her type.

While the thoughts delved deeper into his mind, he realised that if he was Ntombi’s age, Ntombi would not have given him the light of day. Women like Ntombi would have been women regarded to be ‘out his league’ at the age of 21. The older he got, the more he realised that girls that were out his league when he was young, were beginning to be in his league at the age of 31. Even though he lacked the financial trait that Ntombi looked for in a man, his age granted him the chance to be with a woman who would have been out of his league if he was younger. As he was thinking about the matter, she interrupted his thoughts.

“Tshepo, I have just 20 minutes with you in a week and those 20 minutes are the highlight of my week. But I know if you left your wife, left your child, these 20 minutes became 20 hours, I will not love you anymore. Why is that the case?”

“Well,” Tshepo gathered his thoughts and responded, “I don’t know. And not knowing is what makes our love special and strong. Let’s remain not knowing why we love each other. Instead, let’s enjoy it until we cannot love each other anymore.”

Tshepo knew that he loved Ntombi. But he would never leave Palesa. Moreover, he would never leave Palesa for Ntombi. He loved Ntombi as a second woman, as a mistress to satisfy his animalistic urges. He loved her as a woman who had his body but not his soul. His soul belonged to Palesa.

“Yeah, I guess, you’re right. I must leave now. I miss you in your office,” Ntombi said as she got off Tshepo’s lap. Her royal blue pencil skirt raised midway up her thigh as she was seating on the sofa. Tshepo saw this. Her brown, milk chocolate skin lured him. He proceeded to slowly adjust her skirt. However, instead of pulling the skirt down, he raised it.

Ntombi looked at her watch. She was running late for work. She loved Tshepo. She knew what she was doing was wrong. But to her, she was exploring her love with a man who she loved at that moment. She was not the type of girl to be held down. She loved Spike Lee’s *She’s Got to Have It*. But unlike Nola Darling, she only wanted to be with Tshepo- regardless of her sugar daddies.

She felt Tshepo raise her skirt. She had anticipated this and so, she had her undergarment tucked in her bag. Tshepo fully engulfed in lust, held her by the waistline. He picked her petite body up and

steadily placed her on him. She let out a rush of air as she felt him enter her. She looked at him and could see he was in world of his own.

This is where she loved him to be. She enjoyed seeing the man she loved lose himself inside of her. She raised her head as his strokes intensified. Tshepo intensified his penetration in her. Feeling Tshepo inside her made her legs shiver in pleasure. She kissed him on his neck, right under the chin. A few bursts of passion later, she felt Tshepo melt into her and on the couch. She looked at her man and she was satisfied that he was satisfied. She looked at the picture above them. She felt no guilt.

4.

It was her lunch break. Palesa decided to have her lunch in her office that day. She was missing her two boys. She decided to call Tshepo and ask him how their day was going.

“Hey Baby,” Palesa said over the phone.

“Hey my Queen,” responded Tshepo. He held his phone on his shoulder while he was cleaning the sofa that he was on with Ntombi.

“How is my King and Prince?” Palesa asked.

“Prince is asleep. King is great, just feeling slightly tired.” He responded.

“Have you been to your first appointment for the day?” She asked.

“Yep,” responded Tshepo. He mentally prepared himself to lie to his wife.

“How was it, my Baby?” Palesa asked enthusiastically.

A surge of guilt bolted into Tshepo but quickly dissipated. It was as if each time he cleaned the piece of furniture he soiled his marriage with, he was cleaning his heart as well.

“It was okay. It was quicker than expected but I think the people were happy with my presentation,” He responded as he wrapped up the cleaning.

“That’s good to hear my Baby, hopefully, they’ll call back.” Palesa said excitedly.

“Yeah, they probably will. How’s work?” Tshepo responded with the full intention of changing the conversation.

“It’s okay Babe. Today Daniel isn’t in so one can actually work,” Palesa responded. Daniel was her line manager who micromanaged all his underlings.

“Bra Dan! At least, that’s good though.” He responded.

“I guess it is,” Palesa responded. She began to twirl her fingers around the cord of her office landline. She felt like a teenager who got her first kiss every time she called Tshepo from work.

“My Queen, we’ll talk later. Thabang is crying. I think he just woke up.” Tshepo said.

“He’s only waking up now?” Palesa asked slightly shocked that Thabang was only wake up that late in the morning.

“No, he woke up. Had our dude time and he took a bath. The bath knocked him out.” Tshepo responded.

“Oh, oh okay Babe. See you later my King,” said Palesa.

“Bye, my Queen.” Tshepo said.

Palesa hung up the phone. The voice of her husband brightened her day.

Tshepo lied. He had realised how lately he could no longer have long conversations with his wife. The spark that fuelled their marriage was beginning to dim. He thought that the spark was being doused by his infidelity. He thought perhaps the excitement that Ntombi gave him, he was not getting from his wife. This was strange to him. He loved his wife. He would take a bullet and two for her. However, she was beginning to bore him.

He went to the kitchen and returned the cleaning material he used to clean the sofa. Afterwards, he decided to make a cup of coffee for himself. As the kettle whistled promises of sweet caffeine, he pondered about his situation. He wondered how is it that he could love his wife but still love another woman. He wondered how is it that his soul, he could trust Palesa with it, and yet he could trust his body with Ntombi. The last time he made love to his wife was the night Thabang was conceived. And he has never yearned for her ever since.

At first, he thought it was out of respect for his wife. That she was forming his legacy in her womb and out of respect, he kept his sexual urges to himself. However, the day the HR officer introduced Ntombi in his department, a fire that he had forgotten burnt wildly in him. Seeing Ntombi for the first time reminded him of the days when he was a bachelor. He remembered the thrill of seduction. He felt lust again after a long time. And he loved it.

The kettle went to indicate that it had heated the water to the correct temperature. As he reached for a cup to make his coffee,

his phone pinged a text. He didn't expect a text. Ntombi only sent texts if she was on her way or if she wanted to flirt with him. And that usually happened if they had not met after some time. They met this morning, so he doubted the text to be from Ntombi. He just spoke with his wife. His friends hardly ever texted him and it was a code among his friends that they respected. Perhaps it was a spam message he thought. He paid it no mind and continued making his coffee.

It was two hours after lunch when Palesa's boss, the owner of the company she worked for, Mr. Walter, told her that she could go home. He told her that because she was two days ahead of schedule with her work, she could leave early on that day. She thanked him and wasted no time in leaving her office. She packed her laptop in her bag and scanned the desk for any material that she may be leaving behind. Satisfied that she took what she needed; she left her office.

She was happy that she was leaving early. In her mind, all she saw was Thabang's toothless smile. She was happy that on that day she would spend a few more hours with her baby boy. The image of Thabang reminded her of his milk formula that was running out. Thabang must have finished that which was left by now she thought to herself. She got into her car and drove to the local supermarket before heading to her home.

Driving to the supermarket she thought about her marriage. She was a happily married woman, but she wondered whether was Tshepo a happily married man. It had been such a long time since Tshepo touched her intimately in the sheets of their matrimonial bed. To some extent, this did not bother her. However, she heard the church mothers tell her that men are lions. Lions live to hunt meat and they live to eat meat. If Tshepo was a man, it means that he too is a lion. And if he is a lion, he lives to hunt and eat meat. Tshepo did not have to hunt anymore. He had her. She was his meat. But why wasn't he no longer eating her?

A car guard interrupted her as he ushered her into a free parking near the supermarket. She thanked him but waited in the car until the car guard left. She sat thinking about Tshepo and Thabang. The car guard stood behind the left taillight of her car. She knew that the car guard would leave only if she got out the car. She sunk the thought into the inner chambers of her mind, and she stepped out her car.

"Sezo, I'll watch it don't worry," the car guard yelled at Palesa. His eyes were baked from the marijuana that reeked through his clothes.

"Tankie hle," She responded.

Even though they annoyed him, she was thankful that the car guard got her parking that was close to the entrance of the supermarket. Car guards always disappear and reappear before one's leaves the

supermarket. It was like as they usher a car into parking, they tag the car driver with a sophisticated device that used the science of telekinesis that alerted them when the car driver was back. She despised that. Car guards guard the car. These guys did not guard cars. And because of that, she never gave them money when she was done shopping. But because this car guard showed her the most convenient parking space in the shopping complex, that alone, she thought, would be worthy of a R2 coin or two.

She got into the store and headed straight for the baby section. As she was turning into the baby aisle of the supermarket, there were two women standing next to the baby milk formulas. The one woman was a fairly large woman. She was edging on the thin line between being fat and being thick. However, she dressed well for her body. She looked elegant in her black floral dress and black heels. Next to her was a smaller woman. She was wearing a royal navy-blue pencil skirt which seemed too tight for her body, a cream oxford shirt, and wore a beautiful luscious black weave. She recognised the woman but forgot where she knew her from. Nonetheless, she needed to get the formula for her baby regardless of the fact the women became uncomfortable around her.

She grabbed the milk, smiled at the two ladies and walked on. They smiled back at her and waited for her to be at a respectable distance before they continued with their conversation. She found the situation a bit odd but in the same breath, she thought that

perhaps the women were discussing something confidential. And her presence being there was perhaps breaching their privacy.

Whatever the case, she felt a bit uneasy about her engagement with the women. There was something about her presence that did not sit well with the two women.

“I think he didn’t realise friend. He was too lost in the moment to see we were under his family portrait pic...” Ntombi went silent when she saw Palesa.

Ntombi was buying herself a late lunch when she saw her friend in the aisle. She was a friend whom she hadn’t met in a while so, their conversation was longer than it should have been. She did not realise that they were standing in the baby section of the supermarket.

She saw Palesa and at that moment, she did not understand why Tshepo would cheat on her. Palesa was a good woman. Every person who had met Palesa or had been in her presence said that Palesa is like hot chocolate on a cold day. She was the feeling of being wrapped with freshly washed blankets after being in the snow the whole day. She was a good soul to be around. On top of that, even after giving birth to a big chubby boy and even though she has never seen the inside of a gym (according to Tshepo), she had a figure that most women desired. Palesa was a beautiful woman, inside and out.

Ntombi felt like she was nothing compared to her. She was a tiny girl. For most of her high school years and university years, she was the “small girl”. It was only in her early adult years that she was beginning to be an ‘African woman’, according to her sugar daddy who stayed in Johannesburg. Only recently was she no longer thought to be underage when she went to clubs. Only recently was she no longer being asked by men for her ID before she went on dates with them. Only recently she began to feel like a woman in her own right. However, she did not feel to be the woman that Palesa was. If Palesa was Table Mountain, she felt like the pebble people threw in wishing wells.

And yet, they shared the same man. Tshepo told her that he loves Palesa. He told her to respect his wife and that Palesa would come first. But with her, he always came first. And she loved it.

She was telling her friend that she found pleasure in knowing that she was sleeping with a man married to a “Proverbs 31” woman. As a teenager, her mother would pray that she becomes a woman who surpasses all that’s noble. Her mother would pray that she becomes a woman who walks with dignity and speaks with wisdom. Her mother would pray all night that she becomes a Proverbs 31 woman who would find true love. While her mother would spend countless nights on her knees praying for her to be a Proverbs 31 woman, she would be on her knees between the thighs of a sugar daddy thanking him for a new Chanel bag.

She found sadistic pleasure in that she was with a man married to a woman who was considered to be “the ideal woman”. This was the reason she felt no guilt when she was on top of Tshepo with the portrait of his family staring at her. In her own right, she believed, she was a woman worthy to be loved. Even if it was with a married man.

Watching Palesa walk with grace enchanted her though. Even though she was having an affair with her husband, she loved Palesa. She was about to greet her when her friend nudged her with the cart. Palesa did not seem to recognise her. She smiled at her and she smiled back. An elegant woman Palesa was. She never wore pants. Ntombi had never seen her in a pair of trousers or pants. Palesa gracefully excused herself and reached for the baby formula. With class and pure feminine sophistication, Palesa greeted her and her friend. She walked away leaving behind her presence. A presence that awed her and left her with a whirlwind of bewilderment.

Palesa got into her car trying to recall the lady she just saw. But for the life of her, she could not recall who she was. Perhaps she was one of the church ladies. She recalled one that had a similar weave. She put the thought behind her. The only thing on her mind was seeing her two boys.

5.

Tshepo was in the kitchen when Thabang began crying. Thabang was waking up from his slumber. While making his coffee, he figured it best to prepare Thabang's milk so that it'll be ready before he fully woke up. He grabbed the bottle, dashed to the master bedroom, and got his crying baby. Thabang began sobbing less as he felt his father's arms carry him. They went to the TV room where he fed his baby boy the last of the baby formula.

While Thabang was gulping his milk, his mom walked in.

"Haibo, you here early," Tshepo remarked.

"Yes Baby. Mr Walter let me go early today. Told me that I am ahead with my work so I could leave early." Palesa responded.

"Oh, all right, welcome to the Boy's Land," Tshepo responded

Palesa chuckled at the remark. She walked to the kitchen to place the baby formula. There were no pots on the stove nor were there any dishes in the sink.

"My poor man. He hasn't eaten anything today. Let me go freshen up so I can make him something to eat. Shame, bathong" Palesa thought to herself.

Thabang finished his bottle of milk. This time, he did not burp. Tshepo saw this and raised his boy. He gently tapped Thabang on the back, periodically rubbing his back. Thabang began to burp.

But his burps were irregular. Some short, some loud, and some silent. Tshepo kept rubbing Thabang's back. Experience taught him to be safe than sorry in order to avoid having baby formula on his chest later on.

Palesa finished freshening up. She quickly dashed to the kitchen to make her husband something to eat. Looking at the time, she saw that it was almost time for Tshepo's afternoon walk. She realised that she did not actually leave work that early. But an extra hour was better than nothing. She decided to cook supper instead. The extra hour gave her the time she needed to prepare Tshepo's favourite meal.

Tshepo could hear the whistles of steaming pots. At that moment, a slight tingle of guilt tickled him. He had everything a man could want in a woman and yet, he was addicted to Ntombi. Seemed he had something on his mind that would preoccupy him while he went for his afternoon walk.

"Babe, Thabang is in his chair!" Tshepo spoke loudly so that Palesa can hear him, "I'm going for my walk. See you now now."

"Okay, Babe! Be safe!" Palesa shouted in response.

Tshepo went to the bedroom to put on his walking shoes. He grabbed his earphones and pulled out his phone to set his playlist. In doing so, he saw the text message he ignored early. It was not a spam message. It had a regular 10-digit number attached to it. He still thought it was a scammer. But curiosity got the better of him.

He clicked on the message. What he read forced him to sit on the edge of the bed.

“Hey, Tshepo. Long time. Couldn’t really start the text with ‘hey stranger’ could I? But I don’t know how to say this because I know you’ve moved on. I was saddened when I went to your work and they said that you are no longer there due to company expansions. Kinda figured out what they meant. That’s where I got your number by the way. A young lady gave it to me. Anyway, how have you been?”

The dry humour gave him a vivid clue as to who the sender was. If Ntombi had his body, and Palesa had his soul, then this woman had his heart. It was strange how through a digital text he could tell exactly who it was. He decided to respond before heading out on his walk.

“Hey, Naomi. Yeah, times are kinda tough, but we figure out a path and move forward you know. Been great but could be greater, and you?” He typed the message. He looked at the send button. For a moment, he wondered whether he should press send. He paused and thought if it was wise of him to send the text. This single text was destined to open another door in his already convoluted love life. His heart released an uncontrollable pulse to his finger. Without any more thought, he pressed ‘send’.

She was sitting with her mom when her phone buzzed off the edge of the sofa.

“That’ll be the third phone this year if it breaks,” her mom said.

“No Ma hau,” responded Naomi as she reached over for her phone.

She smiled.

He was taking his normal route as the thought came to him. How could he be in love with his wife, in love with Ntombi, and still feel the same for Naomi? What was it about these women that sparked a fire in him?

He remembered how in university, he found it extremely difficult to find a woman. Moreover, get sexual with one. His friends never seemed to struggle. Each weekend, one of them would regale about how they met a certain girl at a certain club or party. In his early years, he thought that clubs were where one got women.

Desperately wanting to feel the warmth of a woman’s skin, he started going to clubs. But the clubs were a different animal altogether. He realised that clubs were the showgrounds for men to flaunt their wealth. This wealth was a mating dance they initiated to attract women. Like the peacock with the prettiest feathers or the lion with the richest mane, the more money a man could spend on expensive food platters or expensive alcoholic drinks in clubs, the more women that man could attract. And his friends would go to these clubs with a joint income to compete against those solo blessers.

He found that mating dance to be expensive and material. To him, it felt superficial to seduce a woman with how much money you can spend in a club. For him, the mind was the source of seduction. He was into reading and preferred spending his time in the library. Ironically, he found the girls who spent their Friday nights at libraries rather than at clubs more attractive. These were girls of his liking. Like the club girls who loved men with deep pockets, these girls loved men with deep minds. With the countless books he had read, he was deeper than the Bermuda Triangle. Girls who engaged him usually got lost in his pure intellect and understanding of things in this world.

However, it was one thing to talk with women. It was another thing to arouse them sexually. It was a different ball game to seduce women. These were discussions he never had with his father or uncles. These were discussions he never had with anyone older or more mature than him. These were discussions he had with his friends. His friends who got women from the clubs. Their way of inducing women sexually was to get them drunk to the point where they were still conscious to say yes but not conscious enough to be aware of themselves. This lack of consciousness eradicated feelings of shame or lack of confidence in one's own appearance. Even though this made sense to him, however, for him, this was not seduction.

For him, he wanted to explore a woman with all his senses intact and hers intact too. He felt that if he felt this way about seduction,

he would want a woman that felt the same too. The union of bodies to become one should not be diluted by alcohol. The union of bodies is a beautiful phenomenon. So beautiful that it carries the power to create life. To him, it never made sense to engage in this beautiful act of life by intoxicating one of the bodies in the union with some substance.

This philosophy of sex he held true. This philosophy gave clarity to his sexuality that he found difficult to express. Without alcohol or a drug of any kind, emotions dictate the human mind. Emotions of pain, emotions of pleasure, and emotions of self all dominate the mind. In most cases, these emotions limit one's ability to express themselves freely, even sexually. He remembered the first time he gave himself to a woman, he was so worried about how he looked that he kept his shirt on. He was self-conscious that he was not the 6-pack Greek or Nubian gods he saw in dirty movies. And as such, at that moment when he broke his virginity, he felt that perhaps the woman was ashamed for giving herself to him.

From that day, he started looking at women differently. Before Naomi, he viewed women through the lenses of his sister, mother, and church. He viewed women as equals. As in, he viewed women as friends. That somewhere, in the universe, the right woman will arrive and whisk him away. Solomon had an army of wives, and David killed for a woman. But to him, women were to be treated like friends. It was forbidden to even consider the idea of being

with women in a romantic relationship. That was until he met Naomi.

6.

Naomi, her real name Tshidi, was his first girlfriend. They met in his first year of university. She was in the studying area of the library, looking extremely stressed. He approached her. He was nervous. Unlike women from church and his childhood female friends, he felt an array of emotions that were mostly sexual. He felt lust for the first time. He confused it with love. With this love masked lust, he approached her.

“Hey, stressed?” he nervously asked her.

She looked at him with teary eyes. Her brows, however, were closed in with anger.

“Hey, uhm look, now is really not the time,” she responded. He ran her hands through her hair, She rested her head in her hands.

He could not leave. If it was any other woman, he would have left. As a man, he learned early to deal with rejection. Rejection is a part of a man’s life. It is unavoidable. But he couldn’t leave. There was something about this girl he was strongly attracted to. Like a coin attached to a magnet, he could not remove himself from her. She was a flower and he was a bee seeking her pollen. He pulled the chair that carried her bag. She saw him pull the chair. She took her bag and placed it opposite her. He sat down.

“Sorry to be a pest but what’s up? Sometimes talking to a stranger allows you to freely express yourself without judgment. You might

never see me again, so your burden will be lost along with me,” Tshepo said.

Naomi was uneasy at first. She kept running her fingers through her hair. Eventually, her eyes could no longer hold back her tears. Droplets of emotional pain ran across her cheeks. He did not know how to respond. He pulled his chair closer to her. Naomi silently sobbed in her hands. Tshepo pulled her over to his chest. No words were shared at that moment. Their hearts were able to communicate undisturbed.

From that day, a two-year relationship brewed between the two. She never told him why she was stressed out the day they met. But that did not matter. To him, it was destiny converging their paths together. For the first six months, he battled greatly with the feeling of lust. He thought that it was love that he felt. He felt that it was natural to feel this way for a woman. That it was natural that the act of life creation is birthed from the feeling of love. But his friends with their many one-night stands never confused lust with love with the women they slept with. Instead, it was driven by the thrill of pleasure. The thrill of pleasure in which the sexual act itself, to his friends, was the reward. It was not from love that they gave themselves to the various women they met at clubs. It was the thrill of being rewarded with sexual pleasure.

He could not share his feelings about Naomi with his sister and mother. To them, it was forbidden and sacrilegious to even feel such emotions for a woman. These were emotions he had to

understand for himself. The church simply told him it was forbidden to seek women sexually. They never explained why.

The closest explanation he got from a pious follower in the church was that one's soul ties with the person they had sex with. This in itself did not make sense to him. The follower explained that soul ties are formed through sex. That through sex, two souls tie together the follower explained. And so, when they tie together, the follower further explained, a person carries with them that person's soul luggage.

He never understood why the person's luggage was always packed with curses and demons and never their angels and blessings. In the church, unlike New Age beliefs, sex is almost a dirty act that should be avoided at all times.

He grew up in the church. He viewed relationships and his sexual urges through the lenses of the church. He restrained himself every time he felt what he believed to be a sexual feeling. But with Naomi, it was difficult. Her smile induced an overwhelming need for him to hold her. Her touch induced an overwhelming need for him to kiss her. Even kissing was an entity that his churchgoers called sex of the soul. Maybe that's why prostitutes never kiss their clients because of this ancient belief.

Naomi was not a church girl. She did not see herself through religious lenses. She saw herself as a human experiencing emotions with a man she loved. She had felt lust before with her

ex-boyfriend. On that fateful day that she met Tshepo, it was the day that her ex told her he was moving on without her. He was her first. She felt betrayed. The fairy tales and romantic movies never prepared her for the pain of having a man, whom she gave herself to, leave her in an instant. Like lightning that strikes a tree, the pain raptured inside of her. It was a pain that scarred her but, it was also a pain that freed her. She no longer felt obligated to one man. She felt free to explore her body.

One day, Tshepo was at her place for a study session with her. They had been studying for three hours straight. He remembered that day vividly. He finished studying first. After studying, he launched himself onto Naomi's bed. He was ready to take a nap before heading back to his place. It was around 2 pm on a Saturday. The weather was favourable. He could afford to leave later than usual. Moments after he landed on the bed, Naomi decided to join him. They usually cuddled before he left. She crawled into Tshepo's arms. He held her close. She had braided her hair into cornrows that week. The nape of her neck was bare. Her skin looked like a pillar of solid caramel. He felt the urge to kiss her on the nape of her neck. He did. He didn't expect her reaction to the kiss.

Naomi pushed herself deeper into his embrace. Doing so, she gently rubbed on him. She rubbed on his chest, on his stomach, and on his loins. A wild, uncontrollable desire erupted in him. Engulfed in pure lust, he surrendered himself to the emotions flowing in him. Naomi reciprocated the same way.

No words were spoken. Their bodies spoke to each other effortlessly. Suddenly, at the worst time imaginably, he became self-conscious. This was not how it happened in the dirty movies. His body was not like those of Hollywood blockbuster action stars. He couldn't stop his body from communicating with Naomi even though his mind was suddenly filled with feelings of doubt and self-shame.

It seemed Naomi wasn't experiencing the same feelings of doubt and self-shame. Then he remembered that she told him that she has had sex before. A wave of thoughts attacked his mind. Would he be like her ex? His friends talked about performance; would his performance be good enough? How would he know if it was good enough if there was no benchmark he could measure his performance against? How would they be protected? He never thought of buying protection. He never thought his first time would be anytime soon. The thoughts barraged his mind. But not his body. His body was locked in with Naomi's.

7.

He decided to sit down by the curb of the road. Reliving his memory, emotions flooded his mind. He remembered how the following week he made love with Naomi, he found out that Naomi's ex had re-entered the scene. She was wearing high waist jeans when she told him how she met him at his place, the night before, to get her things. Only for moments later to find herself leading him up her thighs. To this day, high-waist jeans on any woman remind him of that pain.

He remembered how Naomi was feeling guilty and pleading with him not to leave her. She was crying to the point that her shirt was drenched wet with tears. He forgave her because the church taught him to be merciful. At the end of the day, He died for all sins. And so, one should forgive seven times seven times. However, a month later, Naomi began flirting with a friend she was in class with. What hurt him was not that she was flirting with him. What hurt him was that the previous month, she was crying about breaking his trust. She was threatening to end her life if he left her. He thought that the guilt of committing adultery was lacerating her insides. He felt that her apology was sincere. He felt that perhaps this was one of the storms that relationships experience. The fact that she quickly found herself in a position to entertain other men, after promising him to repent from her actions, broke him.

A deep sexual scar formed in him that he hasn't fully healed from it. Before that pain, he never needed validation from anyone, especially women. After the pain, he began to pursue more women. The pain made him feel less of a man. Every time his friends shared their wild nights of sexual conquests, it was like salt being rubbed on his sexual wound. He felt he wasn't man enough to attract women. He wasn't worthy of a woman. The woman he had loved wholeheartedly had found other masculine energies more enticing than his. And so, in seeking to find validation to prove he's a man, he began to pursue more women. The lenses of his sister, mother, and the church had been darkened with disappointment and pain.

The women he pursued liked him but did not find him sexually attractive. He went to the gym and began paying attention to his clothing. But still, women would continue to like him as a friend, not as a potential mate. His friends were never friend-zoned. To fit in with his friends, he began to fabricate his pursuits. He would speak about his pursuits in a way that his friends would. When the truth was, at the time, Naomi was the only woman he had sex with.

At the age of 31, his friends have had countless sexual encounters, while he had only three; his wife, Ntombi and Naomi. He has never confessed this truth to anyone because he feels he might appear weak to his friends. In his heart, he envies his friends for the various pleasures they experience on a weekly basis. He envied their understanding of their own masculinity.

This one time, he got embarrassed when his fitness trainer told him and his friends about an encounter he had with a particular girl. Apparently, this girl could not resist the personal trainer. He was so explicit in the details he could not help but be aroused by the story. In a group of six males, he was the only one who got aroused. He thought that the other guys probably recalled similar situations in their own lives, and that's why they weren't aroused as he was to the story. To the other guys, the story was a reality that they lived. To him, the story was a fantasy he yearned.

He has never been pursued by women. He has never been told he was sexy or attractive. Women always told him that he was smart or "mature" for his age. He envied his friends. He envied how his friends understood their own sexual natures while he struggled with his own. And because of this, he never shared this sexual scar with anyone. Even his wife did not know about the pain that he continued to carry.

He stood up from the curb and decided to cut the walk short back to his house. His heart was heavy with an internal inferno that he knew he would die with. An internal inferno that burned his desire to pursue women. Even though he was a married man. He figured that the cure that will close his wound would be found between a woman's thighs. He was yet to find the right ones that had the cure.

She looked at her phone. She continued to smile. She did not think that he would respond. The last time they spoke was not the

greatest of days. He bought her a phone after she lost hers. She has never been able to care for her phones. For some reason, she cannot maintain a phone for long periods of time.

She recalled the last time she spoke with Tshepo. After they broke up, Tshepo began going to the gym. He was looking more attractive and appealing. At the age of 20, looks were more important to her than emotions and feeling secure with a man. Seeing him adding muscles to his body made her want him again. And so, she called him to her place to sort things out.

He arrived earlier than expected. The same way he did when she told him she had slept with her ex. There was an awkward silence between them. But Tshepo had the ability to ignore a situation. And even though they had broken up, he acted like an old friend reconnected once more. She did not feel out of place or feel like she was desperate. It seemed natural for him to be there even though they had broken up for three months.

They spoke about their relationship. The talk opened old chambers that were closed off. It seemed like the old flame was sparked back to life. They had a heavy lunch and shortly fell asleep after. Tshepo woke up before her. She was still sleeping when her phone rang. Tshepo answered the phone.

“I got lotion, stroking to your picture,” a deep voice spoke on the phone.

Like being stung by a bee, the pain was sharp and quick. The pain rendered him motionless. He froze and the phone fell to the floor. The thud from the wooden flooring was loud enough to wake Naomi up. He was too stunned to speak.

“What? What was that?” She asked half-asleep.

He stood still, rendered motionless by the deep voice confessing to pleasuring himself to his woman’s picture. This was before Instagram or the popular use of WhatsApp. She must have sent him the picture via MMS or via Bluetooth. If it was via Bluetooth, it means that they met before. And given the context of the call, they could have met in intimate conditions. In three months, he had already been replaced- intimately.

“Tshepo, what is it? Talk already,” she yelled at him.

He finally gathered the strength he needed. A single tear ran down his cheek. He decided to leave her place. He walked out the door. He did so because he didn’t want her to see him crying. His wound bored deeper into his being.

She was confused. She wasn’t sure how to react. She got up from her bed to get her phone. She checked if it was okay and that it wasn’t broken. During the inspection of her phone, it rang again with the caller ID “David – Cab”. A pang of deep guilt engulfed her. She sobbed alone on her bed.

That was ten years ago. She heard that later along the years, after that fateful day Tshepo walked out of her life, he got a girl pregnant. And his family being traditional, ordered him to marry the girl. Unfortunately, the girl got a miscarriage, so she heard, but, they kept their marriage.

Since that incident ten years ago, she remained single. The guilt she felt for hurting the one man who loved her clouded her judgment. She never felt worthy to be with another man. She felt that she would hurt him as she did Tshepo.

And so, for a decade, she focused on herself. She worked hard to improve herself. She focused on her studies and managed to become an admitted practising attorney. She focused her energies on developing herself to be the best version of herself that she could be. She partook in the local running club. In the back of her mind, she hoped that she could be a better woman for Tshepo. Whether he was married or not, she hoped that the love they shared was still there. It was with that in mind that she sent him a text. Seeing his response made her the happiest woman in the world.

8.

On his walk back home, Tshepo met his neighbour's son Dyke. They have never been friends even though they grew up close to each other. Dyke was a Ph.D. student studying psychology. The economy was unfair to individuals such as him who were more than capable to partake in it. Even though they were not friends, it bothered him that a man so educated was unemployed.

“Yoh brother, how's it going?” Tshepo greeted him.

“Brother, all's well, how are you? I see Thabang a big boy!” Dyke responded.

“Yah noh, he's a big boy now. How's the family?”

“Noh, they great. The old people are getting older each day you know? But the wife is okay. Luckily, she understands the situation. So noh, we are all well Brother. And you?”

“The old people are okay Brother. They are struggling with how to video call. But they seem to have settled in well at the retirement village. Apparently, they finally have time to play golf on the village golf course. But they are well. Palesa and Thabang, well you can see Thabang is in good hands.”

Dyke laughed at the response. They stood for a moment until Dyke asked him a question he didn't expect. Especially given that they were not close friends or considered each other friends at all.

“Tshepo, how do you feel comfortable with having a woman who isn’t your wife visit you? And visit you regularly, at your home? Please, slap me if I’m out of line. But, how do you feel about it? She came into your house around half 11 and she left just before 12. And seeing how she left, and that this isn’t the first time she’s been here, well, it’s the first time we see her here, the wife and I know what’s going on. But brother to brother, how does that feel to have two women?” Dyke asked him. He kept shuffling left and right. He asked in confidence. It seemed that he was asking so he could do the same.

“I won’t slap you Dyke. Think I don’t know you hold a purple belt in jiu-jitsu? Well, I don’t know how to answer the question,” Tshepo responded. Given the deep introspection he just had, he knew the answer. But felt uncomfortable sharing it. Not just with Dyke but he felt uncomfortable sharing that which directly affected his masculinity with anyone.

“I understand,” Dyke responded despondently noticing the silence from Tshepo.

To break the silence, Tshepo asked him, “let me ask you this Bro, why do you love women?”

Dyke didn’t expect that question. Tshepo wasn’t his close friend or someone he considered a friend. And even though he studied psychology and was currently in pursuit of the degree at its highest level, he would be offending Tshepo if he gave him an academic

answer. He had to be honest. Like Tshepo, he was forced into marriage. It took him years to love his wife. So, he reached for the depths of his heart to answer the question honestly.

“Tshepo, I’ll be honest. It took me time to love Dee. But women have been the reason why I want to better myself. You know, in matric I came across *The Game* by Neil Strauss. That book Bro is the reason I decided to study psychology. I legit dedicated my life to psychology so I can seduce women. This has been and still is my motivation for my studies. I feel justified and validated when I am able to apply what I learn to sleep with women though,” Dyke told him. He wasn’t done. He was interrupted by a sound from his house. He continued.

“Sorry, I said I’ll be honest. I’ve never actually been able to sleep with women. Except for Dee. When that moment comes, something happens. All the time. So, I think it’s because I don’t have a car. That perhaps my clothes come from Mr Price. Women are my source of motivation in which I desire to be rewarded with their warm wetness. Surely you understand?” Dyke asked. Tshepo could tell that at that moment, Dyke was sincerely asking for clarity on his masculinity. More accurately, his sexuality as a man.

He understood what he was saying. Indeed, women motivate men. Dave Chappelle once said that men don’t buy sports cars for themselves. They buy these cars because women love men who drive sports cars. He remembered an ad by Mercedes Benz for the 2011 third-generation SLK. The ad said that men talk about

women, sports, and cars; and that women talk about men inside sports cars. It is entrenched in society that men seek material goods to seduce women.

His economics lecturer at university used to say that a man's handsomeness directly correlates with the money in his bank account. It made him think about what his uncles taught him that a man's handsomeness is determined by the depth of his pockets. Sex economics was the term an intellectual Youtuber used to define this understanding of human courtship. She explained that society has created a market of demand and supply for sex. And money and what money can buy is a fictional and literal tool that is used to purchase sex in this economy.

He discovered earlier in his life that it is not the money itself that women find attractive. In the real world, unlike the clubs where his friends seduced women, it is not the actual money that women are attracted to. The power of money has the ability to highlight a man's best attribute that makes him attractive. If he is a reader, he can afford to buy books for his own library. And with this library, he'll be able to attract women who are into reading and books. If he is a fashionista, he can afford quality fashion labels. And with these clothes, attract women are who also fashionistas. It is not about the money itself. It's about how money can empower a man to have confidence in himself. At the end of the day, it is the confidence created by money that attracts women.

“Dyke, I hear you, Brother. It feels good. But in the same breath, I know what having Ntombi means. I am playing with my marriage. Palesa is a good woman. What I am doing with Ntombi might turn Palesa into a bad person. It feels good though Brother. But understand it is like knocking at hell’s door. It’s only a matter of time before someone answers the door,” Tshepo answered.

“I hear you, Brother. I hear you,” Dyke responded. They shared a moment of silence. A silence between men who were in the same boat even though they didn’t know it. Dyke’s wife, Dee, came out the backdoor.

“Dyke! Food is getting cold. Hi Tshepo,” Dee greeted Tshepo.

Tshepo waved as to greet her back. Dyke was deep in thought. It seemed he didn’t want to go back into the house. But he had to. Reluctantly, he went back into the house. Tshepo felt his pain. He walked into his house feeling the same.

9.

As he entered his house, he saw that Palesa was watching her pastor on television. Thabang was resting in her arms while her eyes were glued to the television set. He almost forgot that she had arrived early because usually, she catches the pastor halfway through his sermon.

“Oh, hey Bae. You back? Food will be ready shortly,” She said as he saw him walk in. She could tell that he was exhausted. But she could also tell that it was not the exhaustion that came from physical workouts alone. It was the exhaustion that comes from someone who has been falling seven times and standing up each time. It was the exhaustion that comes from running after the light at the end of the tunnel that never drew closer. It was the exhaustion of a man tired of being a man. But she knew her man. Besides this exhaustion that plagued him, on this day, there was something else on his mind.

He walked past them. He wasn't in the mood to listen to the pastor on television. Not that he had anything against the pastor and his sermons. It was that on this day, he had a lot on his mind. He had a lot that a pastor on television would not understand. He did not need a prosperity message. He needed a true message that would help fan out his worries, not one designed to encourage the congregation to sow financial seeds so that the pastor can extend his church. After the conversation with Dyke, his guilt poisoned

his heart. The blood in his veins thickened with a sense of injustice to his wife. He had not realised that his treacherous ways were that visible. He wondered, who else has seen Ntombi leave his house?

Hopefully, Mam'Zintle down the street hasn't seen them. What a disgrace that would be. A disgrace to his parents, a disgrace to Palesa, a disgrace to their marriage. Guilt formed 10-inch claws in him that clutched onto his muscles. It pained him to even breathe.

Ntombi had just finished her dinner. She switched on her television and a pastor appeared. This pastor she once saw on Tshepo's timeline. He was tagged by Palesa. The pastor ignited her encounter with Palesa earlier. What did Palesa think of her? Did Palesa remember her?

They occasionally met whenever she came by the office to meet Tshepo when he was still employed. Other than that, she had never met her elsewhere. Palesa was an enigma to her. Palesa, to her, was the pinnacle of womanhood. And yet, somehow her husband didn't see her that way. Why would he have an affair with a wife as immaculate as Palesa? Why would he betray her trust? What caused him to be disloyal?

Not that to her it was a concern. She loved that she was the one that Tshepo choose to be disloyal with. She loved that she was the one that Tshepo choose to explore his beastly side with. She once saw a video on YouTube. This video was a roundtable discussion

between virgins and professional sex workers. One professional sex worker said that she doesn't feel bad about her profession. That in some way, her profession is needed in society.

She based her argument on a situation that once happened to her with one of her clients. Apparently, there was a husband who was a regular client of hers. She said that the husband had lost all sexual interest in his wife. Through the professional sex worker, he was able to release the built-up sexual tension that his wife could no longer release. She added to say that she was entirely proud of the situation, and through that situation she realised how powerful her services were.

Ntombi felt like the professional sex worker. She felt that through her, Tshepo was releasing built-up sexual tensions that Palesa could no longer release. The thought alone was embarrassing. She did not want to think of Palesa in that light. To her, Palesa was the ideal woman. Perhaps it is from envy of Palesa that she was content stealing her husband, even if it was for mere minutes in a week. So, the idea that Palesa could be imperfect, especially in an area as sensitive and intimate as sexually satisfying a man, riddled her with shame. She switched the channel to focus her mind on something else other than her affair with a man married to a woman she idolised.

Naomi kept looking at her phone. Excited by the fact that the man who taught her true love responded to her text. Her excitement was infused with a great feeling of shame. Shame that she was too young to see the love that Tshepo gave her was what she needed in her life. Shame that she texted a married man with the hope that he would leave his wife for her. Even though she had a stable job working for a law firm in town and she had immensely developed personally over the years, she still felt the same guilt. The same guilt that she felt that fateful day Tshepo left her room; walking out of her life.

Her mom called her to watch the pastor on television. Naomi was not into church. But she cherished spending moments with her mom. As she got older, she started appreciating her mom more. Her mom had retired the previous year. She had time on her hands. So, in the evenings when she came from work, that was the time they spent together as mom and daughter.

“Watch, Tshidi. Maybe you’ll find hope in our Lord and Saviour,” her mom said.

She sat down and watched the pastor preach. She did not understand how people could be so fired up to hear their pastor talk about extending the church. The sermon was basically a sales pitch to the congregation to donate their “seeds” to extend the church. By sowing seeds, the pastor explained, they’ll be able to extend the church and save more lost souls. The pastor claimed that the extension could cost upwards of R4 million.

She did not understand how that was normal. Instead of goats being sold at the church; were books, coffee stores, and conferences more acceptable commodities to sell in the church? Would Christ approve of the R4 million? When he took fish and multiplied it for the masses? How come couldn't the pastor use that R4 million to build a community library or a factory to employ people? Why doesn't the pastor sell the R2 million German sedan he drives to raise at least half of the money that the church needs? Instead of teaching people to sow seeds in the hope of a financial pay-out from the heavens one day, teaching people to believe that their tithes are like lottery tickets, why wasn't the pastor teaching his congregation how to use those seeds practically to reap the financial fruits that the congregation truly desires?

She remembered her close friend once gave the church her Michael Kors watch that her grandmother bought her as a gift. The watch was the last gift she ever got from her grandmother before she passed on. On that day, her pastor was preaching the same message as the one on television. The pastor was preaching that the congregation "sow financial seeds". The pastor added to say that these seeds would one day yield great financial fruits. And that if the congregation did not have any money to offer as seeds, they should offer their financial possessions. She was in awe at how the congregation gave their possessions freely. All in the name of future financial fruits. That was six years ago. Her friend that gave her MK watch as "her seed" to the church was still

waiting for her harvest. She was still waiting for the floodgates from Heaven to open.

She knew that she couldn't share her beliefs about the church with her mother. Like most churchgoers, most have developed a cultlike nature towards the church. They blindly follow the pastor and do as the pastor says. They justify the pastor's actions and find ways to accept questionable sermons from the pastors. After all, they come from a man of God or a woman of God so this anointed individual knows what they are talking about. Dare one oppose or challenge these followers and you are automatically destined to the one place all churchgoers fear: hell.

"What's wrong with hell anyway?" She thought to herself.

Hell is the mystical land where those who have sinned beyond reproach are destined to go. Hell, according to the church and her mom, was where the rockstars and rappers who lived their lives to the fullest went. The woman who slept with more partners than his husband was destined for hell. Yet the men who judged civilisations, and erased entire tribal histories in the name of the church were noble saints destined to have a seat in heaven.

Biggie Smalls once said that he wouldn't want to go to heaven with the goodie-goodies dressed in all white because he liked black Timbs and black hoodies. Biggie was alluding to how being the complete opposite to what the church deemed noble and just destined an individual for hell. To her, hell was for the pleasure

seekers, for the people who sought to live a full life. So why would she sacrifice the pleasure of having a man inside of her only to go to a place that's reserved for 144 000? Why was it okay for a man to sow his wild seeds but sacrilege for a woman to plant her rogue eggs?

If hell was where Tupac, Bruce Lee, Malcolm X, Aztec kings and queens, and the millions of African slaves who died for their freedom went she told herself that she'd rather go to hell as well. There was no pleasure she found in going to heaven. Heaven was for the goodie-goodies who wore white. She was a Black woman after all, her skin radiated under even the whitest of linen.

However, she kept the thoughts to herself as she watched the pastor froth at the mouth as he stressed the importance of sowing financial seeds in the church. Her mother was deeply focused on the message. Her mind was focused on another message. A message that gave her hope of a rebirthed love.

The sermon ended and Palesa switched the TV off. Tshepo had not returned from the bathroom. He usually bathed after his walk. She stood with Thabang to see if he was okay. She got into the bedroom and Tshepo was deep in sleep on the bed. It looked like the only thing that he did was take off his walking shoes. He was still wearing his clothes. Seemed as if he launched himself onto

the bed and fell asleep. He did not go to the bathroom as she thought.

She felt bad because she had prepared him a hearty supper. She also felt bad that she did not understand what ate away at his soul. “It can’t only be the retrenchment,” she thought to herself.

It made her feel guilty that as his wife, she could not find the source of her husband’s pain which manifested itself as continual exhaustion. It was not that Tshepo never expressed his emotions. On the contrary, that’s the very reason why she fell in love with him. In the sense that, Tshepo could express his emotions and he was unapologetic about it. He was still deep into the church when they first met. They met at one of the church conferences that they congregated at the time. She remembered the day as he looked at his husband.

10.

“Hey, I’m Tshepo,” he introduced himself.

His physique was well-built. For someone who knew scriptures like the back of his hand, he was not the stereotypical man of God. He was not wearing sharp nose loafers or carrying a suffocating air of piety. He was the contrast. He wore a black Jordan hoodie, black baggy sweatpants, and black Air Force 1s. He looked like a roadman from the British crime soapies she watched. The contrast between Tshepo to the typical men of God who approached her caused an intense attraction towards him.

“Hi. I am Palesa. Are you here for the conference?” She responded.

“Yeah. Our branch organised a bus for its young lions to attend. Listen, I don’t want to waste your time. I like you though. Mind sharing your number so we can chat later?” He asked her.

She was taken aback by the directness of his request. Most men of God would want to flex their knowledge of the church and scripture first. Most men of God would talk about seeking a Proverb 31 woman. Not this guy. Not Tshepo. He was concise and direct. She could not resist.

“Give me your phone. But please don’t text or call me after 10. The ladies and I will be having our night prayer,” She told him. His wallpaper was an artwork she had never seen. An artwork that

if Mam' Lydia saw would say it's demonic. It was not a scripture reading, a sports car, or a picture of himself like on most men of God's phone. She felt herself involuntarily falling for Tshepo.

At around half 10 that evening, Tshepo called. The ladies were running late. She is thankful that they were running late because if they were on time, she would have switched off her phone.

"Hai wena, I told you not to call me at this time," she answered her phone. She hoped he would hear the playful tone in her voice.

"Eish, I'm sorry. I have no excuse to tell you. Just wishing you goodnight Palesa yaka," Tshepo responded. She could not resist the butterflies forming in her stomach. She was speechless. Moments later, Tshepo hung up the phone. Since that day, for the next eight years that followed, they would spend each day with each other. She loved each one of those days.

Thabang began to fall asleep as well. He gently rocked Thabang to seal his sleep. Thabang fought the Sandman. But the soothing humming of her mother delivered the knockout blow. Thabang felt heavier in her arms, indicating that he was in total relaxation. She gently walked over to his crib. Like leaves falling gently to a summer breeze, she placed Thabang in his cot. Like in the morning, she stood by the doorway looking at her two boys.

“I love you both,” she whispered. She switched off the lights in the room and went to sleep in the guest room. She did not want to wake Tshepo up. She felt a strong sense of pity for her husband.

11.

The soft rain tapped the glass of her windows. It was a cold morning that was met with a gentle shower of rain. Even though it was winter, the rain fell steadily. It was difficult for her to get out of bed that morning. But she had to wake up and prepare for work. The alarm of her phone went off. On automatic, her fingers pressed the snooze button of the alarm on her phone. 10 extra minutes were granted by her mobile device. However, 3 minutes into her extended sleep, a text message pinged on her phone.

“Who could it be?” she thought to herself. Annoyed by the ping of the text, curiosity to find out who would send her a text early in the morning got to her. She pulled her phone from under her pillow. She jumped out of bed with uncontainable excitement.

He realised that he slept alone because Palesa entered their room already having showered. He was a light sleeper so he usually felt it whenever his wife woke up early. But today, he only heard when she got into the room in the morning to prepare herself for work.

“Did I sleep on the bed last night?” Tshepo thought to himself.

He remembered coming into their room the previous night. He remembered laying on the bed contemplating his thoughts. Thoughts of the three women who occupied his existence. Three

women who each revealed a side to him that each of the three women did not know.

Palesa did not know how to be on the edge of an office desk biting on his tie so not to be heard by passing colleagues. Ntombi does not know the vulnerability he felt when he packed his things in a paper ream box when he stepped out of the office he pledged his life to for the last time. Naomi does not know the emotional building that he has built based on the blueprint she gave him. His mind, body and heart were heavy. He did not realise just how heavy it was until it knocked him out when he laid his head on the bed the previous night.

“Are you leaving now Babe?” He asked his wife.

“Yes, Babe. Sorry I didn’t wake you up last night. You looked so peaceful,” Palesa responded whilst applying her body lotion. She was applying her ankles. A beautiful and elegant woman. Tshepo admired his woman. Her beauty offered him a temporary escape from his thoughts. Her left hand was rubbing in the lotion on her left ankle. Her right hand rested on her left knee to balance herself. The posture created a curvature that highlighted her impeccable figure. The curvature slightly exposed her right ribs that were wrapped underneath her smooth brown tan skin.

Tshepo knew that his wife was beautiful and loved that Palesa was his wife. However, he enjoyed the thrill of adultery. Like stealing

peaches from the neighbour's garden, there is a distinct pleasure in eating forbidden fruits.

While he was admiring his wife, he started to feel guilty. The guilt however, quickly became frustration towards his wife.

“Why are you so considerate woman?” He thought to himself. At that moment, he wished that his wife would be upset with him. Even if it was over something insignificant as sleeping on the whole bed by himself. But he restrained the frustration.

“Ok Baby, go get that fat worm. Thabang and I will be waiting for it later,” He said.

“Oh wow, you special my King,” Palesa responded.

He was facing downwards on the bed. His phone, by the look of things, seemed like he threw it on the pillow last night. He reached for it to check the time. In doing so, he realised that he did not close the chat history between him and Naomi. A feeling of fear of being caught seized him.

But in his heart, a new feeling was beginning to form. A feeling of frivolous freedom. A feeling of a frenzy between him and his wife. He wanted to start drama with Palesa. She was perfect. She was too forgiving. She never raised her voice. The only person she ever disciplined was Thabang. Since that day at the church conference eight years ago, Palesa has never rubbed him the wrong way. In

that moment of rebellion towards his wife, he texted Naomi a text message.

She didn't expect that Tshepo would want to meet up with her. She thought that they would text through the phone for a while.

She didn't expect that Tshepo would want to meet up with her the following day after sending the text. But she remembered that Tshepo lived by the motto that one should shoot for the chest or higher. Tshepo never wasted time over trivial things or small talk. If he wanted something, he went for it directly without sugarcoating it.

She felt excitement building inside her as the idea of meeting Tshepo filled her mind. If she ever needed the motivation to get out of bed the text was enough. She got excited that during her lunch that day she was going to meet the man she never stopped loving.

"Looks like this rain won't stop anytime soon. Please keep Thabang indoors. Last night's food is in the fridge and his bottles are ready on the kitchen counter. I'm leaving now Love," Palesa said. She walked out the door leading into the garage to get into her car.

He got up from the bed and followed her to the car. He watched his wife get into the car and drive off to work. He was standing by

the door frame leading into the garage. Thabang was still asleep. He stood by the door with a gentle cool breeze hitting his face. Outside the garage, he saw that the rain was gentle yet heavy in volume.

He stood by the door frame wondering whether it was wise of him to send Naomi the text. Did he send the text because he wanted to meet her or did he send the text to uncover the many layers that have failed to heal the wound that festered on his masculinity? Or did he send that text to get an emotion other than unconditional love from Palesa? But it wasn't like he would tell her anyway. But was it worth meeting up with the woman who taught him love? The woman who showed him both the heavens and hells of it? Was it worth meeting the woman who found the codes to break his virginity? With this thought in his mind, he went back into the house.

Thabang was still fast asleep. With his mother, Thabang usually slept late at night. This was because Palesa would want to keep him up for the longest time possible. She worked an average of 10 hours a day at her job. Seeing Thabang after work was her greatest joy and she would want to enjoy every moment with him.

His stomach began to rumble. He remembered that he slept without eating the previous night. He went to the kitchen to make something to eat. He remembered that Palesa told him that last night's food was in the fridge. Opening the fridge, his plate of food from yesterday stared at him directly. She had cooked rice, and

beef stew with a coleslaw salad, his favourite meal, as she promised. And he didn't eat it. He didn't eat it because he was exhausted. His energy drained from thinking about other women. Guilt and shame raptured the chambers in his heart. Tears formed wells around his eyes.

Naomi was at work but all she could think about was Tshepo. What was she going to say meeting him after such a long time? It was not like they spoke in those years. And Tshepo was now a grown man and not the young man whose hormones dictated his love. She too was now a grown woman and not the young woman who was excited when asked out by boys. And most importantly, Tshepo was married with a child. Could she be the reason for him leaving his wife? Most importantly, did Tshepo love her that much to make such a decision?

As she was contemplating the thought, she remembered a Facebook post that she once saw. It was a lengthy post, but it was worth the read given the context it applied to her situation. The post regaled a story about a man who married a woman because she was a good woman. The man did not love the woman for her looks. He married her because she possessed all the virtues of a good wife. These virtues came from the church and the man grew up in the church like Tshepo. All that changed when the man went out with his friends to a club for the first time.

At the club, the man in the post discovered a new world. He discovered a world of lust and a world where people were comfortable with their sexuality. He discovered a world where men took care of their skin like women. Coming from a traditional background, the post explained that to the man this was baffling. The men in these clubs did not have blackened knuckles and calluses like the traditional men he knew. These men were clean and in his world, these men would be considered homosexuals. But these ‘gay’ men were with the hottest women in the club. They were the ones dancing with the sexiest women there.

As the man in the Facebook post and his friends sat in the club, one of these sexually liberated women approached him. He could tell that she had one too many already. And her approach was direct and strong. The post explains that the lady was wearing a red dress that hang loosely around her. But due to the heavy partying, one strap of her dress that was wrapped around her shoulder had torn. The right side of her dress was compromised in that it exposed the different shades of complexions between her areola and breast. The blend of the different shades of brown between the woman’s areola and breast enchanted the young man. The young woman simply grabbed him by the shirt and slowly ran a finger across his lips. She pulled him and whisked him away behind a less packed corner of the club. In that corner, the man experienced the most intense and the most tantalising kiss of his life. Something that his wife could never do. The post ended off

by asking the reader what they thought happened to the man when he went home.

She knew that she was the drunk woman to Tshepo. She knew that his traditional wife could never give Tshepo the same sexual pleasures she could give him. She doubted Tshepo ever told his wife that they would watch dirty movies and mimic the actors' every position. She doubted that his wife knew that Tshepo's fantasy was to have a threesome before he died. She doubted that the woman who became a default wife to Tshepo knew how to snatch his soul with her tongue.

Naomi always had the belief that humans are animals who are still primal at their core. The difference between wild animals and humans is that humans have created an entire social order around how they preserve themselves. Humans built a hierarchical system that regulates how procreation occurs and when it occurs.

Everything that humans do is to procreate. Women wear make-up to heighten their beauty to attract a partner. Men buy cars to heighten their status to attract a partner. Even though she had not been with another man since Tshepo walked out that fateful day at her student accommodation, she has worked on herself to reach the peak of her femininity in order to lure Tshepo back into her clutches.

She knew Tshepo. She dedicated a decade of her life to getting him back. She remembered the sacrifices she endured to be with him

again. She remembered the many men she rejected in the pursuit to perfect herself for the man she always loved. To her, his wife was an obstacle that had to be removed. And she knew Tshepo well enough to get rid of her completely.

She melted in her chair as the thought that she would wreck Tshepo's home burnt in her. The idea that she would be seen as a home-wrecker got to her. The idea that Tshepo's boy would grow up in a divided home because of her selfishness got to her. She closed her eyes and inhaled a deep breath of air. She exhaled the air slowly. In doing so, the feelings of guilt left her body. She opened her eyes and focused on her goal: getting her man back.

Tshepo was sitting on the couch while he was watching reruns of 90s drama soapies. The meal Palesa prepared was pure heaven. He was into his second serving and thinking of getting thirds. Thabang was still asleep but he knew that he would wake up anytime soon. He looked at the clock near his TV and it read the time was 11:07 am. He figured to ditch the third plate and go shower. Even though he didn't want to, and Palesa told him to stay indoors, he knew that he would have to take Thabang with him to see Naomi. It was inevitable because he was not missing the date with the woman he never stopped loving.

He left the empty plate on the coffee table in the TV room and headed to the shower. He turned the water on and let it run as he undressed. The model physique he had was no longer there. A small belly protruded confirming that he was officially a dad. He

wondered what Naomi would think of him now. But he remembered that she met him when he was a skinny lanky boy anyway. He laughed at how he was getting conscious of his body the same way he was the night he slept with Naomi for the first time. He stepped into the bathroom only to be enveloped by the steam from the shower. In the shower, his thoughts would roam free only to be evaporated into thin air.

The shower was long as he finished 45 minutes later. As he stepped into the master bedroom, his boy was looking blankly at the ceiling. Did Thabang perhaps know? Was he perhaps preparing himself to see his father with another woman who was not his mother? Who knows what babies think about anyway? He quickly applied lotion and dressed up for his date with Naomi.

Before leaving the house, he took Thabang's travel bag which had only what he needed. Thabang's travel bag was always packed so he knew there was no need to double-check it. With an umbrella in one hand, the baby travel bag strapped around his shoulder and in his other hand Thabang sitting comfortably in his chair wrapped in three blankets, he stepped outside and locked the house.

"Haibo, Tshepo!" He heard someone call his name.

At first, he was surprised but later recognised that it was Mam Zintle calling him from the street.

"You going to town? Bring Thabang here, the rain is too strong. Leave him with me but hurry up. The ladies and I are baking later

today,” Mam Zintle said as she rushed from her porch over to Tshepo who was already at the gate. Without even agreeing, she was already taking Thabang with his chair and pulling his travel bag off Tshepo’s shoulder.

“Thank you, Mam,” Tshepo, baffled, embarrassedly responded.

Mam Zintle rushed back into her house with Thabang. Tshepo knew that he would be safe there. He also knew that Palesa would not be mad if she knew that Mam Zintle took Thabang. She would be mad that he went to town when she told him to be indoors with Thabang.

What would he tell Palesa if she knew he went to town? What would be his excuse? However, he didn’t want to think about that at that moment. At that moment, the only thing that he wanted to preoccupy his mind with was his meeting with Naomi.

After so many years, what were they going to talk about? It was not like they kept in communication after all these years. The anxiety of it all filled his bloodstream. Sharp shards of his fragmented sexuality sliced his heart. At that moment, he realised that he was going to meet the woman who defined his masculinity.

12.

Standing at the corner of the street, waiting for a taxi to take him to town, he thought about his masculinity. Before he had met Naomi, he never needed to prove he was a man. The church never called on him to show attributes of masculinity. His mother never questioned him when he was feeling sad when he fell on his bike. His sister never judged him when he never found interest in sports. Throughout his childhood, he never had to “man up”.

Until he met Naomi. Naomi forced him to be “a man”. A man who had to walk in the middle of the night to get his girlfriend after she’s been at her friends. He had to carry her bag even when in his heart he hated being seen with a pink handbag in stores. He had to be a man who bought teddy bears and chocolates for his woman. And most importantly, he had to be a man who never climaxed before his woman.

These are teachings that are taught by society about what a man is. Maybe that’s why his father would reserve himself in a corner. Maybe that’s why his father smoked so much that he now suffers from lung cancer. Maybe his father, with his cigarettes, smoked his worries into a cloud of black dust that poisoned his lungs. For his family, his father had to be “a man”.

To be a man. How do you become a man? No one could answer this question. Some boys go to the mountain top to become a man.

They are taught ancient secrets that enable them to be men. Some boys join gangs because they have no father figure at home.

He remembered when he was young, he got into a fight with another boy at school. He got beaten up pretty badly. His face was bruised with blood leaking through his mouth. On his way home that day, he remembered that he was in pain. The kind of pain that needs a bed and a good meal for it to heal. That was what he needed on that day.

But fate had different plans. He arrived home to a fuming mother. Apparently, the boy who beat him up was also bleeding from the fight and the boy's mother called his mother about it. In her hand, she had a fat stick that was fresh from a tree.

He was confused. Why was his mother upset? Wasn't she supposed to tell him that it is okay? Wasn't she supposed to feed him and put him to sleep? Why was she mad? Wasn't she his mother? Aren't mothers supposed to be soft and understanding?

While her mother was fuming and her hand visibly trembling with anger, his father stepped behind her. He placed his hand on her shoulder and with his other hand, reached for the stick. His mother turned around and looked at his father with bewildered eyes. Through her eyes, she was telling her husband that she was shocked that he was calm about the situation. However, his father remained calm.

His father's calmness threw his mother into a wave of greater anger. She threw the stick to the floor and walked past him. In doing so, she pushed him aside in order to go outside. He stood hurt from the physical wounds that were inflicted on him. And he stood hurt from the emotional wounds his mother just inflicted on him too.

What was his father doing to do? Fathers are boulders who are emotionless. Fathers are the ones who beat women. Fathers are the ones who punish children. Fathers are the ones to be afraid of. After all, the Almighty Father watched as they tortured and killed His only Son.

The feeling of confusion became a feeling of fear. He has never seen his father angry, but men never show emotion. Like the boy who he had fought, men expressed their emotions with fists. What if this was what was going through his father's mind? What if, in expressing the disappointment his mother felt, he was going to express it with fists?

He stepped back to brace for a slap to his face. He could feel his father step closer to him. What he thought would be a slap to knock him to his senses, was instead a warm embrace that he expected from his mother. In that single moment, he felt vulnerable. Tears gushed out of his eyes. Tears that he lost a fight against another boy. Tears that his mother, the one whom he hoped would be soft and understanding, pushed him aside like a homeless beggar. Tears that his father, the one he thought would look at him as being weak

for losing a fight, held him in his arms lovely. The embrace lasted only seconds. But in those seconds, he understood what it meant to be a man.

But understanding is different from knowing. One could understand that the stove is hot, but it is only once it has burnt you that you will know it is hot. And so was the case with his masculinity. With the embrace from his father, he understood what being man entailed. But being with Naomi, only then did he know what being a man meant.

But Naomi was merely the beginning of his knowing. The rain began to fall harder. Luckily his umbrella was wide enough that only his feet were getting wet. Finally, a beat-up Toyota Tazz that was rusting on its side skirts pulled over. His chariot to transport him to his lost love had arrived.

13.

Ntombi took a day off that Friday. She intended to spend the day finishing her assignments for her master's degree. As an intern, she did not enjoy the benefits of study leave. She had to sacrifice her annual leave to study for her degree. As she sat by the window of her study desk, the rain softly beating on the glass, a feeling of loneliness overwhelmed her.

She missed Tshepo. She never understood how she fell in love with him in the first place. He was not her type. Her type were men who drove in cars that men like Tshepo had posters of when they were teenagers. Her type were men who wore cologne that could cover young women like her 6 months' rent. Tshepo was not his type, not even by a long shot.

She found men who did not take care of themselves extremely unattractive. She considered such men weak. Not that Tshepo did not take care of himself, nor was he weak according to her definition, but Tshepo was a traditional man who believed in archaic societal customs like facials were not for men. Tshepo's hands were hardened by the gardening that he loved doing. She tried multiple times to take him to a nail technician. He simply refused with no explanation.

She was a firm believer that a man should take of himself. She remembered her one male lecturer who simply do not take care of himself. The man, she recalled, wore oversized denim jeans that

would bulge around the buckle of his belt and wore no name tekkies. They were not sneakers or fashionable trainers. They were tekkies that were probably made during Apartheid and that man wore them like they were from Balenciaga.

What she found most unattractive about her lecturer was that he had an air of false superiority. She remembered how the man would boast about how he doesn't drink alcohol yet finds entertainment in drinking strawberry milkshakes. The lecturer would also brag about how he works late hours even on a Friday evening. He would say these things thinking that they made him a strong, proud and focused man. When in reality, they made him a sad weak man seeking validation for his masculinity.

This was the curse most weak men have. She learnt weak men either seek validation by justifying their boring lives as being noble virtues of greatness, or they are sad saps who blame the world for their wrongdoings. She and her friends used to say that these men had 'mommy issues.' Like how men would say women who seek a father figure in their romantic partners have daddy issues, men who seek their mothers in their romantic partners they used to say that they have mommy issues.

She hated men with mommy issues with the greatest of passions. And that was the primary reason she only dated men who had gone through the stages of defeat. She went for men who had established themselves because these men do not need validation to prove their masculinity. These men do not seek the security of

a mother's love to be secure in their masculinity. Successful men have conquered the trail and tribulations that young men face. Successful men have undergone the rite of passage that transformed them from being boys to men.

However, with Tshepo it was different. She could tell that Tshepo was not wealthy. She could tell that Tshepo was still knitting the fabrics of his success together. He was still in his rite of passage. She could tell these things. It is easy to tell where a man is in his journey to understanding his masculinity. She would make fun of his lecturer that what he needs was a woman to sit him down and snatch his soul. She knew that if her lecturer experienced the satisfaction that comes from a woman loving you, intimately, he would pay attention to how he dressed. The lecturer would take an extra look in the mirror each morning before introducing himself to the world.

This was a fact that she believed. A book she once read by Napoleon Hill confirmed her belief. Napoleon Hill explained how men who had an advanced understanding of their sexuality and masculinity usually took time to groom themselves. These men usually dressed better. They smelt better. They drove better cars. These men were smart. Sexually mature men displayed their maturity in the way they decided to display their sexuality to a potential mate.

In the same way a peacock will flaunt its feathers to a potential mate, sexually mature men would go the extra mile for women to

notice them. Peacocking was the term that her ex sugar daddy taught her. Apparently, peacocking is what men do to get attention from women. Her ex sugar daddy explained that men drive their cars, with the windows down, blasting their music at the maximum volume just to be seen by women. Women might not like the noise from the car, but the man just wants her to notice him in his car. That second is all a man needs.

When he said this, she remembered that was how she noticed him. Her ex sugar daddy was driving his Audi RS3 and had his music playing at maximum volume. She turned to see where the noise was coming from. Even though she was annoyed by the noise that the car was blasting through its speakers, in the second that she looked at him, she saw a handsome man behind the wheel.

That was peacocking at its finest. She wondered what “peacocking” did Tshepo do for her to notice him. She knows that she is the type of woman who wants to sit shotgun in G-wagons. She was not the type of lady to sit in taxis to see a man. But for Tshepo, she would travel in a taxi even if he was in Cape Town.

She wondered whether it was really love that she was feeling or the excitement of experiencing a masculine force that was different from what she was used to. She sat looking outside the window, searching for the answers in the droplets of rain.

Tshepo was a married man and she loved him. Tshepo was married to a woman she idolised but she found pleasure in knowing that

she too gets to have him intimately. What are the feathers that blinded her to be entrapped by Tshepo's

"peacocking"? What was the charm of Tshepo's seduction that made her want more of him?

In the taxi, Tshepo was sitting next to a young man who was probably in his early twenties. Judging from his hair, and the oversized and faded jacket that the young man was wearing, Tshepo guessed the man was single. There was no way a man who has a woman would ever present himself in that manner to the world. The young man saw that Tshepo was looking at him.

"Fede Groote," the young man said.

"Sho," Tshepo responded. He shifted himself closer to the door to avoid small talk.

"This weather is so nice. It's like you can just stand outside," the young man said, totally oblivious to Tshepo's movements.

"Yeah, it is," Tshepo responded and immediately looked outside the side of his window.

"You know, this weather reminds me of when I was a kid. My friends and I were playing outside, and it began raining like this. I remember my mother was so upset! She chased me inside the house with my father's belt," the young man laughed as he told his story.

“You need a belt to whip a woman as she’s begging you to get inside her, my nigga,” Tshepo thought to himself.

“Oh my gosh!” the young man said.

“This nigga say ‘oh my gosh’?” Tshepo, perplexed, thought to himself.

“Ah man, this weather! This other time I was with my friend and we were studying at his flat. It was raining just like this. Ah, man! We made some hot chocolate and poured some Red Bull in it so we could study the whole night!” the young man laughed as he was regaling his story to Tshepo.

“In this baby-making weather, that’s the best story you could tell me?” Tshepo felt like Detective Alonzo from Training Day as he was surprised by the young man’s excitement from his stories.

The young man could never fit into the circle of his friends. In that kind of weather, he knew his friends would have far more interesting stories to tell. His friends would speak of sexual conquests that validate the fact that rainy weather is baby-making weather. Unlike this young man who for him, such weather reminded him of an awful concoction of hot chocolate and Red Bull.

He looked at the young man. He looked deep into his eyes; eyes that saw pleasure in remembering being whipped by his mother to come in the house late on a rainy day; eyes that clearly sought the

warmth of a woman in such weather but were blinded by the false pride of being noble for not seeking it in the first place. He could see a teenage version of himself in those eyes. There was nothing noble about shying away from one's sexuality. He despised the fact that the young man reminded him of his teenage years when he was at his weakest as a man. He looked at the young man with eyes of disgust.

"You need to get laid, my nigga" Tshepo thought to himself, hoping the young man hears him through his eyes.

Finally, the taxi reached the mall where he was meeting Naomi. He was glad that he would leave the taxi. Being with the young man made him feel weak and soiled his spirit. He felt like the conversation he had with the young man clogged his own masculinity. But in the same breath, he understood that he needed that conversation before meeting up with Naomi.

Through that young man, he saw how much he had grown. He was not naïve about his sexuality anymore. He was not ashamed of it. He did not hide behind the lenses of imposed purity as per the code of the church. He was free as a man to tell a woman she was attractive if he found her sexually attractive. He never realised how liberating it was for a man to have this feeling until he broke that code.

Perhaps that was the reason he fell in love with Naomi in the first place. With Naomi, he discovered his sexuality. However, Naomi led the dance. Naomi showed her experience and through her, Tshepo learnt what the church never taught him. Naomi taught him how to eat the forbidden fruit and enjoy it. And not only that, Naomi taught him how to cultivate and harvest it.

Unlike the young man in the taxi who remembered being whipped by his mother in this weather for playing in the rain, he remembered the day Naomi turned a fantasy into reality.

14.

It was a rainy day that day. Tshepo was studying at the campus library. His friend had invited him over for a birthday party. He did not feel like going. The idea that he will be there eating a thin slice of Shoprite cake with a sad piece of Shoprite chuck meat was enough for him not to go. Luckily, there was an assignment that was due for one of his modules, so he used it as an excuse not to go to the party.

About three hours into his studying, at about 11 pm, Naomi called him.

“Come home Tshepo,” she said. She was direct.

He knew that Naomi was getting annoyed that he wasn’t back at her place yet. He was planning to leave the library around midnight. Usually, around midnight, policemen passed the campus when they conducted their foot patrols. He would wait for the first policemen to pass campus before he left campus. This was the safest time to leave campus at that hour. But Naomi had called and ordered him to come home.

“Compromises,” he thought to himself. He packed his books, switched off the library desktop and headed out of the library.

By the grace of the Heavens, he arrived at Naomi’s place 12 minutes later safe and sound. At this stage of their relationship, they alternated weeks staying together. One week they stayed at

Naomi's place and another week they stayed at his place. Their parents paid too much money for their respective apartments to be vacant. They knew their parents would not agree to a vat 'n sit though. So, they figured that it will be best to alternate between the two places.

He knocked on the door. No one answered. He knocked again and still, there was no answer. He was getting annoyed. Naomi asked – no – ordered him to come to her and yet she was not there herself. Frustration began to well inside of him. He knew that he better calms himself before she opened the door. He took a deep breath and began to count to ten as he exhaled. After three deep breaths and 30 counts later, he felt calmer. He knocked the third time.

“Come in,” Naomi said. She did not yell. It seemed she was saying come in all the time he was knocking. She said it just loud enough for Tshepo to hear.

He opened the door, ready to scold her about leaving the door unlocked that late at night. However, as he opened the door his mind went blank. It was like he got punched by Mike Tyson the way he froze by the door.

Naomi sat on the edge of her bed. She lit her bedside lamp and had the main room light switched off. The light bounced off the tan wall behind her. Infused with the rain outside, Naomi's room created an ambience that felt like drinking hot coffee on a Winter's

day. The room was dimly lit, setting a warm atmosphere. The wave of her fan heater made him forget that he had walked in the rain.

In the center of the room sat Naomi on her bed. He kept his eyes fixed on her. Even while closing the door, it was impossible for him to take his eyes off her. She sat arched slightly forward. It was as if she was balancing herself with her hands that she placed in front of her. Her legs were wrapped in torn fishnet stockings. It seemed as if she bought them earlier and strategically torn them. They were torn in select areas around her legs, highlighting their beauty. He could tell through the dimly lit room that she had shaved her legs. Through the torn areas, her legs bounced off the soft light. They shone like pillars of gold that held the temple of the gods. Her legs were slightly open with her hands resting in front of her. He could tell that she was hiding the one area where the stockings had the biggest tear.

She looked at him. She swayed her shoulders slightly. Her hazel eyes glimmered through the dimly lit room. Her eyes were inviting him. Her eyes spoke directly to his loins. The dark maroon lip gloss glittered as she pouted. Slowly she looked at him. Slowly she raised her hands simultaneously crossing her legs. Tshepo stood motionless watching her.

He could feel his blood rush in him. He could feel the sexual tension pulsating in his loins. He could not move as he was mesmerised by Naomi. He loved Naomi. Not only did he love her, but he had pure lust for her. Naomi was his pinnacle of woman

beauty. As he stood by the door watching her goddess, he felt his urges consume him.

Naomi could sense that Tshepo was starting to give in to his urges. She knew her man. And so, she unlatched the last restraints to unleash Tshepo's beastly side. She looked straight into his eyes. She saw that his eyes were not locked in with her eyes. She saw Tshepo was looking at her legs. This was exactly where she wanted him.

Tshepo adorned his girlfriend's body. Naomi's crossed legs widen her hips. Her thick thighs hid the sweetness of man's greatest pleasure. He slowly worked his eyes up along her arms. Doing so, he gazed at how Naomi's voluptuous thighs narrowed into her flat waistline. Like a river entering an estuary, Naomi's body curved inward around her belly button only to curve outward by her bust.

Her arms hid the nipple of her breast, but the outline of her brown, almost like slightly burnt caramel, areola was visible. He realised that the torn stockings were the only clothing item on her. A wild pulse rushed into his loins. The burst of blood forced his manhood to bounce on his jeans. He could feel it beat on his jeans like a wild lion trapped in a cage. He could feel it beat on his jeans like a crackhead needing a fix. His eyes jumped straight to hers. He could not resist himself anymore.

15.

“Where are you?” He texted Naomi.

A few seconds later, Naomi responded, “I’m at bo my Friend. The one next to Auntie Jackie’s Chicken.”

“Ok cool, I think I see it. I’m on my way,” He responded.

He was slightly disappointed that Naomi was running an errand when they planned to meet up. But in the same breath, he was glad that she was running an errand. He hoped that she would get too busy to go for lunch. In that way, he would save some money by not buying food.

The store that Naomi was in was not far. It sold fashion company rejects at an affordable price. Most of the rejects in the stores were unnoticeable. They were minor defects such as the use of wrong stitching or defects of this nature. They even sold Jordans. To the common man, these Jordans were as good as the real ones with no defects. These were the stores that Naomi loved to buy clothes from.

“Wena le dishopo tsa bo my Friend, I’m by the door now. Which aisle in you?” Tshepo texted Naomi.

Naomi blushed. She felt special that Tshepo remembered a fact about her. She felt special that Tshepo remembered that she bought clothes from reject stores rather than mainstream stores.

She felt special that somewhere in Tshepo's heart, she still lived.

"Whatever! Come to the back, to the dressing rooms," Naomi responded.

Tshepo searched for the dressing rooms located at the back of the store. He saw a sign missing one 's' that designated the back corner of the store as the dressing rooms. He walked through the zig zag aisles of the store to reach the back.

For a store with no name and no clear branding, it was wellmaintained. It could improve in certain areas, but the store was cleaner than most mainstream stores. He continued walking until he reached the dressing rooms. Looking around he couldn't see Naomi. The sections around the dressing rooms were shoes and other bulky items. He figured that the owners thought the shoes and bulky items would be more difficult to steal as a person enters or exits the dressing room.

"Ok so, where are you?" He texted Naomi.

"I'm in the second dressing room," She responded.

"Okay," He responded.

"Okay?" she thought to herself.

"Eish, I think the zip is stuck." she texted Tshepo.

"That's a shame. Let me look for the shop assistant to help out," he responded.

“Tshepo you idiot!” She thought to herself.

“Tshepo! Come in and help me.” She spoke loudly through the closed door.

He did not expect her to call him. Her voice carried memories from years past. Hearing her voice after ten years felt natural to him. It broke the cocoons that freed a dozen of butterflies to float in him.

“Okay, bet” Tshepo responded.

Awkwardly he went into the dressing room section. He searched for the room that Naomi was in. Out of the three rooms, only one was closed. The security camera at the far-right end corner of the ceiling was facing down. It seemed that it was broken and was being repaired. He quickly dashed into the closed dressing room.

He opened the door and realised that it wasn’t locked. He hopped inside without knocking. To avoid possible embarrassment, he closed his eyes as he entered the dressing room. He closed the door and turned around to face the door.

With his eyes still closed, his heart beating through his chest, he asked, “Naomi?”

After ten years, there he was. Slightly chubbier than the last time she saw him but there he was. There was the love of her life. For ten years she worked on herself to be with him again. And there he was. Tshepo, the love of his life. Blood filled the capillaries in

her cheeks, causing them to glow pink. A smile widened across her face. However, she had to remain focused.

Tshepo was a man who shot for the chest or higher. She was on her lunch break and she knew she would not waste it with small talk. She would not waste the time with trivial conversations. She would not waste this moment with the man she longed for with “how have you been” and “it’s good to see you again”. She would not shoot for the chest. She would go directly for his head. And she did.

He stood facing the door waiting for a response. Perhaps the person in the dressing room wasn’t Naomi. Or perhaps it was Naomi but she was regretting calling him. As awkwardness and embarrassment clouded his mind, he felt hands hold him by the waist.

Naomi grabbed Tshepo by the waist and pulled him towards her. She wrapped her left arm around his stomach and with her right hand reached for the inside of his sweatpants. She wasted no time. She felt Tshepo was flaccid. In her hand, he felt soft and smooth. She knew how to arouse Tshepo. After all, she taught him everything he knew about his sexuality.

Tshepo felt himself being pulled back. As he tried to gather himself, he felt an arm secure him around the belly. He kept his eyes closed and did not know how to react. Should he call for help?

He is a man, after all, him calling for help, what help did he need? Should he yell that he is being raped by a woman?

In the same breath, how many men would wish to be in his situation? How many men wish to be pulled by a woman who wants to please them? Unless you are a rapper, such treatment is rare for the common man. And besides, what's wrong with a quickie in a clothing store dressing room anyway? This would definitely be a story worth telling to his friends. When Naomi reached for his loins, his mind went still. He gave himself to her.

Naomi felt Tshepo become calm in her arms. Naomi felt Tshepo relax in her hold. She felt the gentle hardening of Tshepo's member in her hand. She smiled with pride. She knew Tshepo and after ten years, she still knew her way around his body. She pulled her right hand out of his pants and grabbed him around the waist with both hands.

Tshepo wanted to turn around but in the same breath felt helpless. This was something that Palesa and Ntombi never knew about him. He did not enjoy taking charge in sexual situations. He wanted to be babied. He wanted to be led. He wanted to be used as a tool. This was something that only Naomi knew. He kept his eyes closed.

Naomi spun Tshepo around and dragged him across the adjacent wall. She wondered why he had his eyes closed. His face was filled with skin pockets of being a father. His face was carved with

crevices of stress that come with adulthood. Instead of those crevices making him look like a defeated soldier in war, they instead made him look like a war hero who achieved feats that normal men could never achieve. They made him even more handsome than she had imagined or remembered. Seeing him surrender himself completely to her made her feel her inner thighs become slippery.

Tshepo rested on the wall totally motionless. Only his manhood stood up for a fight. He felt Naomi grab it again. This was a losing fight which he accepted.

Naomi knew she did not have much time. She still had to go to work. She could suck him, but she knew Tshepo would not orgasm from it. She could pull the small chair in the dressing room and ride him. But that would break the tension that thickened the air with passion.

She knew what would work. She remembered in university that whenever they hid behind abandoned buildings, this was the position that had Tshepo curling his toes. She grabbed his pulsating penis and positioned it behind her. Slowly she let Tshepo penetrate her. The penetration stretched her as he entered her. It felt warm. It felt snug in her. She let out a soft moan she as felt Tshepo lodge fully in her.

Tshepo could feel himself enter Naomi. It felt different. It felt like he was back home. It felt like he was where he was supposed to.

He firmly held Naomi by her thighs. She was already wet as he penetrated her. He knew he would not last.

Naomi knew that Tshepo behind her, his hands on his thighs with her African butt bouncing on him, he would not last. The dressing room was small enough for her to support herself by resting her hand on the mirror across the wall. She slightly bent her knees so she would bounce on him at a slight angle. She felt Tshepo's fingers dig into her thighs. Like a full balloon being squeezed in a crevice, she felt Tshepo getting harder in her. She knew that he was close to erupting. This caused her to orgasm.

Tshepo felt her first orgasm. He grabbed her harder to go in her deeper. Naomi's second orgasm caused her to contract on his manhood. This was an experience he felt only with Naomi. Palesa was embarrassed about her orgasms and stopped before she could. He doubted if he ever made Ntombi orgasm because she would send him videos of her "finishing the job" after they had the deed. It was with Naomi that he knew if he pleased a woman or not.

Naomi's third orgasm clutched on his schlong as he was thrusting into her. Naomi knew exactly how to make him orgasm. It was as if she held a switch and knew when to flick it on.

Like someone pouring cold water down your spine unexpectedly, his body shimmered as he poured himself inside of her. He could feel mini waves inside Naomi. They were like coaster guards ushering lost seamen to shore. For a moment he felt satisfied. He felt satisfied in a way that his wife could never satisfy him. He felt

satisfied in a way that Ntombi could never satisfy him. It was like eating all the foods in the world and going home eat to the food prepared by your mother. He opened his eyes.

Naomi could barely stand. Her legs were pleasurably trembling caused by Tshepo's thrusts. Tshepo was still in her. He was still throbbing. She could feel him pump the last of his energy into her. A combination of her cream with Tshepo's leaked out of her, rolling down her thighs. She raised her head to look into the mirror. Her eyes locked with the love of her life.

16.

“Let’s go the mall.”

The text message read. Ntombi was annoyed by her friend texting her to go the mall knowing that she was using the day towards her research for her studies. But she had been reading various articles for three hours straight. She was exhausted but did not want to be disturbed. A break, however, would help her regain some energy to continue with her research.

“Okay cool. Give me a few minutes to prepare. Pick me up after 45 minutes or so,” she texted her friend back.

“At least she didn’t stay far from the mall,” she thought to herself. She knew her friend would never walk to the mall. She also knew that her friend would never ride a taxi to town either. QwaQwa taxis were rattling cages from the pits of hades. They were the chariots that transported people around QwaQwa, the enclave of the Sotho mountains. These taxis were beaten, batted and bruised beyond any human repair. Her friend with 21-inch Peruvian hair would never ride in these wheels of despair.

“Ok. Themba will take us,” her friend responded.

Themba was her friend’s boyfriend. One of her boyfriends. Themba was a lecturer at the local university. The pockets that carried his coins were deep. He wore tailor made suits that elevated his status as a man above average. Her friend told her that

Themba had been recently commissioned by a political party to draw an economic policy for their election manifesto. The political party, according to her friend, paid Themba R350 000 for his research. And according to her friend, Themba received such commissions on a quarterly basis.

She got up from her study desk and went to her bathroom. She had showered in the morning, but her mother taught her that a lady always freshens up before she leaves her house. Even though she went against many of her mother's teachings, some were deeply ingrained in her like freshening up before leaving the house. She also noticed how taking an extra moment to prepare herself had more heads turning than when she did not take the extra moment.

She wondered what Tshepo was doing. Perhaps she could send him a steamy picture while she was in the bathroom. But she did not want to make him feel like she needs him. Another lesson that her mother taught her. Her mother taught her that she should give a man space. But what her mother did not teach her is that the space becomes filled with feelings of longing and yearning. This was a space only Tshepo could fill.

Tshepo locked eyes with Naomi. The mirror reflected his infidelity. The mirror exposed his adulterous ways. However, his heart was content. Standing there with Naomi, the mirror reflected the love of his life.

He looked at Naomi and realised how much she had not changed. Her caramel skin was still clear from imperfections. Her upper lip was slightly fuller than her lower lip. Her upper lip was also slightly darker than her lower lip. A petite button nose merged in her face. Tshepo found her as attractive as she was when he met her ten years ago.

He also noticed how her legs were more toned than before. He figured that perhaps she started working out over the years. Little did he know that Naomi has been working on herself for the moment they reunite. Little did he know that Naomi was waking up each day remembering the day he walked out her apartment. Little did he know that Naomi wanted him back.

At that moment, Naomi felt that she finally got her man back. There they were in the dressing room of a Chinese clothing store. After ten years, their bodies could still connect perfectly. Like twisting the last block of a Rubix cube, she felt complete. She slowly felt Tshepo become flaccid inside of her. Feeling the last bits of Tshepo still flowing into her, she pushed herself further back onto him.

The day felt like it was bending time to move slower. The rain was still pouring steadily outside. Her thoughts were suddenly interrupted by a loud, booming voice.

“Listen up everyone! Look, we just got word that the rain won’t stop. Our town does not have the most effective water drainage systems and some roads have flooded already. So, you guys can go home. Your lives are more important,” announced Mr. Walter.

Palesa was relieved. She was counting the hours to leave the office anyway. Without further delay, she packed her belongings into her bag. On the edge of her desk was a flyer from Auntie Jackie’s Chicken. Her colleague was raving earlier about how delicious the chicken was from the restaurant.

“She forgot the flyer,” she thought to herself. She was tired and felt that she would not have the energy to cook later on, even though Mr. Walter had released the workforce earlier than usual.

“We’ll try Auntie Jackie with Tshepo tonight,” she told herself. She grabbed the flyer, took her bag and headed out of the office.

“I am...”

“No, don’t say anything,” Naomi told him.

“...sorry,” he finished the sentence in his head.

Naomi took out several wet wipes from her bag. She began to clean her thighs and her pelvic region. She took time to ensure that she was clean.

“Naomi, you haven’t changed a single bit,” he thought to himself.

This was Naomi's routine after they made love. Meticulously she would clean herself of any stains that resulted from the love they made. If she could, she would have showered too. This routine of cleaning herself after sex, started when they were still in university.

They were studying in the university library. It was around 2 pm and they decided to take a lunch break. Before they headed to the campus food court, they decided to stroll around the campus grounds. During their stroll, they discovered an old boiler room near the education faculty of the campus. Struck by hormones, Tshepo suggested they explore the boiler room in which Naomi agreed.

She knew Tshepo wanted an isolated area for one specific reason. She saw the slight bulge around the zipper region of his jeans. The excitement got the better of her. They had no protection on them on that day, but she loved him enough not to be bothered with one anyway.

Immediately after entering the boiler room, Tshepo began kissing her. She did not resist. She was wearing a funnel skirt that rested above her knees. She only had to take off her undergarment which she did. She rushed to unzip Tshepo's jeans. After unbuttoning the jean, she held both the jean and Tshepo's underwear. She pulled the two items of clothing down.

They were in such a rush, intoxicated by ecstasy that Tshepo almost forgot to pull out. And so, Tshepo found himself shooting some of himself on Naomi's legs. She did not have anything to wipe herself with. They looked at each other and laughed it off. She took her underwear that was resting on her left ankle and used it to wipe herself.

What they did not know was that Naomi's parents were on campus. They were visiting her and were planning to surprise her. As they walked back, Naomi's parent's car was parked by the parking space near the main gate. Her mom rushed out the door with great excitement. Naomi's parents knew about the two of them so seeing them would not be a problem. However, as her mom was rushing towards Naomi, arms wide open, her eyes saw mini stains on her daughter. She also saw the same stains around Tshepo's jeans- which had the zipper undone.

Since that day Naomi always ensured that she was clean after they made love. The beautiful act of solidifying intimacy between two souls was a messy one. After cleaning herself, she took time to clean him as well. He looked as she held his limp member with her left hand, wiping off the lubricant that gelled their souls once more with her right hand. She finished cleaning him by wiping off tiny pieces that landed on his thighs. He felt a sense of pity, guilt and joy.

"Ok, I actually have to go back to work. I am just grabbing a quick lunch next door and then I'm gone," Naomi said.

She held him. She looked straight into his eyes. Her hazel eyes were a portal that revealed her soul. She held him tighter. He could feel she was shaking. Like the aftershocks of a massive earthquake, her world had been rocked by undiluted love once more.

“I love you Tshepo,” She told him.

She quickly gathered her things and walked out of the dressing room. He pulled the small chair in the dressing room to sit on it. His thoughts roamed wild in his mind.

He did not regret his actions. However, he felt pity that after all these years, Naomi still loved him. The idea that Naomi still loved him also gave him joy that the woman who had his heart, he had hers too. In between the feeling of pity, guilt also loomed. Guilt that he moved on when he could have stayed with her.

They were young after all. He too cheated. Even though he never slept with the women he had affairs with, he had shown sexual interest towards other women. The difference was that he never got caught. He sat in the tiny dressing room haunted by thoughts of undying love. Like a fiend refusing to enter the afterlife, his undying love for Naomi decayed in his soul.

“Bo Nice, ladies, amantombazane, where y’all going?” Themba asked Ntombi and her friend.

“Take us to Auntie Jackie’s Zaddy,” her friend responded.

The rain was still pouring steadily and calmingly but in larger volumes. Certain sections of the road were already flooded. The roads were flooded along the surface drainage sections of the roads. They were backed up by years of blockage due to poor maintenance of the municipality. However, they were not bothered by the inefficiencies of the municipality. Themba was cruising along in his red Golf 5 GTI. Ntombi and her friend were seated at the back of the German hatchback. Themba had bought them Ice Tropez which her friend loved.

“Does Tshepo buy you Tropez?” she mocked Ntombi.

“Whatever,” she responded with a giggle.

Luckily there wasn’t much traffic and they shortly arrived at the mall. Themba stopped in front of Auntie Jackie’s Chicken. He did not park the car. He simply stopped in the middle of the mall driveway and switched his hazard lights on. Ntombi and her friend hopped out of the car.

“Later Zaddy,” her friend told Themba.

Like hopping flamingos, the ladies quickly rushed to the restaurant for shelter from the rain. When Themba saw the ladies safely under the restaurant’s outside sitting bay, he roared the German sports hatchback and drove off.

“That’s my man!” yelled Ntombi’s friend.

“Peacocking,” thought Ntombi to herself.

“I actually love him yazi. But he’s crazy if he thinks I’ll settle down,” her friend said.

“Wow, friend,” Ntombi responded.

“Yes, I am not for the home-making. Imagine a sex symbol such as myself washing snorts and breaking nails carrying pots.

Aneva!” her friend proclaimed with a loud clap of her hands.

The two ladies laughed as they entered Auntie Jackie’s. The restaurant was small and was recently opened. It was clean and decorated with modern trimmings. The bay couches were deep blood-red in colour. The tables were a smooth tan brown with walls that were bespangled with pictures of Auntie Jackie herself. Auntie Jackie looked like the lost child of Colonel Sanders and Ouma of Ouma’s Rusks.

“Friend, Themba gave me his black credit card,” her friend told Ntombi. She was all giggles. She looked like a nerdy teenage girl who got kissed by the high school under-18 rugby captain. The excitement radiated through her eyes.

She did not judge her friend. When Gary Chapman wrote his famous book about the five love languages that humans use to emote love, he must have based it on movies or on ideal romantic situations found in Victorian works of literature. Because in the real world, there is only one love language that a woman understands: money.

“Oh my gosh, this rain is so thick. Thank God for this car,” Palesa said as she was driving to the mall. Her large SUV could easily navigate through the mini pools of water caused by the combination of the floods and the potholes on the road.

She thought of Thabang in the weather. Her poor boy. But with his father, surely, he was okay. But his father was not okay. The image of a sleeping Tshepo on their bed after his afternoon walk a few days ago was on her mind.

“Why is he tired? What is causing him to be so exhausted? It can’t be the retrenchment. Ok, maybe it is. But what is the problem?” Palesa questioned herself as she steadily drove to Auntie Jackie’s Chicken.

“Am I a good wife if I can’t offer my man peace?” she thought to herself. The thought that she could be failing as a wife pained her. Her mind raced to the worst-case scenario that perhaps Tshepo was contemplating a divorce.

“I rebuke you Satan!” Palesa reprimanded herself. To calm her mind, she connected her phone to the car stereo. Searching through her YouTube Music Library, she clicked on an album by Benjamin Duke.

“Perfect,” she told herself as she played the album in her car.

“Ok Tshepo, let’s go,” he told himself.

He got up from the chair in the dressing room. Flashes of Naomi continued to plague him. He had his eyes closed throughout the whole time he made love with Naomi. By closing his eyes, he felt her more passionately. These flashes were not visible in his mind’s eye. Instead, these flashes jolted with each blood that pumped in his heart. The tips of his fingers could still feel her thighs. His back was still cold from the wall. Love was coursing in his veins, giving birth to memories once buried deep in his soul.

As he was exiting the dressing room, he looked around to see if any of his personal belongings might have fallen to the floor.

“Oh no,” he said.

Naomi’s phone was on the floor.

“Eish”, he said. He was confused as to whether he should take it or leave it. If he left it behind, it might get stolen. If he took it, he could take it to her home. This would be a perfect excuse to see her again. Without giving it further thought, he bent over to pick up Naomi’s phone.

“To this day, she still cannot take care of a phone,” Tshepo said to himself. He slid the phone into his right pocket. Awkwardly he walked out of the dressing room.

As he was walking outside the store, the shop assistant was looking at him. He wondered whether did the shop assistant know

what happened in the dressing room. He looked at him with a smirky smile.

“At least he smiled,” Tshepo thought to himself. Most shop assistants in the stores in town could not be bothered by customers. Not that he was a customer anyway, he was concerned if the shop assistant was smiling because it was his job or if he was smiling because he knew what he had just done.

He had his eyes closed the whole time. What if the shop assistant peeped through the dressing room and recorded the whole thing? The last thing he needed in his life was a friend telling him that he was uploaded on an explicit website with a clickbait title.

In the same breath, it could be a validating smile. A smile of respect from one man to other. Men respect men who are able to have more sex than the regular man. It is a badge of honour among men. It proves to the world that the man does not struggle to recreate himself.

“This honour is hypocritical,” he thought to himself.

Society honours the man who sleeps with multiple women but shames the woman who sleeps with multiple men. He remembered a joke a pastor once made, ignorantly and inadvertently, in church about the societal double standard. The pastor said that the woman wears a white dress on her wedding day becomes it symbolises her purity. He explained that by purity, the white dress symbolises a woman who is untouched by a man.

The punchline of his joke was that men wear black because ‘hey’. The pastor said this with a gesture that suggested that it is expected that men will enter marriage having been touched by women. At this gesture, the whole church roared in laughter failing to see the sexually oppressive propaganda the pastor was promoting.

“But what does it have to with him anyway?” he thought. This is the society that he lives in. So, when a fellow man smiled with a smirk on his face that validated his ability to sexually entice a woman, who was he to judge? He smiled at the shop assistant. A deep sense of pride and confidence welled in him. At that moment, he felt proud to be a man.

“Oh my gosh, oh my gosh, oh my gosh,” Ntombi told her friend. She was embarrassed as she saw Palesa walk into Aunt Jackie’s.

“What, what is it, friend?” Ntombi’s friend asked her.

“Don’t look but behind you is Palesa,” Ntombi told her friend. She slouched deeper in the red bay benches to hide herself.

“So? Why are you hiding? She does not know you having an affair with her husband. Knowing her, she probably thinks you are one of the young deacons from church,” her friend told her holding a fried drumstick. She held the drumstick cautiously with the ends of her 22mm emerald acrylic nails.

Ntombi could not help but chuckle at her friend's remark. She eased in the bench and sat upright again.

"Yeah, you right." Ntombi said. Carefully, so not to damage her 18mm mocha coloured acrylic nails, she held a single fry and bit into it.

Ntombi quickly composed herself and continued to talk with her friend. "Ya, you right Friend. So, you telling me, Themba wants to take to Bali as a research assistant?"

"This store is pretty clean." Palesa thought to herself as she entered Aunty Jackie.

"Oh sorry," a lady said to her. The lady with beautiful hazel eyes bumped into her as the lady was walking out of the store.

"Oh no, it is fine" Palesa responded. She paid her no mind.

"What will my boys love to eat tonight?" Palesa thought to herself as she looked at the overhead menus.

The rain poured steadily. It seemed that it would continue raining for the whole weekend. Tshepo stood by the door of the Chinese fashion store. While he stood by the door, a ravenous appetite began to consume the walls of his stomach.

“Damn, I’m hungry. Let me get iets to eat before heading back,”
Tshepo thought to himself.

“Thank you so much,” Naomi said as she grabbed her order.

She was not going back to work. Before she left work, she heard one of her colleagues say that the boss was reading the weather. Apparently, if it got worse, he was going to release the workforce earlier. The rain was not letting up. It was pouring steadily. She decided to gamble with the knowledge she had. And besides, she just reconnected with the love of her life. There was no way she would go back to work for her feelings to be diluted by office politics and sad saps that suffered from sicknesses that stemmed from sucking up to their superiors.

As she was leaving the restaurant, she bumped into a lady who was standing idle viewing the overhead menus. She looked familiar but she could not put a finger to who she was.

“Oh sorry,” Naomi said.

“Oh no, it is fine,” the lady responded. She looked at her and smiled. This lady was extremely beautiful. A regal aura enveloped her. But she looked familiar to Naomi. She paid her no mind and headed out the restaurant.

She dashed to her car as the rain started to get stronger. She quickly hopped in her red 2018 Renault Cilo. The smell of fast food filled

the interior of the car. She paused to think about what had just happened.

Her original plan was to meet Tshepo in the store. It's not like she needed anything from the store. She knew that Tshepo did not like spending money. And, Tshepo had the pride that will not allow him to allow her to buy them lunch. So, meeting at a Chinese store selling cheap company rejects was the next best thing. How it was the next best thing, she was not sure. What she was sure about was that she was going to make it clear to Tshepo that he belonged to her and no one else.

The smell of the fast food intensified in her car as her mind was engrossed by the love she made with Tshepo. She hoped Tshepo did not think that she was still the same girl as before. She hoped Tshepo could see the maturity in her. She hoped Tshepo enjoyed her as much as she enjoyed him. Lingering imprints were etched on her thighs. She slightly rubbed them. Almost instinctively, she bit her lower lip as she heard echoes of Tshepo's soft moans.

The smell of fast food thickened the air. The smell exorcised her from the ecstasy that enthralled her mind. The rain beat harder on her windscreen. Inasmuch as she wanted to go back to Tshepo and tell him how she felt, she had to leave.

"Moer," Tshepo thought to himself as he walked into Auntie Jackie's restaurant.

He panicked as he saw Palesa by the cashier placing her order. What was he going to say if she turned around? It seemed the cashier was helping her decide on what to purchase. Tshepo's mind worked on overdrive as he looked for an exit. On the right, he saw a sign indicating the restaurant restrooms.

"If I die, I die," he said to himself.

He quickly dashed to the restroom. Fortune favoured him greatly. The moment he dashed to his right to go to the restrooms, the cashier was showing Palesa a special that was printed on an A1 poster on the left wall of the store. The poster was placed slightly behind the cashier's teller machines so Palesa was still slightly looking forward as she scanned the poster. This gave him the opportunity to quickly bolt to his right and head for the restrooms.

Having quickly evaded his wife, Tshepo felt relieved. As he was rushing to the restroom, his eyes fell on Ntombi. It was as if someone had clogged his heart with an immersive feeling of guilt. He was just with his past lover whom he made love to in a Chinese store dressing room. He just evaded his wife with the fear of being asked questions about why he wasn't home with Thabang in the heavy rain. And there was Ntombi, looking at him shocked and confused to see him. Hearing Palesa conclude her order, he proceeded to lock himself in the male restroom.

“Haibo, Tshepo?” Ntombi said to her friend. She looked at him as he entered the store. Confusion rattled her mind as to why would Tshepo enter the store. The way he froze, she could tell that he did not come with Palesa. And the way he quickly dashed to the restroom, it was clear that he was avoiding his wife.

Their eyes locked for a second as he went in the restroom. She was confused about the situation. What was going on? Were they arguing? What if they going through a divorce? What if she was the cause of the divorce? Perhaps Palesa found out about him and her. Her friend noticed that she was no longer eating her chicken.

“What? Out of nowhere, you are talking about your cheap man,” her friend questioned her.

“Friend, I’m going to the restroom,” Ntombi told her friend.

Without waiting for a response from her friend, she got up from the bench. What if indeed Tshepo is going through a divorce? What if indeed she was the cause of it? In any case, Tshepo was her man. And looking at how her man quickly ran for the restrooms, her man needed her.

Embarrassed, ashamed, and crestfallen Tshepo sat on the toilet cover in the restroom. He buried his face in the palm of his hands. From feeling proud of having conquered a woman in the dressing room of a clothing store, he felt distraught by his sexual escapades.

He remembered his father telling him that a crack breaks the window. At that point, he realised that it was only a matter of time before the cracks of his frail masculinity shattered his marriage.

He could feel tears rush to his eyes as the mixed emotions weighed on him. It was as if he was tied to a solid block of concrete thrown into a body of water. The emotions sunk deep in him and he felt dragged down with them. What was he going to say when he arrived home? How was he going to explain leaving Tshepo with Mam' Zintle in this heavy rain? What was his excuse for being a bad father? What was his excuse for being a failure of a husband?

Palesa did not deserve the pain that was brewing from his treacherous acts. He remembered in university, when he was Naomi, what one girl he had an affair with once told him. This girl was his side girl while he was with Naomi those many years ago. He was feeling a similar emotion when the girl wrapped her arm around him and said seven words that were eternally etched in his heart:

“It’s only cheating if you get caught”

Those words restored him to continue dating the girl. Those words gave him the confidence to pursue more women while he was with Naomi. He never understood why he was so hurt by Naomi when he did the same. Perhaps the fact that Naomi got caught, the seven words came to life.

As the thoughts of his past affairs began to occupy his mind, he heard three knocks on the toilet room door.

“Tshepo? Tshepo? Open up, it’s me,” the voice behind the knocks announced itself.

“Bleksem, the jig is up,” Tshepo thought to himself. He could hear that it wasn’t Palesa. The way the voice said ‘open’ sounded as if the voice’s nose was pitched.

“It’s me, Ntombi. Open already,” Ntombi said.

He reached for the latch holding the vinyl door. Ntombi quickly entered the tiny toilet room and shot the latch back in place to secure the door. As he was about to bury his face in his hands again, Ntombi launched herself on his lap.

“Baby, Baby,” Ntombi said. Tshepo was trying to avoid eye contact. He was swaying his head left and right, doing all he could for Ntombi not see his pain.

“Baby, no,” Ntombi said. Her hand firmly held Tshepo on his beardless chin. Doing this allowed her to hold his head firmly. Tshepo’s eyes were glittering from welled up tears that rested on his lower eyelids.

“Baby, what’s wrong?” Ntombi said. She gently caressed his face with both her hands. She held him softly.

Tshepo knew what was wrong. But ‘monna ke nku’. He was taught a man is sheep that does not cry. Even though the tears were

visible, he would not tell Ntombi. It was the first time that guilt got the better of him. It was the first time he felt guilt rapture in his heart. Ntombi sitting on him made him question his masculinity once more.

Instead of telling Ntombi to get off him, he held her by her petite waistline. Instead of lifting Ntombi off him, he aligned her to his crotch. Instead of going to his wife, face the music of being out without Thabang, he looked into Ntombi deeply in her eyes.

Ntombi could feel Tshepo pulling her closer to her. She could feel him control her body. A feeling of guilt caused her to resist at first. She just saw him evading his wife like a plague. That was unlike him. What was going on between him and his wife and what if she is playing a role in what's happening? But the moment Tshepo aligned her with his crotch, the guilty feeling evaporated into thin air.

Why should she be guilty for what she has no control over? She may have worshipped the ground that Palesa walked but Tshepo was her man. She knew how to make him happy. So, if Palesa was failing to make him happy, it was enough evidence that Tshepo was with the wrong woman. She felt a sense of pride. This pride eased her resistance to Tshepo.

Tshepo looked at Ntombi. He looked deep into her eyes, seeing her soul. He never understood why Ntombi loved him. He knew that he was not her type. He figured after he lost his job, Ntombi

would leave him too. But she stayed. This woman who told him that she preferred to sit in perforated Mercedes Benz seats was sitting on his lap. Ten years ago, he would have never thought or even considered a woman like Ntombi would be sitting on his lap.

The soft scratches of her acrylic nails on his cheeks sent tantalising chills across his body. The chills closed his eyes, swallowing the tears that were building up. Ntombi was wearing baggy grey sweatpants.

“Take them off,” Tshepo instructed Ntombi to take her sweatpants as he was taking off his. Ntombi felt slightly disrespected by the instruction.

“Is everything sex to him?” She thought to himself. But she did not give in to the thought. Even though she felt that she was just to be used for his sexual urges, she found some satisfaction that she was able to please him. Especially given the fact he was married to a woman she thought to be perfect. It gave her a sense of pride and pleasure knowing that she can have any man she wanted, even one married to a woman who was perfect in every way a woman could possibly be. The thought lubricated her inner thighs.

She took off her sweatpants and gently mounted Tshepo. Carefully aligning herself, she gradually sat on Tshepo. Tshepo was not as firm as she knew him to be. Perhaps the emotional turbulence he was experiencing was affecting his stiffness. Nonetheless, she

could feel that Tshepo was in a world of his own. He had his eyes closed.

Tshepo could feel that he was not as hard as he usually was when Ntombi was on top of him. But it was expected. He had just experienced sexual satisfaction that he had forgotten. Ntombi on him felt like his body was operating from habit. It was a habit that he would get hard when Ntombi was on him. It was a habit that he would orgasm the moment Ntombi kissed him on the neck. And indeed, Ntombi kissed him on the neck and the power of habit unfolded.

She was not feeling satisfied with the sex she just had with Tshepo. She was feeling satisfied by the feigned smile that widened his face. In her heart, she was still worried about him. In a twisted way, she hoped that he was going through a divorce. And she hoped that she was the cause of it. It would validate her as a woman. That she, a woman whom society blazoned a venomous vixen, could steal the man of a Proverb 31 woman.

She rolled up the toilet paper next to her and cleaned herself. Tshepo still had his eyes closed. She cleaned him too.

“Tshepo, talk to me please?” she pleaded with Tshepo.

As she looked at Tshepo’s face, a phone vibrated in his pocket. She thought that perhaps Palesa was calling him. Even though he belonged to her, she remembered that he was still married after all.

She got off him, pulled her sweatpants up and left Tshepo dazed in the toilet room.

17.

Palesa arrived shortly before 3:15 pm at their home. The rain was still pouring heavily. Mr. Walter further sent a communication via the work Whatsapp group that the office will be closed until further notice. That meant that she did not have to work the next day. Therefore, she could spend the whole weekend with Tshepo and Thabang. The excitement got to her.

With the excitement that she would spend the whole weekend with her husband and son, she almost bumped into the treadmill that was in the single-car garage of their home. Missing the treadmill by an inch, her lungs bellowed huge amounts of air.

“Calm yourself,” Palesa told herself.

She grabbed the brown paper bag that had the basted full chicken and fries from Aunty Jackie’s. Knowing that she won’t be going to work until further notice, she left her laptop bag at the back of the car.

“This weekend is family time,” She told herself. She locked her car and headed into the house.

However, the door leading into the house was locked. That was strange. Tshepo usually locked the kitchen door and the main door when he was alone. He never locked the garage door because the garage door was remote-controlled unless someone manually

opened it from the inside. They had set a rule to only lock the door if there was no one in the house.

Frustration filled her veins. The frustration thickened her blood to form anger. She tried to calm herself but remembered her pastor say that not all anger is anger. Some anger is righteous and is in fact, what the pastor called, spiritual anger. The pastor referenced Christ whipping merchants selling at the temple as an example of spiritual anger. This kind of anger did not derive from the world nor was it caused by worldly matters. This was anger from the Heavens and therefore, justifiably for a Child of God to feel it.

Her husband leaving the house when she asked him not to causes spiritual anger. Her husband leaving the house with an infant baby in this horrid weather causes spiritual anger. She felt the anger brewing in her heart.

“Tshepo mara!” She yelled in the garage as she reached for the key to the door in her bag.

“She brings him good, not harm, all the days of her life. Lord calm my soul as I enter the home You’ve blessed me with,” Palesa prayed to herself. This was to calm her soul before entering her home. The last thing she wanted was to argue with her husband. Spiritual anger or not, she had been gifted with extra time to spend with her family. She did not want to ruin it over a trivial matter as Tshepo leaving their home when she asked him not to. Surely Tshepo had a valid reason to leave their home in such weather.

Her heart began to beat slower.

“Thank you, Lord,” she concluded her prayer and got into the house. As she got in the house, she saw the empty plate of food on the coffee table. She smiled knowing that Tshepo ate her food.

Tshepo was in a taxi riding back to his house. For the first time, he felt pure guilt rapture his veins from his adulterous ways. The guilt suffocated his airways. He found it difficult to breathe. If he told his friends about what happened that one afternoon, his friends would applaud him. What he had done on that rainy Friday afternoon would mark him a man among men according to the standards of masculinity set by his friends. His friends would probably celebrate his conquests. Because to his friends, sex was a sport. To his friends, sex was a scorecard that had to be updated. If it happened that one of his friends was not updating his scorecard, through ridicule and “friendly banter”, the friend would be motivated to update his scorecard. It was rare for his friends not to update their scorecards on a monthly basis, sometimes a weekly basis as well.

On that day, he had achieved what none of his friends had ever achieved. In a single day, he added two crosses to his scorecard. One would assume, like locking eyes with the fashion store shop assistant earlier, he would feel proud of his achievement. That he would feel his masculinity validated. However, he did not. He did not feel his masculinity validated. He did not feel proud. Maybe because he was a married man, and his friends were still bachelors

roaming the streets, he needed a different form of validation. Having sex with two women in a span of an hour proved to him that he was not fit to be loved by Palesa. Palesa's love was the true validation that he needed. But Naomi's love was the only one he felt.

"It's only cheating if you get caught," he thought to himself, "but why does it feel like I am caught already?"

"Fede Blazo," the taxi driver signalled to Tshepo that he had arrived at his house. Given the weather, the taxi driver drove Tshepo to his house.

"Fede," Tshepo responded as he paid the driver his taxi fare.

He quickly opened his umbrella. Before entering the house, he ran across to Mam' Zintle to fetch Thabang. With long strides, he hopped across the street. Mam' Zintle had a large gate that barricaded her house. How she managed to see what the neighbours were doing through the large gate and elaborated palisaded fence baffled him. He rang the doorbell that was attached to the gate.

"Hello. Oh, Tshepo, I see you," Mam' Zintle responded through the doorbell intercom.

The rain was heavier than earlier. His umbrella was struggling to prevent the rain from falling on him. The slight breeze that accompanied the rain blew across his face. Droplets of icy cold

rain kissed his cheeks. Moments later, Mam' Zintle opened the gate with Thabang in his baby chair. She had wrapped him with an extra blanket.

"I'll come tomorrow for the blanket. Now go before the boy gets a cold!" Mam' Zintle ordered Tshepo. He quickly took Thabang from Mam' Zintle. With the same long strides, he hopped across the street, with Thabang in his baby chair, and reached his house. He rushed to the front veranda of their home. Searching for the front door key in his left pocket, he felt a heavy object. It wasn't his wallet because he never carried a wallet whenever he went out.

"Bleksem," he said to himself. It was Naomi's phone. He remembered that she left it on the dressing room floor. The rain was too strong for him to leave it outside. Even if he left it in the post box, the rain might damage it, or the local nyaope boys might steal it. Realising Thabang was starting to get cold, he bypassed the phone and reached for the house key.

"God is with me, all the time. All the time, God is with me," he prayed to himself as he unlocked the door. To his surprise, the door was already unlocked. He got in and saw that the TV was still in the house. That would be the first that a thief would steal if one broke into the house. Perhaps he left with such excitement, that he forgot to lock. Then suddenly, he was startled to see Palesa entering the TV room.

"Hey my King," she said.

“Hey Babe,” he responded. It seemed as if the slight fright froze the emotions he carried in the taxi.

“Where are you from? I just had the kettle on, you want some tea?” Palesa asked him.

“This woman,” he thought to himself. He figured he lied while he was feeling calm.

“Yes please. Sorry, Bheki called me and said that he had an emergency. This guy. He actually surprised me with a mini-party. Apparently, he says that he was worried about me and that we haven’t spoken in a while. Sorry, I didn’t tell you, my Love,” Tshepo lied through his teeth. Palesa would not call Bheki to verify his story. But even if she did, Bheki was his closest friend. He would bail him out without thinking twice.

“Okay. Okay. I was upset to be honest, Tshepo. But it is okay, all’s well,” she said.

He knew that she was still upset. The only time Palesa called him by his name was when she was upset with him. This bothered him. Given what he had been up to earlier the day, his heart was heavy.

“It’s only cheating if you get caught,” he thought to himself.

“Mr. Walter allowed us to leave early. He said that the rain was getting worse and so, he said we should go home. And he said that we can stay home until further notice.” Palesa told her husband as she placed the tea tray near him.

Tshepo did not go to the room to change. He was startled to find Palesa home earlier than he had anticipated.

“Oh lovely, so you not going to work tomorrow?” Tshepo asked his wife.

“No, my King. I am so happy, we can spend quality time together,” Palesa said with excitement on her face.

A mini implosion of guilt erupted in his heart. Seeing his wife excited to be with him tore several arteries in his heart. The blood that leaked poisoned his lungs. He felt a lump of remorse choke him around the throat.

“Sorry, my Love I just want to shower quickly. This rain got me a bit. Please put the tea in the microwave. I’ll drink it after I shower,” Tshepo told his wife.

Palesa could tell he was a bit jittery. She could tell that something about him was off. It was like a child who just stole cookies from the cookie jar and got caught immediately after cleaning the crumbs. He was trying to behave calmly but the nervousness of whatever that was bothering him seeped through his eyes and the tips of his fingers. She could tell something was bothering him.

“OK my King,” Palesa said. She sat on the couch clutching her cup of tea.

Tshepo walked into their bedroom. The deep feeling of contrition constrained his movements. He struggled to take his clothes off to

get into the shower. After an awkward five minutes of taking off his clothes, he jumped into the shower.

The warm water ran across his face. He stood still thinking about the afternoon he had.

“Naomi,” he said softly. He leaned on the shower wall, he cried.

18.

“Damn it,” Naomi said.

“Watch your tongue young lady! What are you damning in my house?” her mom asked.

“Hau, really Ma? You reprimand me and then you...wow” she giggled as she responded to her mom.

“Khaya lami la. I can use any language I want. Now, what is it?” said her mom.

“I think I lost my phone Ma,” Naomi told her mom.

“What’s new? Do you remember when last you used it?” her mom asked.

She could not tell her mother that she last used her phone texting a married man. She could not tell her mother that she last used her phone to text this married man to ‘help her’ in the dressing room of a Chinese clothing store. She figured that the best answer would be to lie.

“I think it’s in the car Ma. Let me go check,” Naomi. She reached for her car keys knowing that her phone wasn’t in her car.

To make her mom think that she was looking for her phone, she sat in the car for a while. The events of the afternoon unfolded in her mind. After ten years, she finally was with Tshepo. She

thought that she could communicate what was in her heart to him. Not once in her plans did she plan to have sex with him. Perhaps the love they felt towards each other was still that strong.

Words are fabrications of human imagination. Language is abstract and is simply the utterance of sound through vocal cords. Words do not have the capacity to express emotions and feelings. Like meditating in the middle of an open field, the calmness of the winds communicates to the soul of man. The same with emotions like love. Humans have tried to contain love into a vessel. Love is a wildfire that cannot be confined to human imagination.

Perhaps that's why when she saw Tshepo, when she smelt him, when she touched him, she could not resist but give herself to him. She wanted to unite her body with him. When Tshepo did enter her, she felt whole. He was the missing puzzle piece to complete her heart. The void she felt for ten years was filled when Tshepo gave himself to her.

She thought to herself that she would not buy morning-after pills. Whether Tshepo would approve, she did not care. Whether she would be the hammer that shatters his marriage with his wife, did not bother her. If she couldn't win Tshepo back, at least she would bore him a child. That was good enough for her.

Sitting in her car, the idea that she would be a home wrecker, wrecked her mind. But this was Tshepo. This was the only man she loved. If being a home wrecker was required to have Tshepo

back, she accepted the fate. She got out of her car and got into the house.

“Eish Ma, I can’t find it. Can I borrow yours to call it?” Naomi asked her mom.

Themba arrived after an hour leaving the two ladies at the restaurant. Ntombi did not tell her friend that she had a quickie with Tshepo. Not that it would be of concern to her friend. Sitting in the back seat of the GTI, her friend slowly became drunk from the additional Ice Tropez that Themba bought for them.

“Bo Nice, ladies, amantombazane, where y’all going now?” Themba asked the two ladies.

“Take us to Nom’s place Zaddy. But please get me later, weather like this needs me in your arms!” her friend sluggishly told Themba.

Within no time, the loud GTI stopped outside Ntombi’s house in Riverside. It was a modest house that she rented out from an elderly couple that moved to Clarens. She and her friend quickly ran up the stone walkway that lead up to the house.

“Hurry, haibo,” her friend said. She was carrying a cooler box with the mixture of alcohol that Themba bought for them.

“Okay, wait hau,” Ntombi responded. Moments later she found the key to the house. She unlocked the house and the two friends launched themselves inside.

“Wow, I’m putting on the heater,” her friend told her.

Ntombi did not mind. The main door led into the TV room. She reached for the TV remote to switch the TV on. Her friend wheeled the heater closer to the three-seater couch which they sat on.

“Let me get the glasses, Friend,” Ntombi told her friend. As she was walking to the kitchen, she thought about Tshepo. What caused him to well up with tears? Was it because of her? Was he really divorcing Palesa? Would she still love him if that was the case?

She knew that she would not love him the same if he left Palesa. The very fact that he was married -no – married to Palesa was the very reason she was in love with him. Palesa was the catalyst that activated the chemistry between her and Tshepo. Without Palesa, there would be no love to unite her with Tshepo.

She pulled out two glasses from the kitchen cabinet. After raising the two glasses, she walked back to her friend. Her friend was already quarter to drunk. The Smirnoff 1818 that she was busy opening would be the knockout punch.

“You see a man, a man money?” Her friend said.

“What?” Ntombi chuckled at her friend’s stupefied speech.

“Listen. Please, ple...”

“What are you saying?” Ntombi asked her friend laughing.

“OK,” her friend. She closed her eyes and tried to concentrate on her speech.

“Please bring your tripod and ring light. I want us to kiss. Then you send the video to Tshepo and I send it to Themba. We cannot be boring side chicks,” her friend said with her best effort to fight off her drunkardness.

“What?” Ntombi said.

“The alcohol got to her,” she thought to herself. And besides, she was feeling mixed emotions for Tshepo. Was it love or lust he felt for her? Why couldn’t Tshepo tell her why he was dunking his wife earlier? Didn’t Tshepo love her too?

“Friend! WE ARE MARRIED MEN’S FANTASIES!” Her friend yelled with the bottle of Smirnoff in her hand.

“You know what? You are right. I am not a wife. I am a fantasy. I am a dry well in the middle of the desert. I am man’s unattainable desire,” she thought to herself.

She got into her room to get the tripod and ring light. Walking back into the TV room, her friend was sitting on the couch. She was already taking her shirt off. Her G-cup bra was resting underneath her full breasts.

“Okay, I’m setting the ring light to shine dimly with a nice red hue neh? Let’s really get in their minds,” Ntombi told her friend.

“YES!” Her friend yelled again.

Ntombi switched off the TV. Only the ring light and the faint light from the gas heater shone on the two ladies. She placed her phone on the tripod. Like a master sculptor, she carefully judged the phone’s distance from her friend. She aimed to crop the video with a cowboy angle.

“Friend, I want these men to know who we really are. Look, slightly lower your pants right under your thass,” Ntombi directed her friend.

Her friend, who was now totally inebriated, carefully followed Ntombi’s direction.

“Like this neh?” she asked Ntombi.

“Yes, perfect friend. Ok, so just sit at an angle. But then again, never mind. Just follow my direction,” Ntombi directed her friend.

Satisfied with her shot angle, she walked over to join her friend. The distance between them and the phone was ideal. It would capture them perfectly along the rule of thirds on her phone camera. The phone was already recording.

Ntombi sat across from her friend and took off her oversized jersey. Her C-cup breasts bounced out as she pulled the jersey over

her shirt. She too had her sweatpants resting slightly below the region between her butt and thigh known as the thass.

The two friends looked at each and smiled at each other. Ntombi reached for her friend's breast. Her friend pulled her by the nape of her neck. They merged together with a deep kiss. They let off soft moans as their tongues wrestled each other. Her friend collapsed on the couch. Her luscious breasts swayed up and down as she did. Ntombi knew this would happen but was confident that the distance and aperture settings on her phone would capture her collapse.

Ntombi followed her friend. She let herself fall on her friend. She could taste the Ice Tropez and the salt from Auntie Jackie's chicken on her friend's tongue. Her friend was fully submerged in the moment. She pulled away to look into Ntombi's eyes. A soft chuckle escaped through the ladies' smiles towards each other. Her friend began to kiss Ntombi by the neck, slowly kissing her to her breasts.

Her friend softly bit Ntombi's dark brown nipple. The pleasure ran across her whole body. She looked straight into the camera as her friend continued to lick around her dark brown areola. Ntombi could feel herself get moist between her legs. She took off her pants completely and that of her friend's. With her right knee, she opened her friend's legs. She carefully crossed her legs diagonally across her friend. The touch of the women's clitoris on each other caused them to orgasm instantly.

“I am your wildest fantasy, the promise of an unlived dream,”
Ntombi thought to herself as she looked straight into the phone’s
camera.

“I’m done,” Tshepo announced as he walked back into the TV
room.

“Let me go warm your tea. By the way, I bought us this chicken
from that new place that opened,” Palesa said.

A ping of shame twirled his stomach.

“Oh lovely, what did you get?” he asked his wife.

“Well, I don’t know. I think chicken?” Palesa responded
sarcastically.

“But of course,” Tshepo chuckled. He chuckled to shake off the
disgrace of his earlier actions.

Palesa pulled out her 30cm chef’s knife to carve the chicken into
smaller pieces. The chef’s knife was a wedding gift that Tshepo’s
mother bought for them. It had a note attached to it that stated that
a woman’s place is in the kitchen.

After carving the chicken, she dished the meat onto a plate. On
another plate, she dished out the family-sized fries that came with
the chicken. Before heading to the TV room with the two plates of
food. To her surprise, when she reached for Thabang’s milk bottle,

the bottle was full. She wondered whether did Tshepo make the bottle earlier or did he forget to feed the baby earlier.

“She brings him good, not harm, all the days of her life,” she told herself.

On a big food tray, she placed the two plates of food and Thabang’s bottle. She walked into the TV room where Tshepo was playing with Thabang. She watched as her husband was making their child laugh at the funny faces Tshepo was making. How could she ever be upset when she had all a woman needed? With a smile on her face that was caused by a warm appreciation in her heart, she joined her two boys.