

dog eat dog

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NIQ MHLONGO

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one

Dear Mr Njomane

The University of the Witwatersrand Bursary Committee acknowledges that it has received your application for a bursary dated the 4<sup>th</sup> of March.

We regret to inform you that your application was unsuccessful.

We have looked carefully at your application letter and based our decision on the information that you have supplied. Unfortunately you did not meet the criteria set by this Committee.

We wish you every success in your future academic endeavours.

Kind regards

Dr Jane Winterburn  
Chairperson and registrar:  
The University Bursary Committee

I received that curt, insensitive letter on the warm evening of the 13<sup>th</sup> of March 1994. I had just eaten my dinner at the YMCA in Braamfontein. The Y, as we affectionately called it, had offered me temporary accommodation for about a month now, while I tried to sort out my disagreement with the University Bursary Committee.

I got up off my bed and opened the drawer where I had put my other two 'we regret' letters. As if to make sure of their meaning, I unfolded each one and read it again. The wording was the same except for the dates. *Did anybody even read my applications?* I wondered angrily. I thought I had supplied everything that the Bursary Committee needed: copies of my father's death certificate and my mother's pension slip, an affidavit sworn at our local police station giving the names and ages of the nine other family members who depended on my mother's pension, as well as three other affidavits confirming all movable and immovable property that we owned. Although, unfortunately, my family did not own any immovable property as the house in Soweto that we had been living in since 1963 was leased to us by the apartheid government for a period of 99 years. *What more information do these people want about the poverty that my family is living in?* I asked myself.

Anger smouldered inside me as I read the letter again. *Why did the committee have to be so polite in dismissing my application?* They should have told me plainly, 'We regret to inform you that you are black, stupid and poor; therefore we can not waste our money on your thick Bantu skull.' I could have swallowed the words if they were simple and direct.

Now the thought of being forced to part with the cheese life of the Y because of this letter from the Bursary Committee was like a curse. It was as cruel as a man who chops off the breasts of the mother as the hungry baby tries to suck the fresh milk from them.

Did this mean I would be forced to hook up again with those

hopeless drunken friends of mine? Was I going back to that life of wolf-whistling the ladies who passed by in the street, calling them izifebe (prostitutes) if they did not respond the way we liked? I felt like I was being pushed back into a gorge filled with hungry crocodiles.

There was nothing exciting for me about living the life of the unemployed and unemployable, whose days in the township fold without hope. I thought I had said goodbye to cleaning the dog shit out of our small garden. I didn't want to go back to waking up early every Tuesday morning to stand outside with the rubbish bag in my hands, waiting for the garbage truck. I was completely bored of watching the predictable soapies on my brother's television set just to kill the slow-moving time. I was tired of my uneventful township life as a whole.

That month that I had been allowed to stay at the Y I had tasted the cheese life. I had my own room, and although I was sharing it with my newly acquired friend Dworkin at least I enjoyed some privacy, unlike at home in our four-roomed Soweto house.

At home I still slept in the dining-sitting room although I was twenty years old. Yes, at home I was woken up at four o'clock in the morning by the footsteps of my two brothers on their way to the kitchen to boil water before they went to work.

I was happy at the Y. I had almost forgotten the smell of sewage that filled the air at home each time the chain jammed in the cistern of our small toilet, which was outside in the right-hand corner of our 25-square-metre yard. I was enjoying the luxury of using the soft and freely supplied toilet paper; the skill of softening pages from a telephone directory when answering the call of nature in the township was no longer necessary.

At the Y I could differentiate between my meals. I didn't have to queue in our local shop to buy those oily, constipating fatcakes every morning. I was fed with cornflakes, bacon and eggs and Jungle Oats. I no longer walked the streets of the township to find funerals at which to get my weekend lunches. I no longer

had to short-change my aunt by buying a fifteen rand piece of meat at our local butcher each time she sent me out with a twenty rand note; there was no need for that kind of pocket money anymore.

To suspend the pain and frustration that was sharpening inside me I inserted a Peter Gabriel cassette into my tape recorder, and the song *Don't Give Up* started bellowing from the speakers.

Don't give up  
'Cos you have friends  
Don't give up  
You're not beaten yet

The lyrics reminded me of how my father used to encourage me when I ran out of faith. My old man would tell me that to keep on trying would never kill a man. That was the sort of advice that I needed, as I looked deep into my mind for the solution to my problem. I was never going to give up trying.

## two

On Monday morning I stormed into the Financial Aid Office at the East Campus Senate House. I just couldn't understand why I could not be granted some kind of financial assistance. The government was pumping large sums of money into the Universities for needy black students like myself. I deserved that money.

I had already made up my mind about what I was going to say to the secretary. I was going to tell her that I wanted to have a word with Jane. Jane was the first name of Dr Winterburn, who wrote me those three insensitive letters. I didn't know her and I had never spoken to her before. I did not even know where her office was. All I knew was that if you want to get past a stubborn secretary to have a word with their lazy boss, you need to use the boss's first name. That is the only way, to make them to think that you know their boss from somewhere or that you are in some way related to them. Otherwise the secretary will tell you that the boss is unavailable, or in some endless meeting. They will dismiss you even if the boss is available, but doesn't want to be disturbed while surfing the Internet for child pornography.

I marched towards the counter, avoiding the three-metre-long queue. I had already told myself that I was not going to stand in that queue. Enough was enough. I had spent too long dusting those benches with my arse while waiting in vain for that bursary. I had nothing to lose. The decision not to grant me financial assistance had already been taken. *I will show them today*, I said to myself as I reached the counter.

As I expected, I was immediately subjected to a barrage of insults from a coloured secretary with a narrow forehead. She made sure that everyone inside the office could hear her.

‘Shoo! You know I thought they lie. But they were right to say that if you want to hide money from a black person, you must put it in writing,’ she said rubbing her temple with a yellow ball-point pen.

There was some laughter from the students in the queue behind me.

‘What do you want in the university if you can not read?’ She looked at me with disdain. ‘Can’t you see what is written there?’ she said, pointing at the sign on the white wall.

Straight-faced, I slowly turned my head and read the sign.

### **STAND IN THE QUEUE AND WAIT FOR SOMEONE TO HELP YOU**

I paused for rumination. I was seething with anger.

‘Bullshit! What does a bimbo like you think I want? Gold?’

I heard a sigh of awe from the other students in the queue.

‘Get out of this office at once!’ shouted the secretary.

‘Nice try. But you can only chase me out if this is your uncle’s office.’

‘This guy! Who the hell do you think you are to speak to me like that?’

Without thinking I answered. ‘I’m Jesus from heaven.’

The sound of laughter came from nearby. ‘Whoever you are, what makes you think you are more deserving than the rest of these people who are standing in line?’

The office became silent as all eyes were turned on me. I didn’t care; all I wanted was an explanation as to how on earth they thought I would raise the money to study without a bursary. Meanwhile my enemy had disappeared into the office next door to call her supervisor.

‘Is this the one, Rachel?’ asked the overweight woman, pointing to me as if I was a witch.

‘Ja Ms Steenkamp,’ replied the one with the narrow forehead.

Ms Steenkamp folded her arms boastfully, as if she was the Governor of the Reserve Bank. She shot me a shrewd look and raised her nose as if she was confronted with a disgusting township rubbish dump. Her malicious bloodshot eyes locked with mine as she pointed her short, fat forefinger at me and began in a commanding tone of voice.

‘Hey you! If you need to be helped in this office you need to behave like the other students. Do not storm in here like you are entering a butchery or supermarket.’

There was more laughter from everyone in the office. She paused and waited for the laughter to subside.

‘Haa! Just look at him! Do you think this is Cuba? Do you see Fidel Castro here? Do you think you can just get a free education without standing in the line like the others?’

Encouraged by the laughter as well as my silence, she continued:

‘You must act like a civilised person and apologise to Rachel for your apish behaviour. Then you must stand at the back of the line if you want to be helped in this office. Otherwise you will not receive any money from us,’ she said, dismissing me with a curt gesture using the back of her hand. It was a gesture that an angry owner uses to dismiss his troublesome dog.

I did not know what to say. My mind was clouded. I could not think properly. I tried to open my mouth to say something but my lips seemed tightly sealed, as if they were glued together.

With sudden energy I vented my anger, thumping the counter with a loud bang. Most of the files and papers that were on the counter fell down as a result. The coloured secretary Rachel and her overweight boss Ms Steenkamp lurched back, waiting to see what my next move would be. I began to swear, my voice building to a scream:

‘F-f-f-fuu-ck!’

That was all I could think to say to her at that moment. The way everyone looked at me, I guess nobody had ever said such a



swearword in that office before. A moment of silence fell. I had lost my temper. I didn't care anymore.

'Nne-ver, ee-ver, I mean never ever ee-ever speak to me like that. Do you f-ffucken understand me, you fat bitch?'

I have no idea where those words came from. Neither did I understand what they meant at the time. I didn't even notice that two black security officers had been called and were standing right beside me. They were holding their knobkerries, but I couldn't stop. The two security officers had arrived at the wrong time, when my anger was at its peak. I was not afraid of them, come what may.

'Do y-you know who you are f-ffucking with?' I moved back and forth like a heavyweight boxer who is ready to throw another punch. With my right fist I thumped hard on the counter. 'I mean do you ugly fat ladies know who the f-ffuck I am? Do you want to lose your f-ffucken jobs because of what you have just f-ffucken said? Hhee?'

'Ho! Ho! Please relax man. Insults are not worth it man. I understand you are angry,' said the black security officer who was trying to calm me down. 'But you are talking to ladies, remember?'

I turned to the security officer. 'Just shut up! I'm not f-ffucken talking to you,' I said, pointing my forefinger at him.

There wasn't another word from him. I turned back to Ms Steenkamp.

'Do you want to regret having seen me in this office today?'

I paused and looked at the two ladies as if I was waiting for an answer. They were bloody scared. I opened my eyes wide as if the two ladies had just insulted the president of the country. My aim was to frighten them into thinking that I was some big name. *They must think I'm the son of their employer, although their employer is probably white,* I convinced myself.

Everyone was watching me; I guess most of the people were trying to think where they might have seen me. Some of them

must have thought for sure that I was the son of the Minister of Finance, or cousin of the President, or some important celebrity. But before I could vomit more insults, a white lady entered through the main door. She approached the counter, obviously surprised at the sight of the two security guards. Something in my enemies' body language told me that somebody important had arrived.

'My Gawd! What is going on here?' she exclaimed. 'I'm Dr Winterburn, the registrar in this office.' She paused. 'Is there some problem in this office I should know about?'

I felt that I had to answer her before anybody else took advantage of the situation. I summoned all my courage to dispel the anger that was already clouding my mind, and said as calmly as I could:

'This lady here called me an ape when I came to see Registrar Winterburn, and I demand to lodge a formal complaint to her sup . . .'

Before I could finish my sentence the secretary with the narrow forehead interrupted me.

'Ja. You think you're clever mos. Say what you were saying before. Come on say it now. Tell her.'

'Never shout and point at me like that,' I warned her.

'Let's not be emotional and . . .'

said Dr Winterburn, looking at me.

'Who's emotional?' I snapped.

'I mean, it's natural to be emotional and I understand how you feel,' she said patronizingly.

Her attitude made my blood boil.

'Listen here! Are you coming to take sides or have you taken them already?'

'No no no. We don't take sides in this office,' she countered defensively. That's where I wanted her, on the defensive. 'I'm only trying to find out what happened because I'm the one in charge here. Please don't misunderstand me.'

'OK then. These two ladies insulted me by calling me an ape.'

The two secretaries hissed as I tried to explain, but Dr Winterburn shushed them.

‘Ms Steenkamp, is it true that you called this man an ape?’ she asked, trying hard to be fair.

Ms Steenkamp gave a little derisive laugh, her eyes blinking in disbelief. ‘No! Jeez! Good heavens!’ she exclaimed. ‘I did not call him an ape.’ She paused. ‘I was called by Rachel to come and talk to this guy who was forcing his way into the office instead of standing like the other students in the line and waiting for somebody to help him.’ She paused with her finger still pointing at the queue. ‘So I said to him he should stop his apish behavior. My God! I can’t believe this!’

Ms Steenkamp tried hard to make herself look more innocent.

‘You see! That’s what I don’t appreciate,’ I said, feigning horror. Like lightning, I flicked my eyes from Ms Steenkamp to Dr Winterburn. ‘And she is repeating it right in front of you, saying that my behaviour is apish. That is like saying that I was socialised with apes and I should be living in the mountains or the zoo. Is that what you see when you look at a black person like me?’

‘Bullshit! That is not true. I didn’t . . .’ said Rachel.

‘What did you say just now?’ I snapped again.

Silence fell while Dr Winterburn considered our statements. The look on her face told me that she was siding with me.

‘Rachel, what happened before you called Ms Steenkamp?’ enquired Dr Winterburn.

‘This gentleman came straight over to the counter and I had to tell him to go back to the end of the line. When he refused to do so I had to call Ms Steenkamp.’

Like a judge in a court of law, Dr Winterburn turned and faced me. ‘And why did you refuse to follow those procedural orders?’

‘Dr Winterburn, I know all about the procedures here.’ I paused. ‘For me to make an appointment to see you in this office all I need

to do is sign a form which is inside those files.’ I paused again and pointed at the files, which had been picked up off the floor by one of the security guards. ‘And not to stand in the queue with the other students.’

I paused and looked at Dr Winterburn. She was nodding in agreement. ‘I was coming to do just that when these two ladies here tried to embarrass me in front of all these students. This one even took the piss out of me by asking me what I was doing at university if I could not read the signs.’ I pointed at Rachel. ‘She said that without even greeting me properly, let alone asking me what I wanted like any civilised person would. That is not the way to treat people. They are here to help the students, not to insult us.’

‘He’s lying. Ask the officers. He’s the one who swore in this office!’ shouted Rachel.

None of the security officers came to her rescue. Maybe they were siding with their black brother. Rachel was breathing hard and her eyes were beginning to mist over with tears. Dr Winterburn turned and faced the two officers who were leaning on the counter, listening to everything that was being said.

‘Gentlemen, I think I can handle this little misunderstanding on my own.’

As soon as the two officers had left, Dr Winterburn invited Ms Steenkamp, Rachel, and myself into her office. She ushered us into the chairs and the three of us sat nervously in anticipation of her verdict, while secretly observing each other.

‘Sorry, I didn’t get your name,’ Dr Winterburn said, trying to address me in a conciliatory tone.

‘I’m Dingamanzi Makhedama Njomane,’ I answered.

My two enemies remained anxious and silent.

‘Mr Njomane, as you might have heard I am the one in charge here.’ She paused. ‘It’s against the policy of this institution as a whole to insult people, or rather to make people feel insulted. I take this opportunity to apologise to you on behalf of this office, and I hope my staff will do the same.’

The breath whooshed out of me in disbelief. I did not expect the matter to be concluded with such simplicity. Both my enemies looked at Dr Winterburn in disbelief and tried to mask their disappointment by remaining silent. But with a look that no one was likely to disobey, Dr Winterburn turned to the two ladies to elicit their apologies.

'I'm sorry if you took my words to imply what you thought. It was not my intention to insult you,' said Ms Steenkamp reluctantly.

'I'm also sorry for the misunderstanding that happened between us. I hope you did not take it that bad. I did not mean what you imply,' muttered Rachel quickly.

'Okay. Thank you. You two can leave us now,' ordered Dr Winterburn.

I watched my enemies leave the office with glee. But I knew that a mammoth battle was still ahead of me.

Without a word Dr Winterburn opened the top drawer in her desk and took out a diary. She hunched forward and removed her glasses, pushed her long bushy red hair backwards with her right hand, and then began to page through the diary with her long fingers. She groped in the same drawer again and took out a small brown bottle, from which she took two pills. She poured a glass of water from a carafe on the table, put the pills in her mouth and swallowed them with some water.

For about a minute Dr Winterburn scrawled something in her diary. I became mesmerised by the trick that age had played on her once fresh flesh. Although her body showed that she was still young, her face revealed wrinkles that were the result of the unstoppable wheel of time. I started to wonder if she still dated at her age. In my perverted thoughts I began asking myself if she enjoyed spreading her legs for ambitious gigolos to dance between. Looking at the thick make-up on her face, I concluded that she was that type who would share her nakedness with young white men, under the illusion that their pace between her thighs would keep her forever young.

I didn't notice that Dr Winterburn had finished scrawling in her diary. I was stroking my chin in deep erotic thought when she closed it and spoke to me.

'Okay Mr Njomane, what is it that you came to see me about?'

'About the status of my bursary application.'

'Do you have your student card with you?' she asked as she re-set her PC.

I reached for my wallet in the back pocket of my jeans, took out the card and gave it to her. She typed something into her PC and drew back, waiting for the information to appear. By that time I had begun to sweat. Dr Winterburn leaned forward and folded her arms. She exhaled heavily and leaned backwards again.

'I thought that you already knew the outcome of your appeal, Mr Njomane. I wrote to you early last week. Haven't you received my letter yet?'

'Yes, I received your letter, but the grounds on which I was refused the bursary are Greek to me. I came here to make an appointment to talk to you about it.'

'What do you mean?' she asked, her face flushing with astonishment. 'Are you here to tell us what to do and what not to do?' She looked at me and hunched forward again as if she was talking to a deaf person. 'Look here, Mr Njomane; in this office we have our own criteria for selecting students for bursaries. Remember we would love to sponsor everyone who asks for help, but we are circumscribed by the funds we have at our disposal. There are quite a number of students whose situation is really pathetic and we have decided that in your case at least it is not that bad.'

Dr Winterburn hunched forward again and looked at me. She balanced her elbows on the table. I did not say a word.

'What I suggest you do is to apply for outside donors. You can get a list of addresses from Rachel, our secretary.'

I bit my lip in disappointment.

'To begin with, Dr Winterburn, I came here to understand what you actually mean by saying that my situation is not that

bad. It seems that you people in this office have got the wrong end of the stick about my situation and . . .’

‘What’s your point, Mr Njomane?’ she interrupted.

‘My point is this. I got an exemption two years ago and I have been sitting at home since then waiting for the opportunity to study at this institution. I applied to the Faculty of Arts and got admitted to do my BA. It’s my wish that this office grant me a bursary so that I can study, graduate, get a better job and assist my poverty-stricken family. My father has passed away and my mother is a pensioner and single-handedly supports nine members of our family. There’s nowhere I can go for help except this office.’

I took out my brown envelope. It contained my father’s death certificate and my mother’s pension slip as well as the three affidavits.

‘This is the second time that I have submitted this evidence and I wonder if the committee took any notice of it when it reached its decision,’ I added as I pushed the documents towards her.

Dr Winterburn took the documents and a pause followed as she pretended to be studying them closely.

‘That affidavit shows that twelve family members live crammed into a four-roomed matchbox house in Soweto.’

She started looking for something in the bottom drawer. Her other hand was rubbing at the corners of her bloodshot eyes. I knew she was looking for her glasses. From where I was sitting I could see them; they were buried under an avalanche of documents that were lying on her desk, including some of my documents. She found them without too much effort, put them on and began to study my documents.

‘Mmm, so how does your family survive on your mother’s three hundred and fifty rand pension?’ she asked, pushing my documents away.

‘It’s really difficult. Our electricity and water have been cut off because the bills have not been paid for the past two years,’ I lied.

I was not ashamed that I lied. Living in this South Africa of ours you have to master the art of lying in order to survive. As she looked at me I hid my hands under the edge of the table so that she couldn't see my gold-plated Pulsar watch, which I had bought the previous year at American Swiss.

I looked Dr Winterburn straight in the eye. With her left hand she pulled open the bottom drawer, took out a packet of Consulats and a lighter. Next to the carafe was an ashtray filled with butts and half-smoked cigarettes. She carefully balanced a cigarette between her lips, then paused and watched the yellow flame of the lighter flicker between her fingers.

'This is your first time at this university, isn't it?'

'Yes ma'am,' I answered.

She took two deep drags on her cigarette and then flicked the ash sharply into the ashtray. 'Oh, I see,' she said.



## three

Dr Winterburn read each one of my documents carefully. At the same time she added some information to the notes on her computer screen. I glared at my father's death certificate, which lay next to her right hand.

Raw memories of the past surged through my mind. I remembered my sister and myself paying my father a visit in hospital the day before his death. I wasn't young, I was doing my standard nine. I remember to this day my father lying in his hospital bed. He had seemed unusually small like a child; there were dark shadows under his eyes and his skin was very pale, so pale in fact that I could actually count the veins underneath it. He could not even move on his own.

I looked at my sister. Her eyes were filled with sorrow and as she stood in the corner of the hospital room she began to sob. But I was brave enough to stand closer to my father; I wanted him to die in my arms.

*Maybe we have turned into strangers to him,* I thought with pain when my father showed no sign of recognising us. But later he called out my name. He raised his hand and I held it. He even said something faintly, but I couldn't hear him. I called his name softly a couple of times, and unconsciously he kept saying 'hmm' each time I repeated it. He got tired quickly and closed his eyes. I rested his hands on his chest as the nurse arrived and told us it was the end of visiting time.

The following day I heard that my father was gone. That was the first day that I knew fear existed inside me. I did not go to school that Monday. How could I, with that unspeakable sense of grief?

When I finally went to school three days later the Big Punisher, as we called him, was waiting to discipline me for my truancy. That morning, after the assembly and prayer, the names of the truants were read out and they were called upon to appear in the disciplinary room. My name was on the list.

The deep-mouthed Big Punisher was smiling as I stood in front of him. 'Son, those who live in glass houses must not throw stones; obey our rules or face punishment. You know that being absent for a day is ten strokes of the cane. You have been absent for three days so you must multiply that by three,' he said, mercilessly straightening his cane.

When I didn't say a word he continued: 'Do you want to take your punishment in instalments or all at the same time, son?' He let out a small malicious laugh. 'Come on, son. If you take it cash at the same time I will give you a discount of five,' he said, as if we were completing a business transaction.

When I still did not answer he ordered me to bend over and receive my punishment. 'I know you will be able to talk after five of the best.'

The pain that I had felt when Big Punisher punished me the previous week, for fluffing my lines when I was called upon to recite the theorem of Pythagoras, resurfaced. I recalled bitterly how he had made my hand bleed with that thick cane while I screamed for mercy. To this day I can still see those scars when I take a bath.

'Oh no. I have a valid reason for not coming to sc . . .' I began, but he would not even let me finish my sentence.

'Eh, eh. No, no, no, no,' he said, shaking his head. 'No excuses, so don't piss in the wind and waste my time.' He put his fat index fingers in his ears. 'I've heard a lot of stupid reasons today. Enough is enough.'

He started to list every reason that he considered stupid.

'My mother was delivering my baby brother so I had to help spread her legs. My philanderous father's dick was swollen from

the syphilis he caught over the libidinal weekend so he sent me out to buy him some VD pills. My younger sister broke her virginity the day before yesterday and her punana was leaking blood, so I had to help my lazy mother wash her sheets and cook for the family. My brother was castrated by a mob over the weekend after being accused of sleeping with a jailbait.'

I knew that the Big Punisher had an orgasm every time he inflicted pain. He had beaten me several times before. I also hated mathematics, which was the subject that he was licensed to teach with only a standard ten. He had once punished me severely for scoring nine percent in algebra. Because of that he gave me nine strokes of the cane. According to him I was good at mathematics, but just too lazy to practice it. I had consoled myself that day because a friend of mine called David was given ten strokes of the cane because he had got ninety percent. The Big Punisher said that if it weren't for his laziness he would have got one hundred percent. After that we all concluded that he was mad after all.

There was a tall table next to where I was standing. He ordered me to bend over and put my head underneath it.

'But Sir . . .' I tried to talk but the words would not come out of my mouth. Instead I started to cry.

'Tears don't scare me my boy,' he said harshly. 'If you were that afraid of the cane you should have played by the rules. Is it asking too much from you to come to school every day?'

After five of the best I couldn't take any more. I attempted to flinch away from the advancing cane but only succeeded in banging my head severely on the table.

'We are not calling it a day yet. There are five more rounds to go boy if you decide to take it in installments,' he said, laughing maliciously. 'I told you that after five horizontal ones you will decide whether to take it cash or instalments, didn't I? And if beating you here on the school premises isn't to your liking then I will do so in front of your father after school at your home, boy.'

The mention of my father fueled the agony inside me. Suddenly something snapped and I shouted.

‘You will never hit me again in your life, you son of a bitch!’

The Big Punisher was very surprised to hear those disrespectful words. He started rolling up the sleeves of his shirt.

‘What did you say to me boy?’

I did not answer. I could not believe I had just insulted him like that. He continued rolling up the sleeves of his blue shirt.

‘I’m going to teach you how to behave and how to talk to your elders. I can see that you have big balls and want to prove it to me in a fistfight, boy. A cane is not good enough for you,’ he said as he started to loosen the tie around his neck.

He put the tie down on the table and undid the top button of his shirt. ‘You talk too much, boy. I will teach you people today.’

Surreptitiously I sized him up. I was just sixteen years old with bum fluff. He was a forty-year-old family man with a potbelly.

While he was still relaxed and sure that he would teach me a lesson, I gathered all the power that I could summon and punched him as hard as I could. My right fist thumped into his dark bloated face and floored him. His glasses broke and the glass scattered all over the floor. I picked up the fan that was on the table to finish him off, but somebody grabbed me from behind.

‘Stop it at once!’ It was the voice of my English teacher, Mrs Magwaza. She was standing behind me holding my arm.

The Big Punisher was still on the floor. Like a police dog, he was sniffing and spitting. Blood oozed from his mouth. Very slowly he raised himself up and started picking up the remnants of his glasses.

‘I’ll find you. I’m coming to your home tonight, boy!’ he shouted angrily, spitting blood.

‘What happened?’ asked Mrs Magwaza.

But I did not answer her. I pointed at Big Punisher with my forefinger.

‘I’m not finished with you either.’

Big Punisher was very angry. He broke loose from two teachers who were trying to restrain him. Seeing that he had over-

powered them, I scurried out of the disciplinary room and ran outside in the direction of the rockery between the two long classrooms. Pupils started peeping through the windows. Some stood in the doorways so that they didn't miss out on the action. I could hear Big Punisher breathing heavily a few metres behind me as I ran for my life. I ran to the rockery and picked up one of the cement blocks that had been used to build it. At very close range I flung it at Big Punisher. The block hit him straight in the face. He fell down and started kicking for his life.

I was very scared. Mrs Magwaza came running, screaming at the other teachers to call an ambulance. Instead, the school gardener came running with a hosepipe and sprayed water over Big Punisher. I stood at a safe distance, wondering whether I had murdered my teacher at the age of sixteen.

The following day I did not go to school. It was a busy day at home as we were preparing for my father's funeral. I hadn't told anybody about what had happened at school.

Around three o'clock in the afternoon I saw Mrs Magwaza's car coming down the road towards our home. I sensed trouble and as it drew nearer I went to the outside toilet and pretended I was busy in there. I peeped through the crack of the door and saw Mrs Magwaza, Big Punisher and three more of my teachers emerge from the car. They entered our house through the kitchen door.

After gathering some courage I came out of the loo and went into the house after my teachers. There were about fourteen people in our dining-room; they had all come to pay their last respects to my father. The teachers were already seated when I came in. It must have become obvious to them that somebody had passed away. I could tell that their minds were smudged with unspoken thoughts, but I greeted each one of them, including the Big Punisher, as if nothing had happened. His left eye was completely closed and there was also a big gash between his eyes that

was stitched together with some black thread. He was holding a pair of sunglasses in his right hand.

Big Punisher and my brother knew each other from high school. I made sure that I sat with them to monitor the atmosphere. Everybody in the house looked sad. No one seemed to have noticed the wound on Big Punisher's face. Sitting next to him was my biology teacher. He had punished me once for using a picture of a naked girl that I had cut out from my brother's *Scope* magazine to decorate my biology exercise book. He was a very close friend of Big Punisher; I knew that they used to drink beer together. I also knew that he bore a grudge against me because I had been delivering flirtatious messages on behalf of my cousin to the schoolgirl he was chatting up at our school. *He will do anything to fabricate lies that would corroborate those of Big Punisher about my bad behaviour*, I thought nervously.

After a while my brother started introducing my teachers to my aunt. 'Aunt Ntombi, this is my friend Jerry. I went to school with him.'

There was a little pause after my brother had pointed out Big Punisher as everybody in the house turned to look. My brother continued: 'These are his colleagues and they are all Dingz's teachers.'

'It's a beautiful thing to know that the straight and narrow can still be traced among the youth of today,' my aunt began in a dispirited voice. 'In our days life was communal. When one family cut its finger, the rest of us bled. When a neighbour's house was on fire we would bring water. Today is different because folkways have been sidelined with all this so-called modernity. When a person dies a friend will come and demand payment of his unpaid bills. It is very rare and a pleasant surprise to see you young people still upholding the spirit of ubuntu by coming to pay your last respects to the deceased. Ubuntu is the invincible gold of human companionship. It is a perfect product of nature and the basis of the society. With your presence here today, you have shown

the Njomane family that education is not only limited to the knowledge of books, but goes beyond that to include the building of character.'

There was a moment of silence. My teachers glanced at one another. They were nodding at my knowledgeable aunt, but I was not convinced that they were there to extend their condolences. I knew that the Big Punisher was there to give me the beating he had promised me in front of my father, but unfortunately for him my father was no longer in this world to witness it.

'So when did this misfortune happen?' Big Punisher and my English teacher asked simultaneously.

'It happened last week, but we decided that Dingz should not come to school until yesterday as he was very upset,' answered my brother.

My teachers looked at each other for a short while. They didn't know what to say. *Their mission has failed*, I thought happily. Somehow they would have to say that I had told them about my father's death. Otherwise why had they come to our house? Were they there to rub salt into the wound? Or were they there to pass their heartfelt condolences? *No, they won't let our big secret out now*, I convinced myself.

'Yeah,' Mrs Magwaza started hesitantly, 'that is why we have all come – to offer our condolences.'

After an hour or so my teachers left. My brother and I took them to their car – I wanted to make sure that they didn't mention anything about our fight.

'We didn't get to talk Jerry; what happened to your eye?' asked my brother as they were about to get inside the car.

'Oh this? It's nothing,' said Big Punisher. 'I had a little car accident. Don't worry, I'm fine.'

'When did it happen?'

'The day before yesterday.'

'So how's your car?'

'Not that bad.'

As he answered my brother's questions I noticed that he was lisping. I watched him closely to assess the damage for myself and saw a wide gap where his two upper front teeth had been knocked out. The other teachers were already inside the car. Big Punisher got into the back seat and my brother closed the door for him.

'Don't forget to come to school on Monday. We have a test on Tuesday.' It was Mrs Magwaza reminding me. 'Ask David your friend about specific chapters we are going to write about.'

'Yes, Mam.'

It was over. I had won.