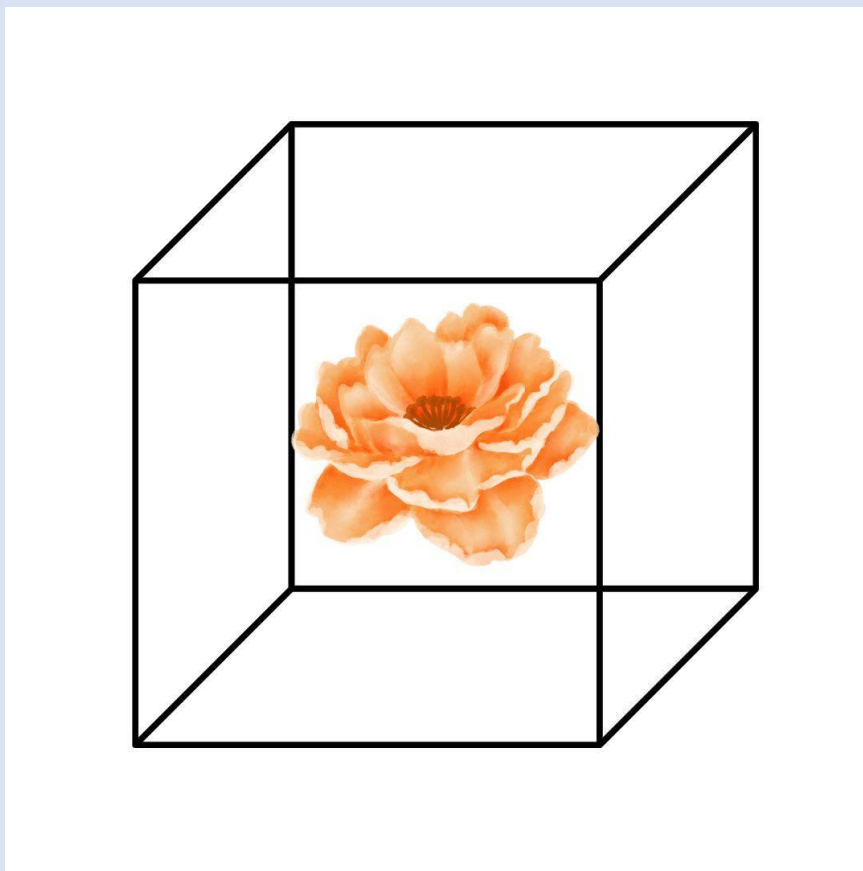


Who Killed Thato?



"If my child had ever told me someone molested him, that person would be dead. I would kill them."

Nolali spoke in riddles. Everything she said worked like a seed ready to grow into something else if you let it settle in your mind. I know this now because I rode the ride.

As she spoke, I drifted away into a conversation that Soso and I had a few months ago. He was telling me about the fights that keep his family together. I must have been drifting off then too because his voice grew louder when he said, "Thato tried to kiss me one evening. Well, he did kiss me. He put his tongue in my mouth and called it practice."

This seemingly unprovoked confession was enough to draw the spark back into my eyes. I shifted around on the rug where we were laying. I could not lie, hold eye contact, and ask my follow-up question all at once, so I sat up.

Cross-legged, I said, "What do you mean Thato kissed you?"

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This is a work of fiction inspired by true events. Dramatic purposes have sometimes required many characters to be fused into one. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. The story is a confessional reflection on relationship trauma.

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Illustrated by, Nonkululeko_Busisiwe

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Soso was still laying back on the floor as he told me the story behind the kiss. He was twelve, and Thato was fourteen. It happened in the living room when the sleeper couch was still out front.

"It wasn't a big deal until I told my mom about it when I was seventeen. I told her the story during an argument. I thought I was telling her that I felt neglected and unseen. But I think she heard me questioning my sexuality or something."

When he was done talking, I laid down next to him and we shared the silence. I filed the story in my memory, and it became one of those things I thought I knew about him.

This evening Nolali is campaigning for the death sentence to be brought up against Luthando Makayi - the 43-year-old man who raped a six-year-old child. I suppose it is natural that Nolali would have an emotional response to the case.

The story was a part of every news update on the national broadcaster. Morning news had call-in segments which sounded like cult gatherings asking listeners to 'speak their minds on the question of capital punishment'. As if the death penalty is a long-term solution for a nation suffering from a collective sense of PTSD. The news media had taken an odd position, I thought. All that 'if murderers and rapists are killed, we would have lower rape statistics and fewer murders happening'. It sounded like a re-branding of justified hatred backed by fear-mongering logic - Passion over reason is sprinkled with a dash of economic theory.

To avoid being hypnotized, I chose to focus on the morning traffic, and the occasional crow that began scavenging the city streets as everybody made their way to some other place that is not home.

Nolali and I were different like that, she wanted to deliberate news stories to a point of debating about our moral positions and ethical views. I preferred understanding the facts and finding a solution that minimizes human suffering. Which to me meant keeping some conversations away from the dinner table and out of my morning routine.

I found it radical of her to insist on discussing this rape case, but I knew she was grinding at something, so I let it play out.

"Anele, what would you do if you had a daughter and one day, she came home to tell you she was raped by somebody you know?"

The question sounded bizarre. I could not gauge if she understood just how offensive it came across. It sounded far too simple. She phrased it all wrong. But hayi wethu, let me see where she plans to land.

"Well, it depends on what you're asking me," I said. "Are you asking if I believe myself to be a murderer? Or you are asking if I trust our judicial system?"

"I am asking what you think a rapist deserves?"

"It is hard to say, but I believe in restorative justice."

"Really? What if it was your son who was rapped?"

"My answer still stands Ma. I believe if we allow violent actions to define our logic then we might as well be at war."

"Raping a child is an act of war!"

I felt cornered. Like I usually felt when speaking to this lady. It was hard to have a conversation with her. She seems set to dominate; with her, it is hardly an exchange.

"Ma, what would killing the rapist achieve for you?"

"Their life would be destroyed just like they destroyed my child's life."

"You know the phrase an eye for an eye leaves both parties blind on one side?"

"You live in a dream. Anele this world is a dog-eat-dog kind of world."

There is no point in having this conversation. Let me go wash these dishes.

"Haha, aren't you glad we aren't dogs?"

She said something as I walked away, but I moved fast enough to make ignoring her seem acceptable.

Every evening it's the same kind of conversation. But at lunchtime she talks about her suffering and how the world is unjust, sounding as though she wishes someone would save her from life's misery.

So much is broken, it is almost unclear what is working.

As soon as I entered Soso's bedroom, I could tell he had been waiting for me.

"Soso, I think I am losing my patience with your mother. I can feel myself shutting her out of my mind. Have you noticed it in my behaviour towards her?"

"Uhm no, not really. I think she likes talking to you. She enjoys your perspective on things."

"I find myself feeling drained after talking to her."

"Why?"

"Don't you?"

"Yeah, I do sometimes but she's my mom, so I have to listen, you know?"

I know it's bad to think like this, but I feel sorry for Soso. I cannot imagine being raised by someone who always sounds so bitter and provocative.

"What's bothering you Lele?"

"Nothing, I just have never heard my mother advocating for murder. It's strange.."

I know I'm threading unstable territory, so I cover my head with the blanket and invite him under. This is going to be a slow morning, I can tell.

"It's strange because your mom seems so measured and reasonable most of the time. But then she has these radical ideas that seem to bubble up from her dark conscience, do you ever notice that?"

"Mom has had a hard life."

"Yes, most people in our country have had a hard life, that's not the point."

"I get you."

I know if I say something else it will be about spiritual awareness or humility and all my logic will be dismissed as sentimental or whatever. If the goal here is wearing me out, then I think it's working because I meant to have an early morning but here, we are getting settled under this blanket. It's probably past 7 am already.

"Do you know she told me a story about how she could have saved this man's life at work, but she didn't because she felt it would have put him on an almost impossible road to recovery?"

"When was this?"

"She said it was years ago - at the start of her career. Soso, your mom scares me. I do not want to be like her, but I can feel her work her way into my mind."

"I know what you mean. She made me stop visiting Thato's mother after Thato died because she thought his family was using me to deal with the loss of their son. That's what she said, I don't know if that's what she meant."

"Thato? Your cousin?"

"Yeah, remember I told you he died at his house party?"

"Oh yeah, the one you missed?"

"Yep, the only one I missed.. After some time, I started thinking she was right. I began resenting Aunty Elaine because I felt I could see her grief every time she looked at me. Convinced me it was not my burden to carry, and I should feel lucky it was Thato who died and not me."

"I hear you, but I'm not following."

"It's probably not the same thing, but I don't think you have anything to be afraid of."

"My gut tells me otherwise. But either way, whatever is happening will reveal itself long before it causes lasting damage."

It's the uncertainty that makes me empathize with Soso. How could anyone grow up feeling unsure about their mother? His response reminds me of an Uber driver who said, "sizalwa ngamagqwira sogqibha asijikele afune ukusibulala kwa thina." I was in East London on my way to Hemingways Mall and the driver was threading between general conversation and friend-making.

My people feel as though they are dealing with more than they should have to manage. Or is it that we think the one who outlives everyone wins the battle?

"Hey, are you awake?"

I hear Soso calling me, but I like my thoughts more than anything he might say right now. Someone elsewhere has said, it's the difference between people that charges social evolution, not competition.

"Anele are you up?"

Some mothers never heal from the trauma of giving birth. Some fathers are never humbled by not knowing what it takes to be the bearer of life. Either way, the foundation has been laid and Nolali is determined to tend to everything. She wants it all. Perhaps Soso is right, it's not that she aims to harm me. Maybe she wishes to stand where I stand and to see what I see. No one knows what exactly is wrong, yet everyone expects to be saved.

"Yes, I'm up. Just thinking. Are you ready for the day?"

"No, but if you lead, I'll follow."

"Give me two minutes of silence and kisses."

"I'll give ten kisses and five minutes of silence if you make breakfast."

"Okay, but now you have to hush, my thoughts are slipping away."

"Okay, shhh." He places his lips on my forehead. I shut my eyes and I drift away.

Misogyny breeds hatred in men. In womxn it breeds a thirst for power, how else is one to stay in control of what threatens to kill you but never does? That is what I see when I look at Nolali. I see someone struggling to stay ahead of her internalized misogyny.

The End of Part 1.

Part 2:

Her mother taught her that it's better to side with the devil you know.

My mother taught me to outwit the devil whereas my grandmother taught me how to slay the devil - bring him to his knees and all. And now here I am about to introduce this new friend to my mother, and I just know mother will not approve.

On a separate night, Soso's mother asked me if I knew anything about witchcraft.

Oh, my goodness, how did this happen again? How did Soso leave me here alone, with this lady? These dinner conversations are the worst part of my days. Here we go...

"My mother was a Methodist; she chose to believe in love, hard work, and goodness. I like thinking about the good things in life."

"Do you know about people who make human sacrifices to sustain their riches?"

"I've heard stories. But as I said, I know enough to not invite unwanted energies into my psyche."

"Hayibo Anele, we are just talking. I am not inviting unwanted anything."

Perhaps if I keep quiet this lady will stop this line of conversation. I didn't notice Soso leaving the room. But it's okay, I'll give it until I finish drinking this juice.

"Nolwazi shaved her hair off. I think she looks good but I'm worried people might think she is into witchcraft. You know how we make assumptions about things like these."

"I remember her new hairstyle. She looks lovely. My mind never went to witchcraft. Some people make short hair seem so glamorous."

"Mmmh."

This juice glass is half empty. I can finish it in two sips.

"So, you never think about witchcraft?"

"My brother and I used to joke that he who brings up witchcraft is a witch in action... haha but like I said it's not something I understand so I tend to keep my distance."

"That's nice."

"We have an aunt who's a healer - a traditional healer. So, she uses herbs and old knowledge to solve people's problems."

"You've never mentioned that before."

"My point is that like a corrupt nurse or an unethical businessman, it's how you use your abilities that define your produce. So, if you are a healer that chooses to poison people, I suppose you are a witch. The same applies to friends who gossip or nurses who drug patients."

"What about ukuthwetshulwa"

"I don't know much about that, but I believe bad things can be animated to give them a scary appearance. I believe people do bad, sometimes physically. Sometimes with their words and with the aid of other people's words and deeds."

"How evil do you think people can be?"

"Ohh, I suppose I believe that evil knows no limits. The same way good is unstoppable - Good night, Ma. I do not think I can finish this juice."

"Oh okay, Goodnight."

Part 3:

Mother had his ability to shock me even when I knew what to expect - it was uncanny.

After the introduction of my newly found friend and all the pleasantries that are expected from a parent hosting her daughter's friend for a weekend came to pass. Monday came by, and Mother woke me up from my usual afternoon nap to suggest we go out for ice cream. Ice cream by the seaside was one of our things, one of our many secrets, I suppose.

As she pulled out of the parking spot at Sun Coast she said, "Anele why are you friends with that girl?" I giggled. I couldn't figure out what to say so I went with something like, "Awu Ma, she's nice. I like her. The tone of her voice sounded serious when she said, "I know you. I gave birth to you. I raised you. So, what are you looking to get from being friends with that child?"

Still a bit dumbfounded. I replied by saying something like, "I think we're outsiders in the same way." Then there was silence. I had an argument prepared in defence of my friend, but I expected my mom to lay out her disapproval by forbidding home visits or introducing new limits on internet use or even tightening security around travelling arrangements. Mother was undefeated when it came to creating walls around me.

We drove all of Umgeni Road in complete silence. I couldn't even finish my ice cream, so I placed what was left of it in the cup holder between our seats. As we joined Chris Hani Road Mother said something to the extent of, "I don't get the combination. You and her as a pair do not make sense and I do not think you're the problem, so be careful."

"Are you saying you don't trust her?"

"No. I'm saying I can see the greed in her eyes. I'm saying I don't trust that you know what you're doing with her."

"Okay, I'll be careful."

I was still getting used to the advisory role Mother was shifting into. Mother had been clear that I was her treasure but at some point, I would have to learn to treasure myself without her aid.

The thing about having a mother like mine is that the task of living was always clearly my task to do alone. In return, I quickly became comfortable with the idea of getting up after a failure. I knew how to be careful, and I knew whatever

happened Mother would break the fall. My brother thinks I'm arrogant and spoilt, but I think he is the same.

Nolali on the other hated her mother. I mean hated, not resented, she simply hated her mother. She was embarrassed by everything her mother had done in her lifetime. It was uncomfortable to listen to her rant about all the siblings she didn't want but had. She spoke about all the issues she inherited from her mother's complacency.

Sometimes I felt sorry for her but again, ultimately, I couldn't understand. Often Nolali spoke about the "abject poverty" she was born into, and from time to time she would mention a father who found his wealth late in life. He fought in Europe during World War 2 and had experience in iron smelting.

I liked the fact that Nolali was older than my Mother, it made her seem charitable - as though whatever she said was purely for my benefit. I didn't like that she thought she was giving me a cheat sheet to survive "this treacherous life," even so I couldn't resist a good story. At first, her cynicism was something I tried to curb but eventually, I realised it was a fact I had to work around.

The best piece of advice she ever gave me was that I should read about the culture in port cities. She said, "You should read about port cities because Cape Town is a port city and you...You look like a wide-eyed Barbie with a bright future ahead of you." I took offence to the "wide-eyed Barbie" sentiment, but I did start reading about the city's colourful underbelly. It would take me eight months to realize that Soso and his mother were a part of the hidden unpleasant part of Cape Town society. It would take me another eight months to fight through the feelings of pity, then three to get over my saviour complex and another five months to cut myself loose from the games they played.

Along the way, there were several threats made against my life. One time I made it clear that if something were to happen to me under their guard, they would have a war at their doorstep. I told them that although I did not approve of violence, my family would not take kindly to their youngest daughter being violated on home grounds. My family considers all of the South African territory to be home ground, their tentacles run long and are rooted deep.

The morning after the witchcraft conversation, Nolali had more questions about my aunt, the healer. It felt strange, so I called my aunt for a long overdue checkup.

When Antana answered the phone call she said, "I've been expecting your phone call." Antana is my G so naturally I was excited by her energy. We exchanged greetings, and she asked about campus life, I told her I met a boy, and we laughed about it. Then she said, "Heeh Lele, yazi I've been dreaming about you."

She went on to tell me about a dream where someone pretending to be her showed up at my campus residence and offered me my favourite white chocolate coated cookies, "the kind your mother kept in her mini fridge and nawe you ate them."

"Lele, you know it's an omen to eat in a dream?"

"No, Antana I had no idea."

"Just be careful sanalwam, take time to evaluate the company you're keeping apho eKapa."

"Yoh...Okay. I must get to campus soon. I love you Antana. Byeese."

"I love you too girl, bye-bye."

It felt like there was no need to talk about Nolali like I got what I needed. It was time for me to stop the sleepovers at Soso's house. Jehovah knows I dreaded that conversation; Soso was incredibly possessive - he said it was the Tsonga in him.

Just before I left to catch the train, Soso wanted to confirm the night's plans. He needed company for a recording session - said his band wanted him to re-record a verse. I felt the noose tighten around my neck. I could never get used to the kind of dependency he required to make things work. One thing was for sure, nothing would bring me back to the house for the rest of the week.

Part 4:

The days went by, and Friday came around. The week happened to be peaceful, and my thoughts were clear. Work was fun, every reading was worthwhile again. I was spending less time chasing the words, and the noise settled down for a few days.

Back then I had a routine, midnight was bedtime. So, my final thoughts of the day happened at the start of the next day. Thursday was a good day and I thought it best to hold on to that feeling for a few hours, that was my final thought as I drifted into sleep.

The next morning my phone rang before my 5 am alarm.

"Hey, you... heey sleepy head... Lele, are you up?"

"Mmmh"

"Lele, I need you to remind me, what time is your first class today?"

"Mmmh, what day is it?"

"It's Friday Lele"

"Mmmh..."

"Lele, wake up... wake up, the sun is out."

"Uhm, I'm up. I'm up."

"Okay, what time is your first class today?"

"Uh... Uhm, it's at 10am."

"Okay, and what time is your last class?"

"Sigh... I think it starts at 2 pm."

"Okay, I'll make my way to you at noon. Meet you outside Molly Blackburn at 1 pm?"

"Sisonke come on."

"What's wrong?"

"My last class starts at 2 pm"

"Yes, I can sit in with you."

"Soso..."

"Do you not want me to sit in with you?"

"That's not the point."

"What is it?"

"You know what, it's okay. Do you whatever it is that you want."

"Okay, See you at 1 pm."

"Okay, bye." - Oh Tsiza!! This guy heard me say my last class starts at 2 pm. Why is he coming over at 1 pm?! Oh Jehovah, please grant me the strength.

I've been doing well ndedwa (alone). I fell back into my hermit routine where things are exactly as they appear to be. Books are books and not cannabis containers. Where water is water, not gin and Sprite. Everything has its place and there were hardly any voices that needed tuning out. Each day had four major goals, wake up at sunrise, do yoga, read for a few hours, and write for a few hours. When I'm lucky Snegugu stopped by, and we had dinner together before diving back into a book.

Oh Jehovah, thank you for the library. The library truly is my favourite place. I forget to eat when I'm in there, it is so soothing. It's simple, I get in, take a seat, pick a reading and I let go of myself. If I pick the right spot it can feel like flying. I can lose myself for hours, feeling nothing besides my mind weaving new thoughts with material borrowed from other people's ideas. The library is where I feel the most alive. Perhaps it's the only place I feel comfortable. Mother made it so; reading was the solution for everything Anele related. She would say, "Read a book" or "You know better, you know the difference between right and wrong" and before I interjected, she would say, "Anele just go read a book" or "I'm tired. Go finish reading your books." Reading makes sense.

If I pick the wrong spot at the library, then someone sees me and together we resume the performance of being in each other's lives. They stroke my ego, then I make them laugh, they giggle and in return I stroke their ego. Finally, we stare into each other's eyes and purr in unison - it's wonderfully exhausting.

Sometimes the social aspect of our humanity can be a hindrance to a person's identity - I don't know, maybe the feeling is just the imbalance of my life at that time, who knows?

Sitting at breakfast I knew I'd be unavailable or at least late for the proposed 1 pm meeting. I also knew that I would not negotiate this fact, it would be as he expected from me, something we must live with. At this point, I did not bother wasting my energy asking for what already belonged to me. My time was my time, if Soso refused to respect that fact he would have to live with the consequences. Time and tide and all that sticky stuff.

At four pm I checked the notifications on my phone. 22 missed calls. I thought that was excessive. The text I sent read: "Hey, the 2 pm class just ended. Can you take a phone call right now?"

He called back. My stomach knotted as I picked up the phone.

"Why did you do that? You knew we were meant to meet at 1 pm! Why did you disappear for three hours?!"

"I had a lecture. Come on Soso, you know my class schedule."

"That's a weak excuse."

"I don't know what else to say to you."

"Where are you now?"

"I'm walking out of the Beattie Building."

"Okay, I'll meet you at the door."

It's funny how he hangs up the phone. He does it so it hurts. It ends up looking like an overgrown child stomping his way in and out of people's lives.

A few moments later, my phone is ringing again.

"I'm at the door outside Beattie, where are you?"

"Sitting on a bench inside."

He stomps. I offer my protest in other ways. The more he thinks he can take, the less I let him have.

My phone rings again: "Lele please come outside. I'm waiting at the entrance on the ground floor."

"Okay Soso, I'm on my way."

Yet, he never stops with the stomping. On our way to Cavendish, I could feel him watching me. I used to like it when he looked at me but being looked at turned into being watched. Now I worry if anyone else is aware that I'm being watched.

He stares. I push back with conversation.

"Hey Soso, how do you think it feels to be strangled?"

He stares. So, I go on:

"This is what I know: you feel the pressure on your throat. You grasp and maybe even fight to get it off, but then you feel it tighten. If it's a hand that's doing the straggling, you start to feel fingers digging into the side of your neck. You feel the hand pulling your larynx away from the rest of your body. 45 seconds in things start to separate, your mind begins to fade. Your brain takes over. It records the feeling of the pressure lightening as your mind drifts away. It records that your eyes lose sight and if the hand lets loose, there are records of the first cough. That cough stays with you, your body remembers how it sounded. After a few days your mind comes back, and it tries to train your body to forget its survival response. It takes time, but the mind is relentless so eventually, the body forgets."

He knows what I'm talking about, but he says nothing. Here is how this particular battle began.

We moved in silence for 15 minutes. If not for the lady at Sterkinekor it might have been longer.

"You pick," I say to Soso.

He picks a movie. I checked the screening time and estimated how long it will take us to get to his house after the viewing. I know the point of this hangout was to eliminate any excuse I might have to avoid spending the night at his mother's house. He thinks I am truly trapped in this cycle, but I know my exit points. It is his tamper that worries me.

During the movie, he makes his way to the restroom three times, and I know he is bored by his own choice. Sitting slouched on my seat, every minute feels longer than it should be. When the movie ends, neither of us is interested in the credits so we jot out of the cinema. Like clockwork, his mother calls as we're deciding what to do with the left-over snacks. I step away to let him take the call. I could tell by the stiff tone of his voice that it was his mother on the

other end. Yazi Soso would be the perfect pick if he figured out how to respect people beyond pretending.

I paid for the movie and snacks and transport to his house was on him. So naturally, we wound up walking through the streets of the Southern Suburbs as he pointed at the monuments that are supposed to signify the riches he could spend if I gave a little more. We walked, he spoke, and together we made it to his house 2 hours later than I anticipated. I always say a little prayer before I step into his yard, I don't know why but I know I should. I suppose this is what they mean when they say we fuel that hell that burns us.

After the door is shut behind me, I lose sight of Soso. I think I'm following behind him when I notice his mother sitting on the living room couch.

"Anele, can you tell me more about your father?" This became Nolali's favourite icebreaker.

"Oh my, you're up!"

"Yes, it's Friday."

"Ma it's almost midnight, aren't you tired?" Oh Jehovah, if deflecting was an art, I'd be kicked out of art school.

Part 5: Scorched Earth.

We grew up in different worlds. Where I was raised rules and responsibilities were put in place to teach us about our roles and loyalties. We were raised to be self-righteous. My value was unspoken because it is obvious and there was no need to state the obvious. Especially because silence is golden.

Soso was raised the way his mother was treated. She closed one door to redirect him, and she concealed and revealed information based on which decisions she wanted him to make. Nolali was truly the product of the apartheid era. She lied effortlessly, she believed it served her desires and she despised the idea of free will. It was strange to watch her extremely deontological ethics override her listening skills. I suppose that is the danger of a binary mind with control issues. She respects rules above everything else, but she's also a willing dictator.

By Sunday evening Soso had become accepting of my benevolent resistance techniques. He was aware that I had a clear sense of who I am. He understood that it did not matter what games they played or how many doors they tried to shut in my face I knew enough about my talents, and I valued hard work. Admittedly it was difficult to ignore their determination to undo what my parents had nurtured.

After Sunday dinner whilst gathered around the television, I simply blurted the words out:

"I don't think I'll be coming over here anymore. This might be my final visit."

Nolali looked right at me. She seemed wounded and surprised. I knew she hated surprises, so I braced myself for anything. I also knew whatever was coming would be big and chaotic. A few months before she announced that she had been diagnosed with cancer. That announcement ended the talks Soso, and I were having about moving into an apartment together. Her most recent announcement came with tears, she said something about losing everything all at once. She felt she was losing her productive years, her position at work, and her social status and because of our relationship, she was losing her son as well. Everything about being with Soso had lost its colour.

For a few minutes nothing happened. Silence befell us so I grabbed my cell phone - just in case. Nolali broke the silence:

"Do you mind giving me some space, I need to talk to my son."

I was grateful for the excuse to leave their presence. As soon as I shut the bedroom door, I began packing my books. I was getting ready for whatever would be thrown in my direction. It wasn't long before Soso came to get me from the bedroom. He did not need to knock because his door didn't work that way, one couldn't lock it or shut it completely. It was another strange thing about this place. So, Soso pushed the door open and said,

"Please join us in the living room."

I replied, "Sure."

I waited for him to leave the room; I quickly scanned the room. The idea was to leave with everything all at once; I set the cell phone to record before making my way to the lounge.

Nolali took the lead; "Anele, if you don't like being here why bother staying the night?"

I kept thinking, Anele let it play out. Let them do what they must without interruption. There was silence. Nolali continued poking,

"I hate it when I speak, and no one responds."

I am dead set on letting her make her move to completion, so I looked to Soso. Another moment of silence to over. Nolali repeated herself,

"Ayibo Anele, if you feel you are worthy of better company than us, why bother staying the night?"

I looked to Soso. He was shedding tears, so I started for the bedroom. At this point, Nolali was screaming at me,

"Don't walk away while I'm talking to you!"

"Ma, I'm going to collect my belongings and call an Uber."

"You think you're so much better than us, huh Anele?"

"It sounds like you want me to leave right now, so that's what I am doing."

"Is that how you're choosing to handle this?"

"Ma, I am trying to respond in a way that will not trigger a violent response."

"Who do you think you are?"

Soso steps in: "Mum, please. Let her stay the night."

"No, she needs to know her position in this house. If she wants to stay, she must understand that I am doing her a favour."

"Mum, please stop."

This is their rendition of the good cop / bad cop play. It seems juvenile but I know better than to underestimate how far these people are willing to go. Nolali is not only over-barring, but she is also a full-grown bully and a certified instigator. An instigator is somebody who knows which buttons to press to get a reaction. Nolali is certified because she is a nurse, she has subscribed to memory the biological knowledge - to say the least, needed to make a person's brain move.

"Sisonke don't tell me to stop. You don't even know that she thinks you're immature. She said so the other day. She thinks you cannot manage your emotions. She says you're reactive and that you often act without a plan."

It hurts to be quiet because this woman is putting words in my mouth. The certified instigator just made an appearance, she reminds me of a friend I used to have in junior school. Chevon, oh my goodness Chevon was a green-eyed opportunist. She lasted but 4 years of Catholic School before she ran out of allies to manipulate. Anyways I know if I react to Nolali these people will kill me and make it, so it appears to be my own doing.

"Did you say those things about me?"

"No." I know I better keep my answers short and clear. Nolali is pushing the merry-go-round, and I am not getting on.

"What did you say?"

"I told your mom that sometimes I feel like I cannot have the difficult but important discussions with you because I'm afraid of your reaction."

"Why would you say that?"

"Because it's the truth and I was looking for her to advise me on how to approach these kinds of discussions..."

Nolali interjects: "So I am lying? Is that what you're saying?"

"Ma, I don't know what you're doing. Soso, I think I should leave, now."

"Anele!!"

"Please stop yelling at me."

"Sisonke are you going to let her speak to me that way?"

The earth is rumbling beneath us, it might be a few more minutes before Sisonke loses patience. Usually, it goes, to tears; soft speech then accelerated soft speech and finally the eruption of anger.

I had no plan to be in the same room with Sisonke when his anger erupted so I re-directed and headed to the bathroom instead of the bedroom. Not that the bathroom door can be locked or anything, but I knew I could stay in there for at least 5 minutes. 5 minutes should be enough for the taxi to arrive.

2minutes into my bathroom hideout, Soso comes in without knocking. Tears flowing, he starts with a speech about how his mother is going to embarrass him by calling a family meeting right now.

"Lele, she is going to drive to Gugulethu and cry until my aunt and her children come over to address the whole thing!"

"What thing? Soso, what is happening?"

"She says I am taking your side and that we are trying to drive her out of her own house."

"Ho-ly!! How is that the truth?"

Silence.

"Soso, I have called an Uber. I'm so sorry this is happening. But I think it's time for me to leave."

"Lele please do not leave me here. Please do not leave me alone."

"Fine. You can come with me."

"Noo Lele, that won't work. Mum needs to find me here when she comes back."

"Soso, you're acting like you're trapped."

"That's because I am!!!"

"Okay, listen. Tomorrow is Monday. Class starts at 9 am. I'll come by to check on you at 8 am. Maybe we can take a walk around the park?"

"Lele please."

"Soso, I am not staying here tonight. I'm sorry that you feel trapped I am. However, this place is no longer safe for me."

"Why are you doing this to me?"

This man is standing in front of the door. My patience is being tested. This is what fighting for your life feels like.

"Hey, Soso. Let's take a break. I need something to drink. So, let's get water and sit outside for a few minutes."

If I let him take my hand, then we can avoid the 'don't touch me battle'. I put my hand out for him to hold, and it takes a few seconds for him to take hold of the hand. But he does, and we make our way to the kitchen. It's surprising to find out the house is empty - Nolali has left. It looks like she left in a rush too.

I had to cancel my Uber ride. I waited 10 minutes before calling another. I left before Nolali came back. On the Uber ride, I opened a window to let the breeze cool my face. It felt like I had dodged a bullet. But in the back of my mind, I knew the feeling would only last until sunrise.

Part 6: Tug-of War

As promised, at 8 am I was saying a prayer whilst Soso fiddled with the padlock. I had my backpack strapped tight, a water bottle in my right hand and a pair of running shoes on my feet - I came prepared for the occasion.

But Soso was being evasive, he was avoiding eye contact and he kept his face covered between his shoulders. I kept thinking, this is it, after this play Soso and I will be on the same page again.

"Good morning... Hey, are you okay?"

"Oh, so now you have time to care."

"What?"

"I said, now you have time to care?"

"Soso are you angry with me?"

"It doesn't matter... made you cereal and a cup of tea."

"Oh okay. Thank you... What about the walk?"

"What about the walk?"

"Are you up for it?"

"Yeah sure, if that's what you want."

"Soso, do you want to walk around the park for half an hour or would you rather we do something else?"

"You came here for a walk, so let's walk."

At times his possessive characteristics would make way for his reactive persona. He becomes even more animated with heightened degrees of passive-aggressive behaviour. This morning we are meeting at degrees of passive-aggressive. Sisonke sets the feeling of doom in motion by using his body like a Dictaphone communicating ideas from different site points. His long back to turn away, his shoulders to hide, his eyes to focus, his arms to swing and his neck to repress his initial line of action. Together the messages sound like quacking ducks in a pod. There is no harmony in the quacking. No pattern in the noise making just continual communication of some idea. When I look back on this, I will not miss the way he speaks.

We wandered around the house for a few minutes before leaving for the walk. I remember the sun shone brightly, I felt a cool

breeze and heard birds chirping over the buzz of moving traffic.

"How did you manage last night?"

"I managed."

"Do you have a plan for today?"

"Yeah, I have a friend coming over in a few minutes."

"Okay."

"We should head back."

"Okay."

"Are you going to stay?"

"No."

"Are you coming back?"

"No."

As things disintegrated it became clear that Soso had an M.O. For every girlfriend who left him. He has taken care to tell everybody he knows just how mentally unstable she was. His lack of originality was shameful.

He was surprisingly creative with the way he let the stories come up. One time while driving with a distant friend who was somehow familiar with a girl he used to date, Soso dove into a soliloquy about how crazy and unstable his last girlfriend turned out to be. The monologue was elaborate, baiting the passengers with questions like, what was I supposed to do? And Even mom, who's a nurse thought that girl needed help.

I heard the story, first, being told by his mother during dinner a few weeks before. It came up again - this is when the largest crack appeared - when Soso pointed at some Rehabilitation Center and said:

"This is where we had to drop her off. She stayed here for a few months."

In the first delivery of the story, the girl was never institutionalized. She unravelled until she disappeared. In a different version the young lady had turned herself into an advocate, in this story she wasn't "that girl" she was his ex. In another version, the girl struggled to monitor her hygiene because she was raised by her alcoholic father and thus unravelled. The cracks connected because he could not stick to one story. Shifting the shame around to conceal the

disappointment. I felt the weight of the shame all over me as the friend tried to redirect the conversation. Soso was dissolving into an unkind character while striving to become a domineering partner. Silently, I was shrinking and suffocating and hoping the pain would stop. Betrayal hurts, whether committed against you or self-inflicted, betrayal hurts.

"Are you coming in?"

"Yes, I left my bag inside."

"I could get it for you."

"Okay. Please bring the water bottle as well."

Soso disappeared into the living room. Outside in the front yard, I was calling for a ride back to campus. The thought of a 9 am lecture was keeping me afloat. 3 minutes later Soso has not returned.

"Sooooo, I'm coming inside."

"HUH? What did you say?"

"I said, I'm coming inside the house to get the bag and the water bottle."

"No. no. no. Wait." Soso says as he makes his way into the living room. When he tries to turn away from the living room, he trips on a standing mirror placed at the edge of the passage. The mirror falls face down and shatters into several large pieces. Soso fumbles away from the mirror before landing on his knee.

"AAHHHH!!"

The sound took me by surprise.

"Ahhhh, my knee. AAAHH. My knee Lele. My knee!"

The screaming continued while he rolled around on the floor.

"Lele, help me. Please help me."

"Is it broken? Soso? Hey?"

"Help me."

"Soso, I need you to stop moving."

"I can't. It hurts so much."

"Okay, I'm calling a hospital. And I'll need a towel for the ice. 1 minute and I'll be back, okay?"

Calling for help was tricky. Soso did not want to wait for an ambulance. He felt it would take too long to arrive. He suggested we take the Uber that is already on its way.

"But Soso, with the paramedics they'll be treating the pain while we're driving to the hospital."

"Oh my god, Lele. Are you going to argue with me right now?"

"So should I call back the hospital and tell them never mind?"

"Yes. Yes. Yes. Tell them we'll Uber there."

This is how it became intolerable to be around Soso. It wasn't so much the lies, but it was not knowing what drives him. Somewhere along the way, it became hard to tell what motivated his behaviour.

"Soso the Uber is a minute away. I think we should get up and move towards the door."

"Okay, can you make sure all the doors are closed?"

"Okay, let me close the doors before we move."

He had the knee cradled between his hands. In hindsight, the commitment to deceive remains so incredibly puzzling. It was on my way back from locking the kitchen door, that I changed my mind and thought it wise to have the Uber drive into the garage so that Soso could exit from the passage door. I unlocked the kitchen door, walked out into the garage, opened it, and began making my way to the front door through the gate in the front yard.

"Hello? Hello? Hi, I'm looking for Sisonke."

It's a beautiful young lady, she's waving at me and she's walking toward the gate. For a split second, I'm confused and then it dawns on me, Soso mentioned that he was expecting a friend. I wave her into the yard and ask that she leaves the gate open.

"Hey, I'm waiting for an Uber to take Sisonke to the hospital. He hurt his knee. But let me take you in and see I you can talk to him."

"Oh. His inside?"

"Yes, follow me."

"Okay, Are you, his sister?"

"Lele! Is that the Uber driver?"

"No. I think your friend is here. Come inside."

I signalled for the young lady to walk into the passage so Soso could get a clear view. As she walks into the passage, I walk around the long couch heading for the front door.

"Hey, can you sit with him while I talk to the Uber driver? Soso the driver is outside, I'll be back just now."

It takes a minute to get the driver on the same page. During the exchange, he explains that he'll only take one person to accompany the injured man. I agree.

Inside the conversation sounds tense. I return to tell Soso about the arrangement.

"Okay, Soso let's get you in the car. While we do that..."

"Wait, can you see her out and then come do me?"

"Uhm wait, weren't you guys going to spend the day together?"

The young lady takes the question:

"Yes, we were."

"Lele, are you coming to the hospital with me?"

"I don't know. The Uber is taking two passengers. What do you want to do?"

"Lele, come with me."

"What about your friend, she came all this way."

"I'm sorry Shaylee I didn't mean to waste your time."

"No, I understand, it's best to be with family right now. I'll send your mom a text to let her know you're on your way to the hospital."

"You have his mother's number?"

"I know it's soon. We met two weeks ago; I told him it's too soon but he made us have dinner with his mom last week."

My face must have betrayed me. I intended to present a neutral reaction but then I heard Soso's plea...

"Lele, please. I'm so sorry. Lele I'm sorry. Please come with me. Please."

Shaylee seemed committed to the same promise, she too was intending to appear wounded. She too piecing the truth of this

moment with the stories must have heard. The way she waved told me she knew to expect me, the question about my relation to Soso said she knew enough to set a trap. Soso's plea betrays Shaylee, her face says disbelief.

"Do you need help getting him to the car?"

"No. Shaylee it's fine. You go."

The travel logistics had Soso laying in the back across all three passenger seats: I in the front passenger seat and the driver at the wheel with an estimated travel time of 15 minutes. My 9 O clock lecture was 25 minutes in, and I was no longer going to be attending. The Uber takes us to the emergency room where we are met by nurses and doctors who take Soso away. I'm instructed to sit in the waiting area. Forty-five minutes later a nurse calls for people accompanying Sisonke, and I am taken to see Soso. When I peel the curtain, Soso is sitting upright on both feet on the bed with his legs. The injured knee is bandaged. He looks like he's been crying.

"The nurse says we have to wait for the doctor to return before I get discharged."

"I understand."

"It might take a few hours."

"That's okay. Do you want something to eat?"

"No. Please sit next to me I have something to tell you."

While sitting on the hospital bed Soso delivered his confession about how he had started dating other people. He said his mother encouraged him to do so after he expressed, he was having anxieties about me ending the relationship. He said, he knew it was wrong, but he felt it was the easiest way to face what was coming. He cried, and we both cried. We shed so many tears. He begged for his mother, and I begged for my mother. He said, his mother had a hard life, and that she tends to respond to things in a harsh violent manner. He said I needed to understand that he is the only son, that his mother did not mean to hurt people and that even with Thato that whole thing was an over-estimated reaction.

I said, "What do you mean?"

He said, "Those guys were supposed to scare Thato. They were supposed to scare him so loses confidence himself."

I said, "Why would she want that to happen?"

He said, "In simple terms...we were jealous and greedy."

He said, "Thato was doing well in school. His life was taking off in a way that made Mom feel insecure about what she could provide for me."

I said, "I don't want to know more."

He said, "Please don't leave me."

Two hours later I woke up to the sound of my ringtone. It was Nolali:

"Hello, Ma?"

"Hello is Soso with you?"

"Yes, he's sleeping, will you be able to pick him up later this afternoon?"

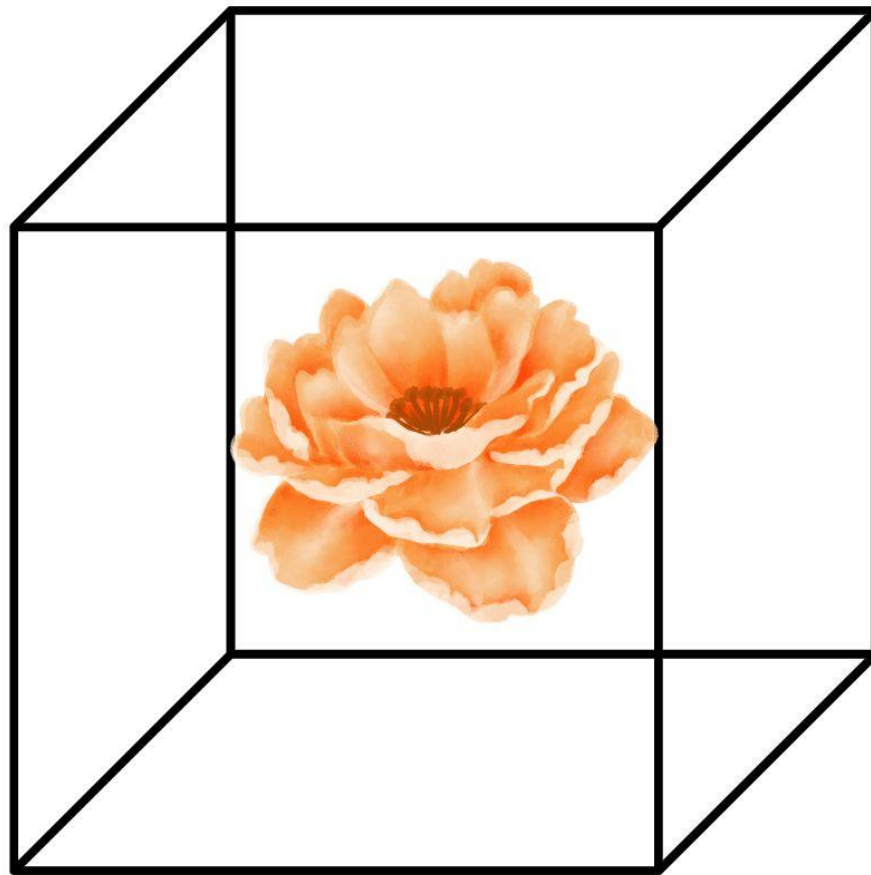
"No."

"Okay. Tell him I'll see him at home."

"Okay, bye."

Nolali hangs up the phone.

Part 7: Umntu ufana ne-Onion



THE REST OF THE STORY IS ON AMAZON - BUT FIRST, FIND US ON
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ACROSS THE GOAL LINE

"Hey."

"Hey."

"Guess what?"

"What?"

"I'm taking a day off. No campus today."

"Yay, lucky me... I mean, thank you for staying with me through this."

Sometimes I have to stare a little to nudge him in the right direction...

"It's okay."

It was not okay. This reminds me, I'm glad I started keeping three journals. Because *the good lord knows* I had to find a way to keep track of what is said and to cross-check it with what is done all the while making sure my voice is not lost in the debate.

"What did they say happened to your knee?"

"It's an old injury. They said I must've twisted the knee too far, my meniscus moved out of place and that's why it was stuck at an angle."

"Oh okay, and what's the treatment?"

"I have to keep the pressure off the knee for a few days, then stretch it out over two weeks and come back for a check-up."

"Sounds like you dodged a bullet."

"Yeah, it doesn't feel like it."

"Soso, your Mum called."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah, she said she'll see you at home."

"She's not picking us up?"

"No Soso. But, also, uhm, I'm basically on campus. I can walk from here."

"Can't you come with me? You can call an Uber from my house."

"We could call you an Uber to take you home. I'll make sure the driver is willing to help you in the house."

"I don't want to be at your house when your mum gets back."

"What are you worried about?"

"I've missed a full day of campus. I think we could talk some other time."

"I'm scared I'll never see you again."

"That would be fair, wouldn't it?"

"I promise I'm not trying to argue with you. I want to apologize and to explain myself."

"Yes. But it is not what I want."

"I want us to talk before you leave. I want to say something."

"I'm concerned for myself. I feel if I come home with you, I may not make it out of your house intact."

"That's okay, if we leave now, I promise it won't be long. We'll make sure you leave when you please."

That sounds good but we both know if your Mum comes home while I'm in her house, there will be no leaving without a talking to."

"Yeah, but that helps. You said it helps."

"It helps you."

Because everything was a debate. Some kind of big major negotiation, the restrictions we live with I tell you!!

"Lele, I don't know what to do."

"Soso, we're not crying in this hospital."

"I know. I know."

"At three I'm leaving."

"Okay."

"I'm feeling dizzy."

"I'm not feeling like waiting for this Doctor."

"Mmmh"

"I bet you haven't eaten, have you?"

"I'll call a lift when you say so."

"Call a lift."

"You know the exit right?"

"Uhm I came in through the emergency entrance. What are you talking about?"

"Soso, ufuna ndithini?"

"What do you mean to say?"

"I mean I'm leaving the side of your bed. I'll take a walk, call a lift and meet you in the car."

"Yeah, but if I'm not waiting for...It's okay."

"Say it."

"What if the nurse makes me wait for a doctor?"

"Soso, I'm sure you can manage. It's 13:15 pm. Ma comes home at 16:30pm."

"Lele -"

"The lift will meet us outside the cafe."

This I said on my way out. Oh dear god, if looking back was an art. If it's one-fifteen ngoku - mmh eating takes an hour.

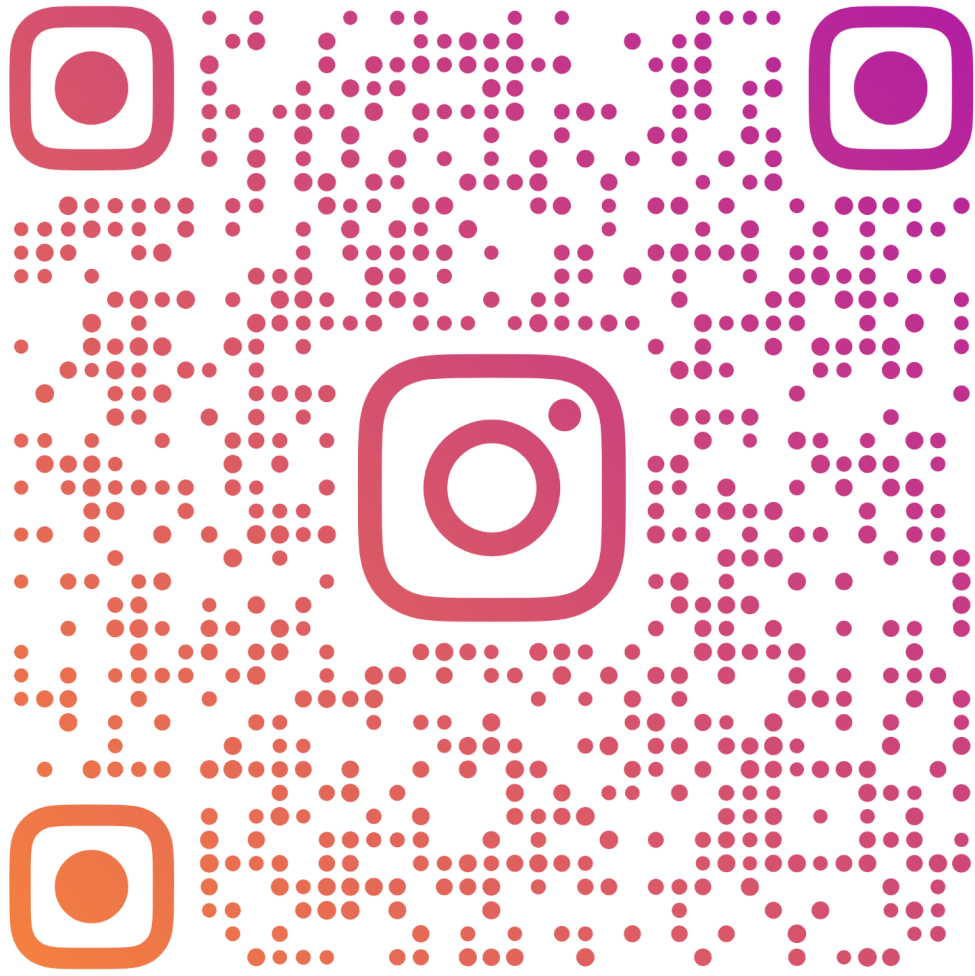
Sitting near the exit, I am focused on making this sandwich last.

Sometimes Soso and I chat like the Uber driver is not in the car. Like we're floating on some battery charged bubble. We know what's happening - everybody is aware of the split-screen but Soso and I live with it so we carry on. Everybody carries on. It's the shame we live with, or whatever.

At the end of the ride we'll take turns to look the driver in the eye. The driver will let it happen. Hopefully, if we meet again we'll remember the look of recognition. It's funny how things start.

CONTINUES ON AMAZON - [9385 WORDS / 11 000 WORDS]

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