Hunger

MY STOMACH GROWLED AGAIN.

I turned to face the other side. I lay in a foetal position, pulling my knees up to my torso to suppress the pangs of hunger. They subsided for a while. Then there was a heavy traffic of wind-balls running up and down inside my stomach. I pressed my hand against my abdomen and released wind. The air filled with the smell of rotten eggs. I felt empty, nauseous and hungrier than before. I had performed this exercise throughout the night.

A dove cooed from the top of the big gum tree. It had a nest there and would coo every morning until everybody woke up. I opened my eyes. There was a small light coming through the slit in the curtain. I pushed the curtain to the side, and could see tips of cattle horns showing above the walls of the kraal. A single cloud hung above the mountains on the horizon. There was no threat of rain.

There came a knock at the door.

'Who is that?' my grandmother shouted from the other room.

'It's Nomatse, Grandma,' the visitor responded.

'Nomatse! What is a squirrel doing in our homestead so early in the morning?' Grandmother wondered.

'I am here to ask for cow dung, Grandma,' Nomatse said.

'Cow dung so early in the morning!' Grandmother exclaimed.

'Yes, Grandma, I thought I should come early so I would get it fresh.'

'You are a squirrel, and you want fresh cow dung early

in the morning?' Grandmother tried to make sense of what Nomatse was saying.

'Eh, Grandma,' I intervened. 'Nomatse is the daughter of Uncle Mpangele from the Bheles.' I could tell that my grandmother did not understand that 'Nomatse' was actually the name of the girl, and not a squirrel as the name suggested.

'Oh, Mpangele. The one with the eyes of a guinea fowl?'

'Yes, Uncle Mpangele, Grandma.'

'Why didn't she say so? All right, go ahead, child. Get yourself some cow dung.'

'Thank you, Grandma,' Nomatse said and proceeded to the kraal. This was her routine. She woke up very early on Fridays and went to those homesteads that still had cattle in their kraals. The droughts had left many kraals in the village bare.

My grandmother had consultations with the Creator every night before going to bed, begging him to spare the lives of the three cows, two calves and the bull that we still had in our kraal until I was old enough to marry. She was convinced that I would marry Nonqaba, her friend's granddaughter, who was the lead singer in the church choir. Pity Nonqoba's appearance didn't match her voice. Besides, I only had eyes for Nonzwakazi, a third-year student at the University of Fort Hare, just like me. Nonzwakazi had gone home in Mqanduli after the campus closed down two weeks ago due to the raging student protests against the exorbitant and continually escalating fees.

My back was itchy. I reached for the area and tried to scratch it. I could feel the prints of the grassmat with the tips of my fingers. I got up and stretched. There was a bulge in my shorts. I had to take a leak to rid myself of the hardness. A cold breeze hit my half-naked body as I stepped outside. I peed against the wall of the kraal. Nomatse was so engrossed in her job of collecting cow dung that she didn't even notice

me. Her bucket was full, but she kept piling it up with her now green hands. She had to get enough dung to smear on the floor of her entire homestead.

The cattle went about their business as usual, munching yesterday's grass, which they kept in their mouths. They occasionally swished their tails, in an effort to purge away flies that used their backsides as landing strips. Their skeletal backsides bore testament to the devastating drought. The cows looked deformed with their bloated udders hanging underneath them. The calves mooed from the small enclosure, eager to join their parents in the kraal and have their breakfast. What they seemed not to understand is that human beings were in charge, and had to milk the cows first before allowing the calves to feed from what little was left.

I went back to the house, wiped my face clean and changed into my tracksuit and running shoes. 'Are you going to school again today, Grandson?' my grandmother asked.

'Yes, Grandma. I'll give it a try once more.'

'Tell them that if they don't sort this matter out today, I'll go there myself,' she threatened.

'Yes, Grandma. I will tell them.' My grandmother inhabited a world where delusionary visions superseded logical reasoning. She saw herself as an invincible superwoman who could solve anything and everything on the surface of the earth. She had lived in Mavuso village all her life, but had never set a foot in the premises of the University of Fort Hare, which was separated from the village by a single hill. That same person thought she could sort my money problems with the university, where throngs of students had to jostle for resources.

The set-up in the Dean of Students' office was the same as on all my previous visits. The door was wide open. Kate, the volunteer administrator from Denmark, was busy typing emails and chewing gum simultaneously. Occasionally, she would jot some notes in her ever-present journal. She was

slim and of average height. Her long brown hair lay in strands over her shoulders. She had a warm personality, this Kate, always eager to have a conversation. She had previously told me that she had come to South Africa to do in-service training for her Masters Degree in Rural Development. Mr Kensington saw it fit that she spent most of her time behind a computer in the air-conditioned office.

She constantly blew gum, making bubbles and deflating them. I cleared my throat, in an attempt to get her attention. She lifted her eyes, and a smile spread across her face.

'Hey, Mr Mayekiso. Good to see you again,' she said, broadening the smile and flashing nicotine-tinged teeth.

'Hi, I hope I'm not disturbing. Is the Dean in today?'

'He's not here yet. But you can take a seat if you don't mind waiting,' she said, pointing at the waiting area across the room. There were three sofas and a coffee table. The table was littered with magazines and university prospectuses. The door to the Dean's office was closed. Kate continued typing and reading emails. She occasionally squinted her eyes to focus. Her lips would move as if she was having a silent conversation with the computer screen in front of her. A smile spread across her face again.

'I wish I could be the one putting that smile on your face,' I remarked.

'Sorry, I didn't get that. What did you say?' she asked, lifting her head to look at me.

'The smile,' I repeated. 'I wish I could be the one putting it on your face.' I had been gathering courage to say something like this to her for a very long time.

'Oh, that,' she chuckled. 'I didn't notice that I was smiling. It's this message from this guy,' she said.

'Your boyfriend must be a fun kind of guy, heh?' I said.

'You got that wrong, actually. This guy is just a pervert that I met online. He does make me laugh though, that much

is true,' she said, still with a wide grin.

'So, Mr Mayekiso,' she went on, a bit more hesitant. 'Where are you from, I mean, you come here quite often even though the campus has been shut down?'

'Please call me Sipho. I'm from Grahamstown.'

'That's about…' She took a pocket-book from her desk. *A Rough Guide to the Eastern Cape* was written on the cover, and she paged through it hurriedly.

'That's about a hundred kilometres from here, isn't it?' she asked.

'Yes, it is.' I was not so sure about the distance, but what I knew was that I had travelled it often enough to know that I was R30 poorer after every trip.

'Gosh! How do you manage to travel from there every week? They should sort this matter out already.'

'I hope they do.' There was no point in prolonging the story, bringing all the issues of me staying with my grandmother, who lived in a nearby village.

'So, you are Kosa?' she said.

'Not Kosa. I am Xhosa. X–x–x. Say it,' I instructed.

'That sounds nice. C–c–c. Cosa,' she said, and we both burst into uproarious laughter at her absurd effort. 'C'mon, teach me how to say it,' she said, still laughing.

'I think we'll need more time for these lessons – outside office hours, of course.'

'Sure, I have all the time in the world. I always wanted to learn the language anyway,' she said, to my delight.

'So, where are you staying?'

'I'm staying at Elukhanyisweni Residence,' she said. Elukhanyisweni, the Place of Light, was the most glamorous student residence on campus. Only postgraduates stayed there. Although the campus was closed down, there were still postgraduate students around, as many of them worked on campus.

'And how are you finding South Africa so far?' I asked.

'I like it here but I, I kinda haven't travelled much, you know. There are a few places that I wanna see but I'm scared of crime,' she said, frowning.

'C'mon, it's not that bad. Especially if you travel with a local,' the patriot in me prodded, inspired by the prospects of becoming Kate's personal guide.

'Can you travel with me then? I want to go to Hogsback. Have you ever been there?' she asked.

'I go there all the time,' I said. In actual fact, that was the truth in reverse. I had never been to Hogsback before, but I had heard about it, what it looked like and what tourists enjoyed there the most. 'It's a nice place, that,' I decided to add.

'Are you going with me tomorrow, then?' I could see the sparkle in her eyes as she asked the question.

'For sure. No problem,' I said without thinking.

'But are you gonna travel to Grahamstown today and come back in the morning?'

'No. Actually, I can crash at a friend's place tonight.'

'Great, so please meet me at the residence at five tomorrow morning. I'd like us to get there before sunrise,' she said, scribbling her room number on a piece of paper. She gave me the paper, and that was the moment I heard the shuffling of Mr Kensington's feet. He came in as I turned to go back to the sofa in the waiting area. He was a very short man and his shiny bald patch glittered under the office light. He was carrying a briefcase in one hand, and a lunch box in the other.

'Young man, I see you've made yourself comfortable in my office,' he said. I had gotten used to his way of greeting.

'Good morning, sir,' I said, going back to the sofa. Mr Kensington wore a khaki safari suit. He had thick glasses, and a pipe hung below his bushy moustache. He put the briefcase on the floor and took a bunch of keys from the pocket. He dropped the keys as he was about to open the

door to his office. He bent down to pick them up, revealing the outline of his buttocks. Seeing that he was struggling to bend, I picked up the keys for him.

'Thank you, young man,' he said, opening the door to his office. Kate got up, a diary in hand, and strutted in after her boss. She closed the door behind her, but I could hear whispering.

'Why did you allow him to wait for me?' I heard Mr Kensington saying to Kate. She replied, but I couldn't hear what she was saying because she had muffled her voice. When she emerged, she flashed a bleak smile.

'He'll see you in a minute,' she said, trying to hide her frustrations.

'Thanks,' I said. After a while, her phone rang. She had a short conversation with the caller and, after putting down the handset, she told me that Mr Kensington was ready for me.

'Take a seat, young man,' he said, ushering me to one of the two chairs in front of his desk.

'What did you say you wanted again?' Mr Kensington said, opening a file in front of him. Inside it were my previous letters to the university, my academic transcripts and my grandmother's old-age grant certificate.

'All I want is an opportunity to pursue my studies and finish my degree, sir,' I said.

'Boy, you expect us to pay for your tuition, accommodation and feed you. Everything!' He threw his hands in the air.

'I have nowhere else to go, sir.'

'How did you survive the past two years? Can't your parents pay for your registration, at least?' he asked.

'My parents are not alive, sir. My father died last year. He's the one who assisted me with his pension money,' I explained.

'So, you are an orphan?'

'No, Sir. I am not an orphan.'

'Didn't you just say your parents are not alive?'

'That does not make me an orphan, sir.'

'Boy, you are not making any logical sense. Don't waste my time here.'

'Sir, I would think of an orphan as someone who has no one, and I am not that. You don't find that even among the cattle, sir. If a cow dies, leaving a calf, the calf becomes part of a herd, a community of cattle. It will never be alone. It is the case with our culture as well.'

'That's an interesting take,' he said, nodding and taking a drag from his pipe. 'So, Mr Philosopher, where is your community of cattle, then? Who do you have to belong to now?' As he spoke, smoke poured out of his mouth and nose like a chimney of a coal train.

'I have my grandmother who is a pensioner, sir,' I said. He shook his head and paged through a thick book in front of him.

'Your academic record is not bad. Maybe we should see you on Monday. I'm meeting with the Registrar to discuss cases like yours. There are many students who are facing similar problems. We'll be starting with the screening process next week.'

'That would be wonderful, sir,' I said.

'Don't come too early on Monday. We can only see you after twelve, okay?'

'Yes, sir. I'll be here after midday on Monday.'

I left the campus in high spirits that day. I had been trying to secure a meeting with the management since the university had opened some six weeks ago.

'How did it go at school today, Grandson?' Grandmother asked on my return, before I could even sit down.

'All is well, Grandma. They finally agreed to meet with me on Monday.'

'That is wonderful news. What time are you meeting them?'

'They said I should be there at midday,' I explained.

'Who is they, son? You keep saying "they, they, they". Are you talking about cattle that say moo-moo-moo, or you are talking about people with names?'

Grandmother barely ever left the house, let alone the village, except on payday when she went to receive her old-age grant in town. It was highly unlikely that she would know the Dean. I didn't understand why she bothered asking.

'You wouldn't know them, Grandma. I spoke to Mr Kensington, the Dean of Students. We will be in a meeting with Mr Mzila, the Registrar, who is the highest authority on this matter,' I explained.

'Mzila,' she said. 'That is one of us, isn't he?'

'Yes, he's a black man in charge of big issues at the university, Grandma.'

'I see. They better let you study, child of my child,' she said with finality.

I woke up early the following morning and left for campus. Kate was already waiting in her green VW Beetle, which had seen far too many years. She gave me a hug, the first I had got from a white woman. And it was just like any other hug.

The Beetle left campus, heading in the direction of Kingwilliamstown. It took a left turn towards Hogsback, roaring all the way as it meandered through the mountains and gorges. We approached from the west, with the sun still hiding behind the hog's back-shaped mountain before us. The scenery was almost devoid of human beings.

'This is splendid!' Kate screamed with excitement.

'Yes, it's great,' I said, not really sure what she was referring to exactly.

'Look at the clouds,' she said, pointing to the clouds that hung above the mountain. 'They are orange. I've never seen anything like this before.'

We parked next to a stable with horses. There was a

group of tourists braaiing meat across from us. My nose followed the trail of barbecue like a starved dog.

'Let's go up the mountain,' Kate said, opening the boot of her car. She took out her backpack, which contained among the noticeable items, bottled water, a camera, sunblock cream, a pack of Camel cigarettes, a cigarette lighter, her journal and a pen. As we stood at the foot of the mountain, I thought about the journey ahead. There was a small footpath that snaked up the mountain. My body shivered as the image of a snake came to mind. I looked around my feet, just to make sure there was no crawling reptile nearby.

'Are you gonna walk up that mountain?' I asked, with a bit of trepidation.

'We are gonna go up the mountain. We can take a horse trail, if you want. In fact, let's check if there are any horses available,' she said, and I made a silent prayer for the unavailability of horses.

'We've only got one horse available at the moment, ma'am. You may have to wait for two hours or so to get another one,' the enormous receptionist said.

'No, it's okay. Take the one that's available. I'll walk besides you,' I said, protecting my dignity. I had never been on horseback before and I was not interested in learning how to ride in the presence of Kate.

'Are you sure?' Kate asked.

'I'm a runner, remember. Just ride on that one,' I said.

'That's so gentlemanly of you. But I'll give you a chance to ride when you get tired of walking,' Kate offered.

We went up the mountain, Kate on the horse while I walked beside it. She could be fascinated by anything, this Kate. She would shout 'Splendid!' at just about everything that she came across. The weather, the vegetation, the horse, the rabbits and antelope that dashed away as soon as they saw us, and even the pink buttocks of the baboon that startled us

as it climbed up the adjacent cliff – all were splendid! I began to doubt if the word had any meaning to her anymore.

When we finally got to the mountain top, she dished out more 'splendids'. The scenery was splendid, the blue sky was splendid, and even the air was splendid. And she never forgot to make journal entries.

'Thank you, boo-boo,' she said, kissing the horse's mane.

'I wish I could be a horse,' I ventured, sitting down on a big rock.

'What?' she said.

'I said, I wish I could be a horse,' I repeated.

She smiled and got off the horse. 'You mean to get the kiss or the ride?'

'Maybe both,' I said, matter-of-factly.

'You are crazy!' She kissed me on the cheek. 'You ain't getting the ride, though,' she said, taking the pack of cigarettes out of her backpack. She offered me a cigarette, and I took it. She shielded against the wind and lit her cigarette, before bringing the flame to me. Having the flame next to my face was not the most comfortable thing, but I tried to puff so the cigarette caught alight. I sneezed immediately and began to cough.

'You don't smoke, do you?' she asked.

'No!' I shook my head, still coughing.

'Why didn't you say so?' she asked.

'I thought you'd say it's rude,' I said, giving the cigarette back to her. She killed it, and then smoked hers.

'What else didn't you tell me about you?' she asked.

'That the other reason I went to the Dean's office so often was you.'

'What about me?' she asked.

'I like you. I wanted to see you everyday,' I said.

'Why didn't you just say so?' she said, throwing the cigarette stub away.

'I didn't have courage, I guess,' I said.

'What if I say I like you too?' she said, looking straight into my eyes. That warranted no verbal response. I kissed her pink lips. Her mouth smelled like ashtray. Our tongues wrestled each other. My south pole pointed north. Only the mountain, the trees and the horse were witness to this unfolding miracle.

I fell in love with the Hogsback Mountain that day. We went up as strangers, Kate and I, she riding on horseback and me walking besides the horse, like a slave. And we came back as lovers. We walked hand-in-hand as we went down the mountain, with Kate leading the horse behind us.

Kate was not the most beautiful woman I had ever been with, but I was sure to earn respect among my fellow villagers for 'eating white bread'. We were two years into a democratic South Africa, but no one in Mavuso village had been able to advance the idealism of a rainbow nation by having a white woman lift her dress for him.

She took out a picnic basket from the car. In it were apples, bananas, a bottle of Coke and bottled water. The snack of bananas and apples left my stomach an empty vessel. I wanted bread. But that would have been too much to ask from a new girlfriend.

'I like the texture of your hair,' Kate said, brushing my hair with her hand. 'Why don't you get the locks?' she asked.

'You want me to get dreadlocks?'

'For sure!' she said, squealing with excitement. 'I find African guys with locks extremely sexy,' she explained.

'I won't cut my hair again. I'll let it grow and form the locks,' I said, even though I had no intentions of growing dreadlocks. My grandmother wouldn't let anyone in her household grow the locks. She believed they were the thing of the diviners.

We sat there, me and Kate, talking about the trivialities

that new lovers find so interesting. Kate kept writing notes in her journal, which was beginning to make me uncomfortable.

'So, have you ever met Mandela? I understand he's Kosa too?'

'Yes, he's my grandfather,' I said. Traditionally speaking, I was telling the truth. Mandela shared the same clan name as my grandmother, and that made him my grandfather. But the closest I had come to meeting him was seeing him on TV.

'Oh, that's wonderful. I'd like to meet him,' she said, excited.

'No problem. I can take you there when he's in Qunu,' I said. That also warranted an entry in her journal.

'So, how often do you communicate with the Mandela family? I mean, why don't they assist with your schooling?' she asked.

'You know what our people say,' I said, trying to think of a way out. 'Men don't talk when their mouths are full. So, I don't wanna bother them.' She gave me a sympathetic kiss. I held her in my arms and for a while, we were locked in a tight embrace.

Orange sun rays hid behind the mountains. The sun was done with the business of the day. We also had to make our way back before it got dark.

When we got to Kate's room on campus, she dropped the backpack, took her towel and toiletry bag, and headed for the bathroom to take a shower. I needed to take a shower too. Walking up the mountain next to a horse in scorching heat had left my body sticky and my balls itchy. But it was a women's residence, and since the eye is a thief and the heart a follower, entering the bathroom was a risky business. I looked in the mirror to see if there was anything screaming that I had not washed. I noticed dry lips, which betrayed something else – hunger.

I opened the fridge and found two fat-free yoghurts. I

opened one, looked around for a teaspoon, and couldn't see any. The business of eating should not depend on irresponsible teaspoons, I said to myself. I drank the yoghurt. It was the most tasteless yoghurt I had ever eaten, but it was quite filling. I licked the container afterwards. At that moment there was a scuffling of keys at the door. It swung open, and Kate entered with a towel wrapped above her breasts.

'Sorry it took so long. I've been sweating all day,' she said.

'It's okay.'

'I like your white moustache, by the way.' She was smiling again. I jumped to the mirror, and saw the remnants of the yoghurt around my mouth.

'Are you hungry?' she asked the obvious.

'I only had that snack today,' I said.

'You didn't have breakfast? You should've told me,' she said, and gave me a hug. Her touch was enough to banish all the hunger and tiredness. I untied the towel and it fell to the ground. Her breasts were small and firm. She had pink nipples that looked straight at me. They were remarkably different to what I was used to. Nonzwakazi's breasts were brown and voluptuous. She was somewhere in the villages of Mqanduli, while I was visiting the Garden of Eden with my white Eve. What if Nonzwakazi was doing the same with a new bloody Adam?

The thought ruined all the sensation that engulfed me at that moment. I tried to forge on so I would have something worthwhile to talk about in the village. I kissed Kate and pushed her to the bed. She lay obligingly on her back, legs apart. I got on top of her and tried to induce an erection. For the first time in the presence of a naked woman, my south pole didn't point north. It looked south-south instead. I felt let down.

'Don't you want me, Sipho?' she asked, chest heaving.

'I do. I want you desperately. But in my culture you can't

have sex without having washed and eaten first,' I said, making up a story.

'Why didn't you say so?' she asked, pushing me away.

We got up and she led me to the women's bathroom. She peeped ahead, looking this way and that, before telling me to enter. As we were heading for the shower, the shower door swung open, and a glittering brown body came out. The woman had shaved her pubic hair. She had wide hips, round bums and a flat stomach. Her structure was almost identical to Nonzwakazi's. She greeted and walked past, a toothbrush in hand and a wet towel draped over her shoulder, seemingly undeterred by my presence. She stood in front of the mirror to brush her teeth. Her protruding backside gave me wild imaginations. My south pole pointed north instantly. Kate pulled me out of the bathroom. I left my mind in the bathroom.

I took off Kate's towel as soon as we got to the room. The sexual craving was overwhelming. I fumbled in my pockets and fished one of those free condoms provided by the government.

'No, we can't use those,' Kate said, getting up and rummaging in her handbag. She took out a pack of Lovers Plus condoms and handed it over to me. I knew what to do.

Kate, the white woman, was lying on her back, naked and ready for me. Her cheeks had turned reddish. I kissed her. I felt her hair on my tongue. I tried to remove it, and she pressed my buttocks towards her. I wanted to call all my ancestors to come and witness the work of democracy.

In a few minutes, I was lying on my back heaving with exhaustion. Kate was resting her head on my chest, her hand tucked on my crotch, as if my south pole might suddenly escape.

'So, how come you do things in reverse, now?' Kate asked.

'What do you mean?'

'You made love before getting the food and the shower.'

'Well, I had to accommodate your culture!' I said, laughing at my own stupidity. I played with her hair, which after our escapade was strewn all over the pillow.

'Please give me that,' she said, pointing to her handbag. I stretched my hand, reached the bag, and handed it over to her. She took out a packet of cigarettes and the journal. She lit a cigarette and dragged one long puff. Then she blew clouds of smoke to the ceiling while at the same time jotting something in her journal. That became her routine for the rest of the weekend.

At twelve o' clock on Monday I was sitting in the waiting room again, waiting to be called into the boardroom where the Dean was meeting with the Registrar and his deputy. Kate sat at her desk, stealing cautious glances at me. She had a permanent smile on her face, and I knew it was not the computer that gave her so much amusement. I also had visions of my own. I was reminiscing about the scintillating moments of the night before. She had a way of moving her hips up and keeping her waist suspended in the air – allowing me to reach deep inside her. That gave me unspeakable pleasure. She sent me into raptures when she crossed her legs over my back and pressed me tightly against her body. It was a moment of magic.

I heard the clucking of a hen. Kate's eyes popped.

'Is this the right place to wait for the son of the Mzilas?' a familiar voice said, sending my pulse into a whirl. While I was still reeling from the shock of hearing the voice, my grandmother walked in. She had a box tucked under her arm. She had opened holes in the box, and a beak of a hen peeped through one of the holes.

Kate jumped forward and received my grandmother with excitement. 'Splendid!' she said.

'Hallo, child,' grandmother greeted, but Kate was more

interested on the hen. 'This is so cute!' she said, scrutinising the hen. 'Are you selling it?' she asked.

'Grandma, what are you doing here?' I barked at my own grandmother.

'I am here to see the Mzila man, what do you think?' she replied.

'Sipho, please ask her how much is the bird?' Kate intervened.

'Kate, this is my grandmother. She just came from the nearby village,' I explained.

'You have a grandmother here! That's news to me!'

'You never asked,' I said.

At that point, Mr Kensington entered. 'Young man, I see you came with your grandmother today,' he greeted, in his own fashion.

'Yes, sir. She is here to hear for herself,' I tried to explain.

'Please come this way, ma'am.' Mr Kensington led us to the boardroom.

When we got to the boardroom, we found the Registrar, Mr Mzila and his deputy, Dr Mbewu, already waiting for us. Mr Mzila was a tall, large and hairy man. He wore a bright-coloured shirt of the type often worn by the disciples of Afrocentric persuasion. The massive beard that surrounded his face must have taken several decades to grow.

Dr Mbewu was standing, frantically sorting documents on a thick file. She had a tiny figure, and a light complexion adorned with red lipstick. She wore a mustard two-piece suit and a white low-cut-blouse. She bent down to scrutinise the papers, and the blouse gaped open, revealing a splendid view of her breasts. I watched the two yellow pears dangling in front of me like low-hanging fruit ready to be picked. She pulled out several pages and took a seat across from me. The pears disappeared from view. She nodded to the Registrar, signalling him to start.

'Ma'am, I assume you are this boy's grandmother,' Mr Mzila said, opening the meeting. My grandmother started a long embarrassing narrative, giving our family history, in which poverty seemed to be the dominant phenomenon. In conclusion, she offered the hen to Mr Mzila.

'You of the Mzilas, you should know these things better than the light-skinned one that the child of my child has been talking to. We do not have big monies. With this hen we are coming to you, saying this is all we've got at our disposal. Our child is hungry for education. Allow him to receive this wealth of knowledge,' she concluded.

Mr Mzila's eyes darted from me, to his deputy, the Dean and to the hen. Dr Mbewu was the first to respond.

'I am sorry that you had to come here personally, Grandma. It must have taken a lot of effort on your part. I am gonna interpret for Mr Kensington here, because he doesn't speak our language,' she said, and then whispered to Mr Kensington, trying to summarise the long narrative. The three of them kept nodding their heads at regular intervals. I hoped that the nodding was in my favour. After some more whispering and occasional nodding, Mr Mzila cleared his throat for our attention.

'Thank you, ma'am, we are glad that you came to clarify the situation. Let us hear from the boy now. We need to get his point of view as a student in this institution.'

'Thank you. You of the Mzilas, the child of my child is very clever in his head. The papers are there to show. He deserves an opportunity to be educated,' she said.

'Mr Mayekiso,' Mr Mzila started with his interrogation. 'We are trying to assist here. But you must also be co-operative. We would not like to see any student excluded on financial grounds. But again, you have to pay for your education. We also have bills to settle. Now tell me, other than your grandmother, who else can help you?'

'Only the university can help, sir. I have tried all I could elsewhere.'

'Son, from where I am sitting, your appearance doesn't suggest that you cannot afford to pay for your studies. Look, people,' he said, inviting his colleagues to the show. 'This boy has even got one of these stylish haircuts.'

'Sir, I hear you were involved in the liberation struggle,' I said.

'Yes, of course. What does that have to do with anything?'

'And you received military training in Zambia and the Soviet Union.'

'That's right. I'm a fully fledged soldier here. I know hunger. I know how it feels to be in the trenches,' he said, with a glimmer of pride.

'Your body does not show that you are a trained soldier, sir, much as my appearance does not show that I have a poor background.' The rebel in me had risen.

'Boy, what are you getting at?' He was clearly not pleased with my statement.

'I cut my own hair, sir. That's why I have this haircut.'

'All right,' Dr Mbewu decided to intervene. 'Perhaps you should give us a moment to speak to your grandmother alone,' she said, addressing me directly. 'Please take a seat in the waiting room. We'll call you in a moment.'

When I got to the waiting room, Kate was busy writing in her journal. She lifted her eyes, and then went back to her writing. There was an uneasy quiet until Kate decided to drop the pretence. She closed the journal and challenged me: 'Where's your grandmother now?'

'What business do you have with my grandmother's whereabouts?'

'Why are you such a liar, Sipho? Why didn't you tell me that you had family around here?' she asked.

'I didn't need to.' I was not interested in arguing with her.

'So, everything about our relationship was based on lies!'

'Don't you dare pretend you ever loved me!'

'What do you mean, I'm pretending?' Her face was turning red.

'I've always been an anthropological subject to you. You wanted an African with dreadlocks. I had to be Mandela's relation and all. Tell you what, I am not any of those things, and I don't intend becoming anything but me, the way you see me now.'

'I just can't believe this,' she said and reached for her journal again.

'Are you gonna write just about everything I say?' I grabbed the journal and looked at the page where she had been writing. She had only written a subheading, 'When Hunger is Gone.' I went back to the first page, and there was the title, 'Hunger.' There were notes below the title, and my name featured prominently.

'You fucking spy! What are you all about exactly?' I blurted out.

'Did you just call me a fucking spy?' Her eyebrows cringed, and her tiny nostrils flared. 'Tell you what, *brother*, this fucking spy listened to your troubles when no one cared, this fucking spy got you an appointment with the Registrar when it seemed impossible, this fucking spy fed you when you were hungry—'

'Child of my child!' A voice spoke. I turned to look. My grandmother was standing in the doorway. There was no box under her arm.

'We have won!' she announced. I stood there, in the middle of the room, like a fly caught in a spiderweb. I could hear Kate's heavy breathing.

'They will let you study and give you food and accommodation. Hunger is gone!'