The Suit Continued

IT IS ANNOYING WHEN people keep telling the story of a woman who was tormented by her husband because I left my suit in his house. You know, people think that she was the only one who suffered. But then, I don't really blame them because maybe that's how Can Themba wanted them to feel.

The only thing he mentions in his propaganda piece 'The Suit' is that I ran away. Did he think that that was the end of the story for me? Did he think that I, a respected schoolteacher, enjoyed running around the streets of Sophiatown in my underwear? Did he think that I felt no remorse when the woman decided to put an end to her life? No, those things could not just happen and leave me feeling no shame. Besides, I had my own humiliation to deal with. I'm neither a writer nor a journalist as Can Themba was, but I thought I should jot down a few lines so people know my side of the story before I sink six feet under. This is not a confession, but a testimony.

First of all, it was never my style to have dealings with married women. You see, there is this thing about a woman: if she wants you, she is sure to get you. Unlike us; if we want her, we have to go a long way trying to impress her. Somehow I feel that women do take advantage of us men. In fact, women of those days had a great deal of advantage over us.

When I met this girl, I had had a few tots of brandy, not to get drunk; just to cure my body after a Sunday afternoon of heavy drinking. Please note that I'm addressing her as a 'girl' because that's what she looked like when I first met

her. She didn't seem like a married woman at all. I know when alcohol registers itself in a man's head, even the ugliest woman suddenly becomes attractive, but this was not the case. She caught my eye with her red mini-dress that girls used to wear in those days. Ag man, I forgot that you young people wouldn't know those dresses. Let me just say, they are seductively equivalent to the tight shorts and the skimpy blouses that young girls wear these days. When I see these girls, I feel like getting young again. I may have a bald patch and a wrinkled skin, but my heart feels as young as ever.

But that's not the point. What I'm saying is that this woman took advantage of me the first day we met. It was during lunch break and I went to Thirty-nine Steps, as I usually did on Monday mornings. That's what we used to do with Can when he was teaching at Madibane High School in Western. I had been friends with Can since our university days at Fort Hare. You see, this is what I like about being a teacher: you are within the community, and you can always take a moment out to rid yourself of a hangover. We usually bought our hooch from Thirty-nine Steps and took it to Can's 'House of Truth'. Decent guys in Sophiatown used to drink there.

On this morning my throat was as dry as a desert, and my whole body was shivering. The noise that the children made sounded like a beehive inside my head. Every word I said trying to silence them echoed in my aching head, and they wasted no time in making irritating whispers and pointing towards my direction. Hangover was playing with me, I tell you. I knew the only remedy was to pay a quick visit to Thirty-nine Steps.

Can was now working as a journalist for *Drum*, and I knew I'd find him there. Well, he was not there yet, and I did not mind having a brandy half-jack by myself. Fatty, the enormous shebeen queen, seemed to be pleased that I took the drink on credit. Man, that woman knew how to

do business. She was always happier when you went there without money because she would charge you double the amount. You would not think about that until at the end of the month when you had to pay her. As friendly as she was when she gave you the drink, Fatty took no nonsense when she wanted her money. Sometimes I just felt she increased the bill because she knew I was a bit drunk when I initially made the credit. I didn't dare complain because Fatty was never reluctant to squash a man with her bare hands.

Here I am again dwelling on shebeen life, but that is not what this testimony is about. It is about this woman who got me into trouble. I call her 'woman' because I never knew her real name. Yes, I slept with her a couple of times, but still I did not know her name because she called me 'sweetie' (it was the first time a woman had taken to calling me that), and I had to refer to her in the same way. I only knew her name after I read Can's story. Matilda (as Can calls her) came in and sat on the arm of the sofa I was sitting on. I knew she was attracted to me because I was looking good. Although I was not a full-time member because I had a decent job, I was often associated with the Americans – that notorious Sophiatown gang. I had on my Humphrey Bogart hat, my blue suit, and brown-and-white Florsheims, 'America's finest shoes' (as the advert claimed). Even the Mapantsulas of these days wouldn't match my style during those days, let alone a man who wore khaki-green messenger uniforms. I was mjita van Kofifi, I tell you.

Matilda was just one of many women who couldn't wait to jump into bed with me. Okay, to make a long story short, Matilda asked why I drank there because it was not the right place for gentlemen like me, especially during school hours. I told her it was the only place where I could drink. She said no, I must come over to her place and finish what's left of the brandy there. Well, needless to mention, drinking was not the

first thing we did when we got to her place. In fact, it went down well after we gave each other some bodily pleasures.

There is nothing as nice as something you are stealing. I knew very well that my wife would not have been happy to find me there. But, nonetheless, it was good; I really enjoyed my time with Matilda. It became a habit for me to spend some time during my lunch breaks at Matilda's place. You know, there was this thing about her: she was not a nagging woman. One thing about women when you have an affair is they usually ask you about your other relationships. How many kids have you got? Are you married? Do you like your wife? Things like that. I really hate it because the inquisitiveness forces you to give her ears what they want to hear. It's better when we do what brings us together and leave other business alone. Finish en klaar!

Matilda never asked anything other than for me to come back the following day. For that reason, even my wife never suspected a thing until that day you all know about. In fact, it became known because of Can. I only find solace in that he never mentioned my name. It was that old walking radio Maphikela who spread rumours. I must be honest and say I felt a bit of relief when that big-mouthed, woman-like man took his exit from this world. It seemed like the older he got, the longer his tongue grew.

I suspect Can was one of Maphikela's co-conspirators in setting me up. You see, journalists like Can and Henry Nxumalo were real trouble those days. They were willing to risk their lives in their pursuit of a scoop. Actually, that's how Henry died (bless his soul). I particularly liked Henry because he was dedicated to fighting the injustices. As Mr Drum, Henry exposed the brutal treatment farm labourers got.

No matter how Africans were divided those days, there was this lingering bond that always brought us together. We were all victims of apartheid. Together we became a potent

force that fought against a common enemy. Besides, there was this looming threat, since 1939, that Sophiatown was going to be demolished. Even the Berliners and the Gestapo, who were the worst enemies in the world of gangsterism, attended the same meetings in the name of preserving the only free territory we had inside South Africa. Together we sang one song: Asiyi ndawo, we won't move. Our resistance campaigns turned out to be like farting in a deep ocean when heavily armed police came with bulldozers to demolish Sophiatown in 1955. The Sophiatown we loved was destroyed, but many of us carried it in our hearts to exile.

Can was a good writer, but I can't understand why he would exploit his writing skills by telling reality that was not to be told. Even my grandchildren today know about my ordeal. I understand now that Can was not the major herald in delivering the news to Philemon, but he knew that I was going to get caught that day. You see, I was smoking my Lexington while Matilda rested her head on my chest like a baby clinging to its mother on a stormy evening.

Suddenly Matilda whispered: 'That's him!'

'That's who?' I asked.

'That's my husband.'

'A husband. Where, what are you talking about?'

'My husband is here. He's opening the door.'

By that time I could hear footsteps coming towards the bedroom. There was no time for asking too many questions. Before I could think of anything, the doorknob turned, and the man was inside the room, wearing his khaki-green uniform. I was there naked in his bed with his wife.

'What should I do?' I thought.

The man headed straight for his wardrobe and I knew he was looking for something dangerous – a gun or a knife. I was not interested in finding out which one because that meant I would be carried out of that house – head first. A

black man killing another black man was never taken as a serious offence during those days. People did not fear being arrested because a black man could go to jail for not having a pass anyway. Besides, even the law would not protect a man who had been found in bed with another man's wife. The only thing that came to my mind was that I must get out of that house before he turned from the wardrobe. I swiftly put on my boxer shorts and jumped out the window, holding my vest in my hand. I ran while putting on the vest, oblivious of the people who were watching. Apparently among those people was the Sophiatown herald, Maphikela, with whose courtesy Can received the news. Maphikela must have swallowed a small radio during his early days.

I ran and ran and kept running until I heard someone shouting, 'Pace-up, pace-up, meneer.' It was only at that moment that I thought about looking back to see if anyone was following. There was no one, but I could not stop abruptly because that would have invited suspicion from passers-by. Fortunately, I spotted two young fellows who were jogging. One thing I liked about people those days is that you could just join anyone who was on the road. I joined these guys and as my pace was a bit faster than theirs, they picked up speed. We were now racing each other. After a couple of minutes of running with them, one asked, 'What sport do you play?'

'I run.' I could not say anything longer as I was already gasping for air.

After a brief pause the other one asked: 'Do you normally run on bare feet?'

'Yes,' I said in between breaths, 'especially when I'm preparing for cross-country.' I realised this was not good company to keep, so I took the closest turn that would join Ray Street, which led to Edith Street where my house was. As I entered Edith Street, my legs were giving up, and my

house seemed to be moving further away.

Now my worry was that Grace might be home when I got there. Okay, let me just say it was one of the few days that the Lord actually listened and responded well to my prayers. She was not back from work yet. What a relief. I reached for my keys, but couldn't find the pocket. It was only at that moment that it crossed my mind that the house keys were in the suit that I was wearing that day. My house keys, my wallet and my pass were left in the suit. The blue suit, my best suit, my wedding suit, was trapped in another man's house. As I was standing there still searching my vest hoping that the keys might have been stuck somewhere, I felt a tap on my shoulder. The first thing that came to my mind was that the man had been following me, and I was now busted.

'Terence, why do you look so terrified?' said a familiar voice as I turned to look. I'm not sure whether I got relieved or more nervous when I discovered that it was my wife.

'Hey Grace, it's you. I thought it was these silly boys. You see, they have been saying funny things because I'm dressed like this.' I said this because I could see in her eyes that she was concerned about my attire, or should I say, my lack of attire.

'Why are you wearing these things? Where is your suit?'

'No, Grace, you see we were having Funny Day at school and I forgot that we had to leave our suits and wear casual. They took my suit so I would look funny. You know those things like Guy Fawkes Day?'

'So they had to humiliate you and let you go home like this?' she said, surveying me from top to bottom. I had to find someone else to blame.

'Grace, you don't know these principals. Because we are under them, they think that they own us. They said I was being disobedient when I refused to take off my clothes. And you know I have had several warnings already.'

'Your warnings are due to your drinking habits, I don't blame them… and where are your shoes?'

'*Eish*, you won't believe this. They didn't even give me a chance to put them on. Now please open the door because I don't want the whole of Sophiatown to see me like this.'

That was indeed the one honest thing I said to her that day. I didn't want any more people to see me looking like that.

I was relieved when she finally opened the door. I felt like remaining indoors forever. My heart was still racing like a dog chasing a rabbit. It was only at that moment that I felt the pain of having run on bare feet through the dusty streets of Sophiatown. My feet were swelling. Blood was oozing from my toes, and I had to wash my feet before Grace noticed. Grace began pumping the primus stove in order to boil water. I filled the washing basin with cold water and washed my feet.

'Terence, are you washing now?' she shouted from the other room. I could hear her clearly in our two-roomed matchbox. There was not too much privacy there. You could hear what your next-door neighbour was doing with his wife at any time.

'Yes, I'm gonna wash with cold water. You can just make tea with that water you boiled.' I knew she liked saving so much. She always complained that I spent too much money on drinks.

'All right. Wash up so that we can go fetch your suit then.'

'No, Grace, don't be in a hurry. I am a bit tired now. I will go there later.'

'If you are embarrassed, I don't mind fetching it myself.'

'No, no, don't worry about it. I'll go there myself.' She compromised even though I could see in her eyes that she was suspicious. I loved my suit and I was very desperate to have it back, but I could not go to that man's house at that point.

I thought I had survived the storm, but it became clear

that it was only the whirlwind. My wife always ironed my suit every day for me to wear. When I woke up the following morning, I only found my vest and boxer shorts nicely ironed and waiting for me.

'Where is the suit that I am supposed to wear today, Grace?'

'Your suit is at school, Terry. Didn't you say you left it there? You can just go and get dressed there.'

'But I can't go to school like this.'

'But you came from school like that.'

'Grace, it's different, yesterday was Funny Day. Today isn't.'

'I guess that's what you'll have to tell your principal, Terry. You are not putting on another suit until you bring that one.'

I knew Grace when she was determined to do something. There was no way she would change her mind. I suspected somebody had already told her what had happened the previous day. I could not go to school without a suit on. My suit, my pass, my shoes and my house keys were in another man's house; the man whose wife I had been sleeping with for the previous three months. I had to find a way of confessing to my wife.

I cleared my throat and called her. 'Grace…' I instinctively placed my hand on my forehead and looked down. My eyes darted from her face to the floor, back to her face and then to the ceiling. She knew from my mannerisms I was about to tell some twisted truth.

'My suit is not really left at school. You see, what happened yesterday…'

I noticed a frown on her face, and I knew that she would not take too kindly to what I was about to say.

'Actually, the principal gave it to this boy, and he is keeping it in his home.'

'Do you know the house?'

'No, yes I do, but you see I have to get dressed first. I can't go there like this. You don't want your husband to walk around the streets of Sophiatown in underwear, do you?'

'In fact, I don't mind, especially when he decides to give his clothes to some *boy* that I don't know. You are not going to wear another suit until you come back with that one.'

Well, I never believed in arguing with a woman. She's my woman; I had to find a way of twisting her mind. A man is not a man until he knows how to get himself out of trouble at the worst of times.

'All right, let me go like this, then.' I left the house in the same attire as the previous day. I went straight to my brother's house, which was just two blocks from mine. I was a bit taller than my brother. I wore his suit even though his pants held my thighs so tight that I could barely stretch my legs. The arms of the jacket ended just half way down my arms. Since he always wore his only pair of Jarman shoes, I wore his tennis shoes, waterlogged from a heavy downpour the last time they were worn. Cakes of mud had dried on them, changing their original white colour into something brownish. Needless to mention, they were a size or two smaller than mine, and as I walked each step felt like a sharp needle piercing my toes.

School children derived their pleasures from my attire in those few days. Every time I turned to write something on the board they would begin to giggle, and I knew what was so exciting to them. I never smiled, even at the funniest joke, and I used the rod at the slightest offence.

When lunch break finally arrived, I didn't even think that Matilda's husband might be home. I just wanted to get my suit and end whatever had brought us together. When I got there, Matilda told me about her husband's hospitality. They were serving my suit supper and treating it like an important

visitor. For that reason, I could not take my suit because Philemon valued it so much that he would kill Matilda if she did not take good care of it – 'good care' meaning that it had to be fed and kept within the family.

I could not believe how cruel that man was. Perhaps he was as cruel as my wife was to me. I had to spend three weeks wearing my brother's clothes and dropping them off after school, as my brother had to wear his suit during his night visits to shebeens or white men's businesses to supplement his monthly income. I had to be very careful about where I walked because not possessing a pass reduced me to a criminal in the eyes of the law. Eventually I had to confess to my wife because I could not stand the humiliation of entering my house half-naked everyday.

'Grace, I hear that my suit has been confiscated by a certain man,' I began rather casually, trying to hide the guilt that filled my heart.

'What do you mean, confiscated?'

'I mean, the boy's father found the suit there and thought it could belong to his wife's lover. So he is keeping it until the owner reveals himself.'

'All right. In that case, I'll be more than pleased to go there with you.'

I had no choice but to let Grace go with me when I went to collect my suit. As we walked, my mind danced back and forth: how stupid it was for me to fall into this woman's trap; how inconsiderate of me not to think the woman might be married; how foolish I looked when I walked into my house in underwear.

The sight that confronted us when we got there still haunts me to this day. We found Philemon crying helplessly over Matilda's body. My suit was still sitting on a chair with a plate filled with food in front of it. Instead of going for my suit, I just broke down and cried alongside Philemon. I even

forgot about my wife who came with the understanding that we were there to take my suit from a silly schoolboy, whose father had confiscated it due to his jealousy and insecurity.

I was more concerned about Matilda's death. My fear was the indignity of fingers being pointed at me as an adulterer, a killer and a devil who had had the audacity to walk into another man's house and sleep with his wife in his bed. The best thing I can do at this stage is to let people know that I am not as inhumane as Can made people think.