



**UNIVERSITY of the  
WESTERN CAPE**

# **University of the Western Cape**

*Private Bag X17, Bellville 7535, South Africa*

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## **FACULTY OF ARTS**

### **MASTERS OF CREATIVE WRITING (Mini-thesis)**

#### **Reflexive Essay**

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**UNIVERSITY of the  
WESTERN CAPE**

Submitted to the Faculty of Arts, University of the Western Cape in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Arts, Creative Writing.



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## Part 1

His brown hands, tanned darker than they already were from hours of supervising men shoveling sand and mixing concrete on building sites, gripped the steering wheel. Hendrick Vermeulen drove down Voortrekker Road after a long day's work. He had dropped off the last of the guys with his bakkie and was looking forward to resting. He was enjoying the cool night air blowing up his arm. And there it was, that mountain. There was nothing more to think about it. It meant nothing to him; a big rock, a marker to remind where he was. The rich people were there by the mountain; he was not. He drove on.

The sun had gone down and he was making his way home. He looked at his eyes in the rear view mirror, the lines on his forehead more visible than they had ever been. He lived close to the university that he dropped out of thirty years ago. He drove past it often - a reminder of a life he could have had. He was supposed to be a teacher and help his mother move out of the coloured townships and into a nice house, nessie wit mense, like the white people, she would say. She always said that and she laughed, with a cough at the end as she slapped her knee. That was a long time ago. He often thought of the past, but he always made sure he snapped out of it soon enough. No time for that, he thought.

And then he saw her, the young lady walking down the street. He slowed the car. What do you think you are doing, he thought to himself as he idled down the main road. She had a plastic shopping bag and was probably on her way home from the Pick 'n Pay. Student life, he thought. He hardly had a taste of it before the riots and state of emergency and all that. Now he was a contractor. Men like him are not supposed to look at girls walking down the streets going home to their flats. Jissus she was beautiful though, he thought as he stopped at the intersection and she crossed the road. She ran across and as she walked under a street light, he got a better view. A thick, brown coat and black pantyhose and not much else. He

shook his head and laughed. These kids of today. But that's how Chalita used to dress. When they were young themselves and fell in love. They were free. When they had dreams and hopes and she thought that things were still decent and they were going to have a double story and everything will be...

Green light. She was almost out of sight when he saw her up ahead again as he pulled away. Before he could even see what shoes she had on, the young man came out of nowhere, probably a side street, looked around to check for witnesses and pulled out a knife. Shit, thought Hendrick, he wants to rob her. He pulled away and shifted to second gear faster than the bakkie usually would allow. The intersection proved to be too big and the young man too fast. His expert hands got the young lady's handbag and she was bent over with her plastic shopping bag on the ground.

He pulled up on the curb and caught a glimpse of the man running down one of the side streets. He got out and ran over to her.

"Are you ok?" he asked.

"Took my phone." she said looking up. "Just took it!" She stomped her foot.

"Uhm... Are you ok?" he asked again.

"You already asked me that. Do I look ok?" she said, in one breath. He finally got a good look at her. Short, she had skin like the dark chocolate Chalita liked. Chalita, his wife who seemed to spend more time at the casino than she did at home. But this girl's skin was absolutely perfect. He couldn't help but notice how even and clean it was. Her beanie fell off her head and she reached down to get it as he gathered the few things in her bag that fell out.

"Let me take you home," he said and pointed at the bakkie that still had one wheel perched on the pavement.

“Er... I don’t know about that,” she said. “I don’t live too far from here. I’ll be ok,” she said as she placed the beanie back on her head. She reached for the bag and took it from him.

“Thank you though,” she said and tried to flash a smile. It was forced, he could tell.

“Are you sure sure?” he asked. She laughed this time. It was not a laugh of happiness, he could tell. She just wanted to get out of there.

“This is not the first time I’ve been robbed, mister. I’ll be fine,” she said. She walked away back down the street. He watched her until she was out of sight. He drove away, keeping his eyes to the left, hoping to see her. She was gone.

\* \* \*

Chalita was already up by the time Hendrick woke. It was the morning after he has seen the girl for the first time and all night long she had spoken to him in his dreams, like a bird visiting at the window pane. He knew by now not to disturb this morning routine. When he would try to give his wife a squeeze from behind or a peck on the cheek, she would tense up and say “Nie nou nie, Hendrik,” not now, through gritted teeth, although it never seemed to happen later either. In fact, it hardly happened anymore. He would drive around aimlessly just thinking about where he went wrong. That was what went through his head as he saw the sliver of his wife as she stood in the bathroom adjacent to their bed. He listened to the hairspray shushing his thoughts and watched her lean in and out to the mirror.

She sat down in front of the mirror, ready to do her make-up, and wondered. When the sadness turned to anger, is where it all went wrong. She grew to hate him. He was just another man to her now. Like those who hurt her; those who abandoned her. All she saw when she looked at him was them. All she felt was the hurt. He was trying, God knows she

saw that. But whatever he did, never seemed to be enough for her. He was not enough for her. They both knew it.

“You have to take me to the casino again later,” she said as she walked past him. “I’m meeting Linda there and it’s the draw tonight,” she said as she searched through her bag for a lighter, still not looking at him.

“So don’t come home too late, ok?” She walked out.

“Just drop the boys and hurry back,” she said.

The boys in question were fully grown men. They gathered on the street corners every morning looking for work. Work from other men. They were fast becoming a South African trademark, or blemish. Cheap labour readily available, like fruit vendors, or whores. Waiting, with a finger outstretched and pointed at the sky as every car drove past. Most ignored the men; they were in fact Hendrick’s workers. He knew which corner the few who worked for him stood at, and they were always grateful to see him. Chalita kept her eyes on the road as he drove her to the train station, and held her bag tight, even in the car. Her mother always said that Cape Town is a dangerous place, not fit for a girl like her.

The working class, it has a certain smell, Chalita thought to herself as she entered the station. These blacks. You can almost taste it. Never has this been more apparent for Chalita than the morning train to work. The job that she hated almost as much as the man she resented for not taking her to work in the city every morning. She almost held her breath as the masses shoved themselves into the carriages. The morning train was the worst part of her day. She resented having to pay extra for the “Plus” portion of the ticket, when she didn’t see any benefits to go with it. She hated the smell and carried a bottle of hand sanitizer at all times. She went into Clicks more often to buy a bottle of germ killer than anything else. It’s

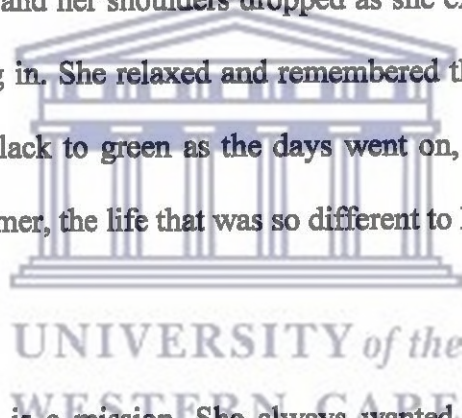
amazing how the weather would change as the train got closer to the city, Chalita thought. It would either get colder, and the sky darker, or much hotter. Chalita always carried a cardigan, just in case.

She would meet Mari at the station to get on the first carriage. It was emptier than the others because most of the ticket checkers got on there. The ride home was worse because she finished earlier than Mari and often had to brave the masses by herself. The train arrived ten minutes late as she rolled her eyes. Where is this country going? she thought. She always thought this as she held her bag tight and navigated the streets of the CBD to get to work and back to the train at 3:45pm, her eyes moving quickly over the faces in the streets. She flopped down on the padded seats of what used to be called "first class" and waited for the train to go. She heard a faint singing in the distance as two small children walked through the carriage, the backdrop of dirty train windows and graffiti on the seats and carriage walls. They stepped through the doors connecting the creaky carriages and walked past the people ignoring them, shrugging their shoulders to indicate "no money" or just waited for them to get the hint and pass. She recognised the tune now. The kids, one supposedly blind, and the other leading, rattled their can with the coins as they sang the monotonous drawl "sweelosweecherriot. Carryforthe carrymehooome" they mumbled the tune over and over, shaking the can. They probably heard it outside some pub during a rugby game, not even sure what they were singing. For some reason they stopped next to her. Chalita had not realised that they were right next to her. They had stopped singing and were waiting for a response from her. She felt a finger poke her arm and the young boy say "auntie auntie change change money for the shelter?" Caught off guard, she jumped up.

"Don't you touch me!" she said, and before she could stop herself her hand flew up and she slapped the little boy, sending him stumbling backwards. It was a quick backhand, not with all her force, but enough to make him gasp. He rebounded quickly, grabbed the little girl by



the arm and dragged her out of the stationary train before any more attention was drawn to them. Chalita looked at her shaking hand, and then sat down. She looked back out of the window, but saw a figure out of the corner of her eye, a woman seated opposite her. Who does she think she is, looking at me like that, Chalita thought. She looked back out the window at the train station, a few people walking around. Chalita became conscious of how tense her shoulders were and eased back into the seat. Only God can judge me, she thought, like her ouma always said. She took a breath and leaned back slightly, gripping her bag again. She stared at her reflection in the train window. Her face was there in portions, lit occasionally by the light from the stationary train next to it. She looked at her face and thought of her youth. She took a deep breath and closed her eyes. Her hands relaxed slightly around the handle of her bag and her shoulders dropped as she exhaled. She felt at ease with the other commuters trickling in. She relaxed and remembered the mountains of home, how the light turned them from black to green as the days went on, the river running clear and singing with the frogs in summer, the life that was so different to how it was now.



The road to Bergsfontein is a mission. She always wanted to get out. But the road is terrible. Gravel, the last stretch with the worst potholes she would ever see. Sometimes she even had to get out of the car and fill the potholes with sand and stones so her grandfather could drive on.

When Chalita was at Sunday school, she went on a trip to Lambertsbaai. She was so excited. That's where she saw the ocean for the first time. She was 8 or 9. She remembered that it went on forever and ever and ever wondering where the end was (she always wondered when it would ever end. It never did). That's when she knew she wanted to leave. She wanted to get out of this place, she thought. She didn't know any better, but she knew she wanted

more. She wanted to see the ocean, to live by it, and to watch it go on forever. She would lay on her back, watching the sun rise, her eyes not moving as a new day started.

Chalita returned home during the June and December holidays. Every child who was good enough at school was sent to Paarl or Malmesbury to go to high school. She was one of the lucky ones. Under the old government, if they showed promise in a skill, they could study further in it. Chalita was going to be a nurse.

Bergsfontein was safe back then. High in the mountains, there was everything they needed. The river, mountains, farmlands, they had no reason to leave, her grandpa would always say. “Die Here het alles vir ons voorgesien”, he would say, reminding them how God had provided everything that they needed. The town even had its own fire brigade and burial service. They never had to leave for anything.

That December, a 14 year old Chalita returned home and breathed in fresh air. Clean air. She was at ease again. She did not have to worry about the other girls and faffing over their hair and what the boys at the other school thought of them, or what new dress they wanted. She was comfortable being barefoot and lying by the river for hours.

Before it got too late, she got up and walked home along the grass of the gravel road. The dust, always rising up, always following her and coating everything in its chalky taste. Her grandma had already started the fire for supper. She could see the smoke from down the path. The houses, all white painted mud huts, lined the way home. The mountains looked down in the not too far distance.

“Naand sê tjind.” said her grandma, greeting her. Chalita knew that she had her usual chores to do, and that her grandma was lenient only because it was her first day back home. Chalita smiled and went to the back to help her grandpa with the rest of the meal. There were

pumpkins and potatoes that were kept on the roof and the goats and sheep were in the kraals in the back. Their “backyard” was not really a yard, but the wilderness of Bergsfontein, with the animals roaming freely. She remembered how they would chase the chickens, watching them fly only as high as they could, and then gone before they were caught.

In the summer, especially hot ones like this, Chalita would help them cut and empty the pumpkins. They were left to dry and filled with water which was kept cool by the makeshift bowl. There was never quiet. The donkeys, horses and sheep in the back would make a noise in the day, and at night there were crickets and mice outside, creaking and scratching. But they felt like part of the family.

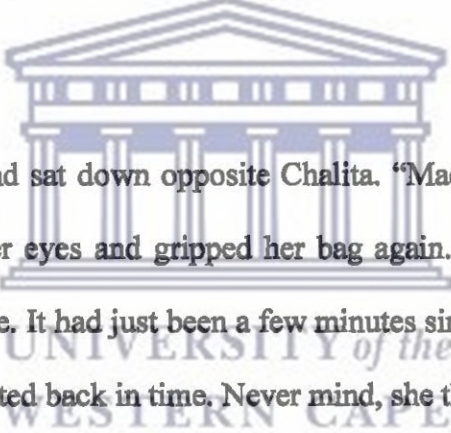
Chalita kicked off her shoes, the velskoene, and jumped on her bed. She looked out the window and saw nothing. She missed looking out and seeing nothing but the stars. The next morning Chalita spent the morning cleaning. The floors covered with beesmis, cattle dung mixed with water that was spread over the floor. It kept the dust away. Always fighting with the dust. After it dried, she went out and left the floor to dry. Her knees were brown and wet, so she went to the river and washed her skirt.

Back home Chalita dusted the house and wiped down all the cups and plates. She didn't mind cleaning their small house, but it always seemed to take forever. But Chalita made sure she never complained.

The hike up the mountain was a tradition. To go up and look down at the town and everything around it was what every child looked forward to. They would stay up there all day. The high altitude of Bergsfontein already made you feel like you were in heaven, but to go up that mountain was something extra special. The name of the mountain was Spitzkop. They used to climb to the top and make a fire there with friends. There was a house behind the mountain that was used by the missionaries many years ago. It was used occasionally by

the pastor when the congregation wanted to go on a retreat. People in Bergsfontein were always reminded that they didn't need anything else, because everything they needed was right there. Sometimes when they went up the mountain, and if people were in the house, then they would go there for supper before it got too dark.

The town was closed off to outsiders. The Moravian outpost did not allow any behavior that would tarnish the reputation of town, or religion. Every year, rugby teams from neighbouring towns would play a friendly tournament. This year, Bergsfontein hosted it. Because she didn't really care much for rugby, she didn't even notice that their town had a few extra people, and some activity. The men who played in the matches drove in on bakkies, played their games and then slept in the hostels on the outskirts of town.



Mari arrived in the train and sat down opposite Chalita. "Made it," she said in her usual perky tone. Chalita opened her eyes and gripped her bag again. She felt like she had been asleep, and for a very long time. It had just been a few minutes since the two children ran off, but it felt like she was transported back in time. Never mind, she thought, forget that.

"Things are really heating up, hey?" she said to Mari as the train pulled away, trying to not show how shaken she was. "Kaapse weer, it's more confused than a menopausal woman."

"When last did we have a pool party?" asked Mari.

"Ag wanneer las? I'm so busy with work and you and your hubby are always out and about. No time for us little folk in the suburb." said Chalita.

"Hai nee man," said Mari to her friend, half laughing. "I'm just really happy," she said, stroking her ring, admiring it. Chalita looked down at her friend's wedding ring. Her face tightened, the same way it did when she stepped in dog shit, or saw a man pissing on the side

of the road, then it relaxed and her shoulders slumped. She turned and looked out the window as the train trudged on. She tuned out the blurry world passing by and as her eyes regained focus, she saw her droopy face and vacant eyes in the translucent reflection of the window.

“Let’s do it,” she said as she turned to Mari. The voice sounded chirpy, but her face didn’t smile like her voice was trying to.

“Tomorrow then, a Saturday braai, like the good old days,” she smiled again and turned her face back to the passing world outside.

\* \* \*

Saturday morning, 9am. The day of Chalita’s braai with Mari. In another part of Cape Town, Xolisa is taking the taxi to Bellville station. She is sick of her weave. She needs the change. After her phone was stolen, she went to Bellville station and got a cheap, second hand phone at one of the many cellphone vendors. She figured that she might as well get her hair done with the last of her money that her mother sent for the month. She wanted braids again. Yes, braids it is. Back home she never had to think about her hair. It was not a priority. But here people were judged for it, especially the other black girls. If she couldn’t do natural, then braids it is. Never relaxer though. No way! When she first came to Cape Town, the other girls on the rez would look at her hair. She soon realised that the residence on campus was a tricky place to be. She always knew that girls could be snakes, but fitting in had never been harder than it was at university. She was happy to have met Mike. He and his family had moved to Cape Town from Uganda. Even though she was granted a residence room, she spent a lot of her time with him, at his flat off the main road, a taxi and short walk away from campus.

So it was decided, today she was getting her braids. She liked the movement of them. The way they felt when they were loose and hanging down her back. They rustled; they almost reminded her of the sound of leaves. They felt good against her back, comforting. And of course, the men loved it. They enjoyed their girls looking like real African sis. Never mind the fact that Xolisa read everything she could get her hands on since she could read. These guys wanted their woman silent and pretty. She knew that she had a brain, so she didn't mind looking good, and being admired for it.

"Hi Chocolate!" screamed a taxi driver as she walked past. He was smoking a cigarette and eyeing everyone who risked walking past him. He leaned against the minibus and leaned on his right leg as she walked towards the train station with its stalls and shops.

"Excuse me? Uthini?" she stopped and raised her eyebrows as she leaned forward.

"How you, girl?" he said and moved forward, putting the cigarette to his lips, gripped with thumb and forefinger, the filter now dampened as he sucked on it, watching people walk by.

"Did you just call me that?" she asked, her handbag tightening round her shoulder as she got irritated at this man, but not waiting for an answer.

"Hayi hayi," she said as she clicked her tongue and walked on, angry at the man for flirting with her in that way. She believed that men could look, but touching and cat calling was not what she wanted, and she was not afraid to say it.

She rolled her eyes as the man swore at her and called her a stuck up bitch, not that she cared about the likes of him.

Braids weren't as bad as a weave, she found. Much better than relaxer, she repeated in her mind and consoled herself with the fact that the chemicals in relaxer were bad for you and that it was better to embrace a natural look. She rolled her eyes again and thought of the

endless debates about hair that she would have with friends since she was young, and how they had invaded her thoughts. She smiled to herself as the braids occupied the rest of her head, a snail crawl at the pace set by the stylist's hands. Xolisa sat in the stall, big enough for her and the hairstylist to fit in the plastic sheet casing with pictures of the types of braids and styles they could apparently do. Xolisa leaned her head forward as the hairstylist, her own hair in a state of half-braiding with one side still a combed-out afro with a comb stuck in the middle of it, the other side corn rows, pulled at Xolisa's head to get the tightest braids. They moved in unison, Xolisa, like other girls, careful to not resist for fear of getting their heads yanked back in the process.

She left there in pain with her head now throbbing, but happy with the results. She looked at herself in the windows of the taxis as she walked past them again. The taxi driver who shouted at her earlier did a double take as she walked by again. She was not fazed by him. She held on to her handbag and walked right by him and all the other drivers now ogling her even more than she was used to.

She stepped into the taxi headed back to campus and waited for it to fill up as the guardtjies shouted for customers, herding them in to the taxi. Xolisa sat by the window towards the middle of the van and half looked outside and also at her ghost reflection in the mirror. She would get lost staring out at the world like this as a child and still found herself doing it in the taxi, sometimes nearly missing her stop. She hopped off at the entrance to the university and made her way back to her room.

Getting robbed in Cape Town is a rite of passage. Outsiders soon discover this. Whether it's your car, home or self, people in Cape Town who do not prepare for this eventuality soon discover it. Xolisa felt the loss of her phone more than anything. Her lifeline to her hometown was now gone. The fancy phone with photos of her family and all her favourite songs was

gone in an instant. Her daily conversations with her mother were now cut short thanks to the man who took her phone that night. It was the second time she had experienced this. The first time, her first phone was also stolen from her. This one was bought by her mother before she left for Cape Town. Xolisa was not warned by anyone to not walk and talk. She later lied to her mother and told her that she had dropped the phone in the toilet. Her mother laughed and said that if it were not taped to her hand, she was not surprised that she lost the phone. But Xolisa could tell that her mother was sad. Not quite disappointed. And definitely not angry. Her mother was never angry. She loved and supported Xolisa in everything she set out to do. When she spoke to her on the coin phone on campus, she kept having to speak up and asked her mother to repeat herself. But Xolisa's mother never raised her voice. Now that she had a new, albeit crappy phone, she could at least receive calls and text her mom.

"Do you miss it?" asked her friend Mike.

"Huh? What?" Xolisa asked surprised at the question. "What are you talking about?"

"Home," said Mike, who was lying on the floor of his flat off Voortrekker road in Bellville.

"Oh. Home," she said. "You mean my hood?" she joked. Home was in the Eastern Cape. The land of no opportunities; at least to the people living there. The young ones itching to get out. The privileged few. She was one of those young people. Village girl, as she thought of herself when she first arrived in Cape Town, her mother warned her constantly of the loxion boys of the townships. She got here with stars in her eyes. Study, get a degree, get a good job, get a house and get a car. Get a brand new life. She had no idea that she would be lying on the floor of the flat of her friend, at the university that she dropped out of, trying to figure out what next to do with her life.



“I miss my grandmother’s cooking the most” she said to him. “A lot. Yhu! I don’t think I’ve had a decent meal since I’ve been here,” she said.

“I beg your pardon,” Mike said propping himself up on his elbows in a fake British accent.

“Haibo, you know what I mean,” she said, rolling her eyes and swatting her hand at him.

“Food feels like home. When I’m lonely, I can imagine it in my mouth, touching it. The smell. It’s like I can smell it right now,” she said, staring at the roof, and then closed her eyes to better imagine it.

“So what do you people eat over there?” he asked.

“Suka wena,” she said in mock anger. “Who you calling ‘you people’ you kwerekere?” she said and pointed at him. They both burst out laughing. They were the only people with whom they would make these kinds of jokes.

“Well, let me tell you!” she said and sat up. “Amagwinya, you know, vetkoek. Except its way better in EC,” she said rolling her eyes. “And steam bread,” she said as she now closed her eyes again.

“Oh oh and we always had the best tripe, but it had to be cleaned well or it was just yuck,” she said, her face pulled down to show her disgust.

“And, and...” she said snapping her fingers with her head tilted back, “the best samp and beans. Umnqusho,” she said as she rolled back onto her back and lay there.

He said nothing and watched her there on the floor.

“I miss my mommy,” she said, her eyes still closed.

“But I can’t go back. She would know that I didn’t fulfill the dream. They all depended on me, and look at me now. A drop out. Failure.”

“I’m sure you can re-apply for next year and still get your student loan,” said Mike.

“Dream on. Have you seen the news lately? Budget cuts and strikes all over the place. I really messed this one up. I don’t even know what I’m going to tell my mom. They barely have money for food back home. Hell, I barely have anything myself over here. Nearly everything is bought on credit, like phones that get stolen.”

They both sighed.

“What about you? Do you ever miss home? What did you eat back home?” Xolisa asked. She asked quickly and knew she was taking a chance. She and Mike had never spoken about his life growing up in Uganda. Mike and Xolisa grew up as outsiders in their respective countries. They met in a lecture hall in Cape Town and had been friends ever since.

“Oh I don’t remember much about that,” he said, looking down at his hands.

“So, would you ever go back?” she asked.

“No,” said Mike, looking at her.

It was her turn to find something on her hands to look at. Down the hall a mother screamed at her daughter to come inside. A police car sped past in the street below. The fluorescent light bulb hummed at them, and the old fridge groaned in the kitchen.

“You know what?” said Mike. “We’re going out.”

“What? No, Mike, we’re broke. We don’t have a lift. Tests. Assignments. Any of this sound familiar to you?” she said, rolling back onto her back looking at the ceiling.

But Mike was already up on his feet looking for something to wear.

“Never stopped us before, my dear,” he said.

“Now up you get. We have things to shake off and we’re not getting any younger,” he said.

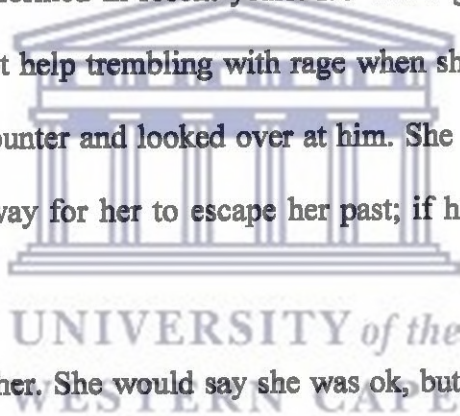
Xolisa laughed and listened to what her friend was telling her. We’ll make a plan, she thought.

\* \* \*

That same day, as Xolisa got her hair done and she and Mike got ready to go out, Chalita woke up as usual and after getting up she went to the bathroom. She always went to the mirror first, still sleepy, last night’s dreams hanging in her mind like mountain fog. The mirror. She always had to look. She couldn’t help herself, as though the previous night’s dreams which were often difficult and unhappy could be read on her face like rain water streaks on a dirty window. But this morning instead of just her face, she looked at her body too. She grabbed her belly, the light layer of flab that had formed over the years just sitting there. She grabbed at it, and then let it go. She grabbed it again, this time harder and squeezing tighter, then let it go. She grabbed again, digging her nails in. She leaned forward, looking at her face. She dug her nails in and her face scrunched up in pain. Her face turned red and she started moaning. She looked down and gasped when she saw the red marks. She slammed her fists down on the sink and leaned forward, her eyes closed. She jumped in the shower and stood there under the lukewarm spray, her eyes closed, trying to forget the world. She chose her black one-piece that she got especially at Woolies for the day, with a sarong for her lower half.

“Hurry up,” she barked at Hendrick as she walked past him, still in bed.

Hendrick, not looking forward to the day, inched his way out of bed and took a shower. He started the fire and she sighed in the kitchen. The men braai and the women make the salads. That's how it's always been, even though she hated it. None of them questioned it. Chalita would have preferred lying on a beach, or by the pool, not doing anything. It is what she imagined when they first started dating, and after they married and she moved to Cape Town from Bergsfontein. She had imagined her life would be different from what it was now. Now she hated her life, she thought as the noodles overcooked. She ran over to the pot, nearly spilling her glass of wine which she gulped down and drained the boiling water in the sink. She slammed the pot down as she watched Hendrick wave the black smoke out of his face as he struggled to get the fire going. He still had his hair, and strong arms. He wasn't too fat, except for the boep that had formed in recent years. He was a good man, she thought, and good to her, but she could not help trembling with rage when she looked at him over there. She rested her arms on the counter and looked over at him. She wondered if she ever really loved him; if he was just a way for her to escape her past; if he was really just like every other man out there.



Her face always betrayed her. She would say she was ok, but the head cocked, eyebrows raised and pursed lips always told Hendrick how she really felt. She downed the rest of her red wine and threw together the salad. She got the rest of the things from the Pick 'n Pay bag and made the noodle salad and the potato salad. Never as good as his mother's, she thought. Why do I even bother? Even though Hendrick never said this to her, she always believed that she was never as good as he wanted her to be. She looked at the glass of wine as she cut the potatoes with a limp wrist. She scooped out half a jar of mayo and the yellow of the egg crumbled like soil as she cut that into the bowl too. Stir stir stir en klaar as she pushed the bowl to the side. Done.

They were gathered round the fire, talking, and the men with their tall glasses of beer. They took a deep gulp and held the glass up every so often and admired their drinks. Sweat beaded on their brows and they wiped the droplets off with their forearms as they turned the meat over as soon as it got too dark. The women were sitting close by, by the pool, just standing on the steps and sipping on their glasses of red -- a Shiraz or something, not that Chalita cared what it was anymore. Hendrick and Karl talking about the match. It was aimless conversation, the kind of talk from two men who become unwitting friends through their wives. It was rugby. Yes, they were talking about the latest rugby match and how the captain is a good-for-nothing and how the inclusion of that latest player was such an obviously political move and how the government should just stay out of sport.

“Otherwise they would probably have to fill out an application form just to score a try,” said Karl and gave a halfhearted chuckle at his attempt at a joke. Hendrick laughed, more at the attempt than the joke.

The women were still standing uncomfortably in the shallow recesses of the pool.

“The garden is looking good,” said Mari.

“Thanks,” said Chalita.

“It’s the least he can do, right?” she said.

“Things not going so good?” she asked.

“Ag it’s oraaait. Could always be better, right?” said Chalita and sipped on her wine again.

Mari’s body was looking exceptional, noted Chalita. She had a good tan and was toned. Her breasts were higher than Chalita’s and her arms were even and strong. She wore that leopard print bikini that she always wore that made Chalita joke that she looked like she

should be in a jungle, not on the beach. But now it was causing more discontent in her than ever before. It was not even that long ago that the four of them used to sing at karaoke and do drunken versions of ABBA songs. The one about money, and Waterloo and when it was that one about a man after midnight, Chalita would look over at Henry and meet his gaze across the pub. She had eyes for only him and sang that song directly to him. They would stumble out and she would whisper in his ear, "Take me Henry. Now." No place was sacred after midnight when they would go out. When they wanted each other, there was no stopping them. In the beginning it was still bearable for her and she thought that maybe he would be the man for her, the one who would save her from her past. But it never happened that way. Now she stared at him, with anything but love.

"What have you two got planned for your vacation this year?" she asked Mari.

"Ag nothing special," said Mari, smiling at Karl as he and Hendrick went on with the braai, sports conversation and beer admiration.

"Oh just tell me," said Chalita.

"Well..." she started, looking at Chalita, excited and at the same time almost apprehensive, "Karl booked us two weeks in Thailand. We're going to Phuket," she said. It burst out of her lips and she gave an overexcited smile like a little child.

Chalita forced a smile and said, "Ooh lekker ne. You guys are fancy" and took another sip of her red. At this point her face was starting to turn red too and she had forgotten about her sarong. She held it loosely and the rest of it swam around her like an oil spill close to her body.

"Shame, Karl and I have been working out every day trying to get in shape," said Mari.

“Apparently all the tourists go there and we don’t want to look like beached whales,” she said and giggled, holding her hand to her mouth.

Chalita did her best not to roll her eyes and looked over at the men. There he was, having a ball of a time, while she was miserable, pretending to enjoy hearing about how amazing Mari and Karl had it.

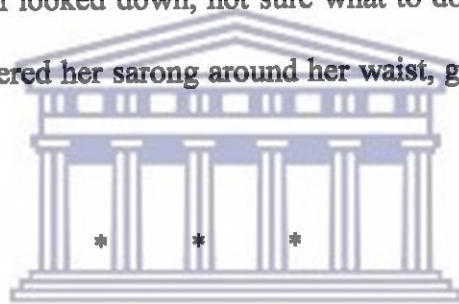
“Henry...” she called to him. He looked up, raised his eyebrows and scrunched his nose as if to say “What’s wrong?” She smiled at him and cocked her head, calling him over. Mari now sat on the edge of the pool with her feet in the water, moving them around like lazy fish, watching the water swirl. Hendrick went over to Chalita and leaned over to her and said, “Yes skat?” She parted her lips and took a breath, waiting for him to come even closer. She looked out of the corner of her eye at Mari sitting on the edge of the pool and checked if she was listening. When she was certain that Mari was in her own world, she turned her head towards Henry and whispered, “Why don’t you go put on your Speedo? You haven’t worn it in ages. I wouldn’t mind seeing that sexy body again” and smiled, looking at the water. His ears prickled and his eyes were two headlights as she caught him off guard with her flirtation. It felt like old times when she used to sit on the beach and watch him for hours as he swam, while she tanned. When the water was still clean, as she always said in recent years. They no longer bothered with the beach. She always had a problem with all the people and said that it was safer at home. Those people are like animals, messing it up for the rest of us, she would say. Why can’t they just act decent? she thought.

He went inside, excited at the prospect of inciting some form of interest in his wife again. He came out in his swimwear that used to get his wife so eager about his strong, tanned body. He dove in the water as Karl and Mari both looked up from where they were, and then went back to what they were doing. He came up with a smile on his face on the shallow end, a few

metres from where Chalita was sitting. She looked at him with a look of disgust, the water cutting his body in half at the belly button, the slightest hint of the beginnings of a bald patch now exposed. She pursed her lips, which broke into a smile, then a full blown laugh.

“Look at you,” she said in between giggles. “Look at your body,” she went on. “You look like a fool. Like a hippo,” she said bent over, enjoying her joke a little too much as Hendrick waded over to the edge, got out and grabbed his towel. She was still laughing as he walked past her, his droplets just grazing her as he left; her face getting a darker shade of blush as the sun and wine did their magic on her.

When she stopped laughing, she realised that her voice was the only one left. She was laughing alone. Mari and Karl looked down, not sure what to do with their eyes. She drank the rest of her wine. She gathered her sarong around her waist, grabbed a towel off the deck chair and went inside.



8pm. Hendrick walks into the bar somewhere down the middle of Voortrekker Road. He didn't care where he was going; all the places looked the same to him anyway. He knew that he had to get out of that house. Escape. There was some match on. Again, he didn't care. He usually knew all the details and would sit himself down in front of the TV well before a game started. That's if he was not at a braai with other men, but that became increasingly rare over the years. Like every young person, he once had plans layed out for his life, but more importantly, he had friends. Ever since a decade ago, they seemed to grow apart and he and Chalita seemed to spend miserable hours together, or solitary hours alone, and less time with their loved ones.



So he walked into this bar, its windows darkened from the inside, a fluorescent light above the entrance which would come in handy later when the younger crowd came in. Like most of the bars and pubs here, this one had a small dance floor, big screen TVs playing music videos (but tonight the rugby), pool tables and a few small slot machines. Something for everyone. He sat down at the bar and looked at himself in the mirror. The young man at the bar turned to Hendrick, hit the counter and asked "... can I get you, Sir?" and Hendrick settled on a Black Label. He drank it in big lazy gulps, not sipping and savouring like he normally would. He stared at himself in the mirror, looking up at the screen every now and then to check the score and see what the fuss was about.

"You not a supporter, huh, Sir?" asked the bartender. The man looked like a young version of Hendrick, but better looking and with a lot more energy than he could ever remember having. When Hendrick glanced at himself in the mirror again, he noticed how slumped his shoulders were and wondered if that's how he always looked. Rolling them up and back and straightening his spine felt like a considerable effort when he realised how he had been slouching.

"Nah my boy, not today," he told the bartender.

"Can I get you anything else?" he asked.

"Let me try a Stella," said Hendrick, looking at the dispenser in front of him. "First time for everything, hey?" he said.

"Yes, there is," said the bartender, smiled and got Hendrick his drink.

Later that evening, still on the same seat, but another Stella, a Hansa, a Castle and other draughts to his credit, Hendrick felt the weight of the day evaporating off his shoulders. It

was the almost-forgotten, but always familiar feeling of drunkenness. People seemed friendlier and approachable, and he just felt at ease.

When he turned around and saw her, was when he felt the breath being sucked out of him. Dark skin, long braids, perfect complexion, gorgeous. He was sure it was her. The music seemed to slow down, but only to him. He saw her hips moving, braids swinging, ever so slowly. They barely appeared to move. Her eyes were closed, head tossed back to every other beat. She had a light layer of sweat on her face. It was even, not a single drop out of place. A part of him wished that their eyes met at the same time. That would have made the story so much better, he thought later that night, and it's how he chose to remember it. But he stared at her while she was dancing, and he was drinking, and she never glanced his way. Only when the song changed and she screamed as she recognised it and jumped around, probably one of her favourites, then she looked up. She pushed her braids back and frowned as she looked at the man in the distance at the bar.

"I can't believe it's him," she said.

"What?" Mike shouted at her, not sure if she was speaking to him or just singing to the song they were dancing to.

"I'll be right back," she said and walked away.

"What?" shouted Mike again, closing his eyes and dancing to the music.

She walked over to the man who was smiling at her. She was not exactly sure what she was doing. She didn't even know his name; just that he was the guy who helped her that night. Or rather, he tried to. When she got close to him, he stood up. As she put her hand up ready to say hello and shake his hand, he went for a hug and they ended up in a half embrace as she conceded and leaned in with her left shoulder, Hendrick rubbing it like a friend.

Hendrick laughed, not sure where to put his hands after their hug had ended. He was not even sure what to say to her.

“How are you?” he said, trying to not sound too excited, but also not sure why he should be excited to see the young lady. Xolisa nodded her head at the question and said “Fine. I’m fine. How have you been?”

“Good, good,” Hendrick said, and nodded his head.

Xolisa also nodded her head, looking at Hendrick, wondering if he would say anything.

“Thanks again for the other night,” she said.

“No, no, it’s nothing. Glad I could help,” Hendrick said, stumbling over his words.

“I’m Xolisa, by the way,” she said and extended her hand. Her shoulders were hunched and he couldn’t help but marvel at how cute she looked.

“We never officially met that night,” she said. Hendrick, as upset as he was earlier, mostly knew how to handle his liquor, but wished he weren’t drunk.

“But you can call me Lisa. Most people get the click wrong. The X always throws them off.”

“Hello Xolisa. Hendrick,” he said and they just smiled at each other.

“Hey that wasn’t too bad. Are you sure you’re not Xhosa?” she said, but still not smiling.

“Well, I get a little practice every now and then,” he said with a laugh.

As he was about to offer to buy her a drink, Mike came running up behind her.

“Where did you go? You missed our song!” he said, hugging her from behind.

“Geez can you calm down, man?” she said, shrugging him off. “Mike, this is Hendrick, the guy I told you about?”

“Aah, the knight in a shining bakkie who came in the night?” said Mike, and did a half curtsy and extended his hand. Hendrick smiled and shook Mike’s hand.

He was amused by the pair as Mike pulled Xolisa to one side and they started speaking animatedly.

“Ok ok, I’ll see you there in a bit,” she said as Mike ran off again to the dance floor.

“He doesn’t get out much,” she said, and laughed. Hendrick smiled at her and how annoyed she was with Mike, rolling her eyes at him. He missed what he was feeling at that moment. To just forget and not to feel empty inside. He had not even realised how much he enjoyed being out of the house.

“Do you want to talk outside?” he asked. “I can’t hear a thing in here.”

Hendrick was not thinking. He was not thinking about how this might have been wrong; how this girl might catch on how he felt about her, that he was acting like a teenager; how he really enjoyed her company even though they had just officially met; how she was the most beautiful person he had seen; how he had not thought that of Chalita in a while.

“Ok,” she said after looking around at Mike whose eye she caught to signal she was ok, then back at Hendrick.

Outside, Hendrick and Xolisa stood a few metres away from the entrance where the bouncer was patting the people down, checking for drugs or weapons - men who came to watch the game, others who just wanted a beer and to shoot pool, and also the young ones who came to dance and drink.

“How have you been since you were... Since I saw you last?” he asked.

“Since I was robbed, you mean?” she said, and looked him in the eye. “I’ve been ok. Studies keeping me busy and, just life, you know.”

Hendrick did know. Life had been keeping him busy. He had fallen into routine, patterns that he did not even consider anymore. It was only when she was standing in front of him that he thought about what his life had become. His mind kept drifting off and imagining himself with this girl – driving with her and holding her hand, giving her a hug and feeling her body up against his, smelling her hair, seeing the way it moved when she danced, the long braids twirling and flying around as she moved.

“Where are you from?” he asked.

“Excuse me?” she said, frowning, not realising how abrupt it may have sounded.

“I’m sorry, that was personal,” he said, and looked down.

She looked at him looking at his feet. A police van drove by, and a group of young people were walking down the road across from where they were standing. A young man threw his bag from the Steers in the bin and without hesitation, one of the bergies standing outside walked over and grabbed it. They were like seagulls, the homeless, thought Hendrick; they couldn’t let a single crumb pass them by or someone else would snap it up.

“Well, I’m staying on rez, but home is in the Eastern Cape,” she said.

He looked at her. She seemed so alive, so young and electric. Groups of people walked past, the men looking at her, checking her out, while the women gave her the bottom to top stare-down so common with young women, always competing. Xolisa didn’t pay them any attention. She’s looking at only me, he thought.

“We should be getting back soon. Mike has had too much to drink, and you know that always leads to trouble,” she said.

“Yes, I know all about that,” he said.

“Any chance we could bother you for a lift?” she said, looking up at him, raising her eyebrows.

“No problem,” he said, returning her smile.

After a few more songs on the dance floor, Mike, tired and drunk, Xolisa and Hendrick all drove back down the road. With the exception of Hendrick’s occasional polite small talk, Xolisa and Hendrick were quiet, with Mike babbling, even more talkative than usual thanks to his inability to say no to a drink.

Well past the hour for visitors to enter the campus, Hendrick dropped them at the entrance for students. Mike stumbled out of the car and walked towards the gate. She laughed as they watched him stagger, scratching in his pocket for his student card.

“Hey Mike, I got your access card with me,” said Xolisa.

“Yes, yes. Ok,” he said, looking over at the car where her voice came from.

“Will you two be ok?” asked Hendrick.

“Yes, we’ll be fine,” she said, looking at him in the light of the moon and the dim light from her open door. “Thank you again,” she said.

“You too,” he said. They smiled at each other, and would later wonder what would have broken the gaze had Mike not screamed “Lisa, I need to pee!”

Before he even had a chance to notice, she took his phone from the cup holder by the gear stick and entered her number. She didn't look at him as she climbed out of the car, leaving Hendrick in a flash of light as she opened the door, and then only moonlight, and caught up with Mike. As they entered the campus, she looked back at Hendrick reversing. Through the fence, as she and Mike walked down the path that occasionally left them in darkness between lamps, she saw that Hendrick was waiting for them to be out of sight.

"Why didn't we just go to my place? It's closer!" said Mike, as he held on to Xolisa's arm, leading him back to her room.

"Because we have a new friend now, Mike," she said. "I want him to know where to find me."

"You could have just told him," said Mike.

"I know," said Xolisa. "I know."



Hendrick and Xolisa spent every day of the following week together. Their routine was simple; Hendrick would pick up Xolisa, usually at campus, and they would go for a drive. They spoke and spoke, and sometimes he laughed. He actually laughed. He enjoyed laughing again. He had forgotten what it was like to look at a woman and have a decent conversation without the expectation of a fight, or being criticised.

He still played the good husband and boss. He dropped Chalita at the station to go to work, picked up the men on the corners of streets who would be his day labourers, and took them to work. He would measure, saw, cut, screw, hammer and oversee the men carrying counters and wooden beams and all the other components that make up his work. He would consult with the clients and check if everything was according to their tastes and

requirements. He would get lunch for the men, the boys. Usually chip rolls, or a vienna gatsby. He would phone around for better deals on the materials. But always he was thinking of her. Her dark skin, and long braids, and perfect everything. Her face was in front of him, he could see it clearly. Her eyes, a little sleepy when she wasn't in the mood to talk, but that was seldom. Her laugh that rolled like waves and the way she would throw her head back, then recoil and become demure and coy the next instant. He didn't know how to describe it, he didn't know why. He just knew that this girl was on his mind and he couldn't stop himself.

“Jammer Lita,” he apologised, realising too late that he hadn't called her by her nickname in years. She was blaming him for running late. She had just made it for her train to work. The fighting became background noise to him as he thought more about Xolisa (only later realising that their nicknames were so similar) and drowned out Chalita.

They used to call each other Henry and Lita, or even Hennie. Sometimes he called her Charlie, or Chilli. They used to laugh together. They would look at each other as they walked past one another. Now they just walked past each other. At family events they used to dance. Every New Year's eve, they would go out and dress up and langarm dance like the big people used to do back home when she was growing up. Chalita used to wait until New Year's Eve and watch, with a smile on her face, and an occasional clap of her hands, as the adults got close to each other and swayed and moved across the floor of the community center. She dreamed that one day she would find someone, like all the big people, to dance with. They met soon after high school. They were so full of hope in a time when there was not much going around. Hendrick was going to be a teacher. Chalita went against her parent's wishes to be a nurse, a safe reliable job. She didn't want to be a teacher either. She wanted money. But back then she only had eyes for her Hennie. She was the most beautiful person he had ever seen. When they were together, he made her forget her past, especially the pain from her childhood.



“I’m here” read the text message he sent to her. It was the same message that Hendrick sent to Xolisa when he was outside the university gates where he first dropped her off after the night he had met her again at the bar.

Xolisa would come running down the path. He would smile when he saw her through the fence, the diamond-shaped linked metal covering her body in his sight, tiny at first then getting bigger until she was passed through the gates and safely into his car. He looked forward to seeing her smile, especially knowing that he had something to do with it.

He drove down the road, but not alone like he was used to. He felt like he was drifting along, but the city felt a little more pure with her by his side. He looked at the shops that lined the road as it stretched out before them. He marveled at how things had changed since he grew up, when he would run these same streets with his friends. He hardly recognised them anymore even though he had been living here all his life. He turned his head as he drove down and looked at the used car dealerships and fast food outlets. The Somali women covered, with only their faces exposed, looking like ghosts from behind. When he drove past, he would check his rear view mirror to make sure they still had faces. Hendrick always felt silly for believing his superstitions. He didn’t share that one with Xolisa. Not yet at least.

Sometimes they would just go for a drive, never too far, because he had to get home in time to pick up Chalita. So they usually only had about two or three hours together. Today, after the pleasantries of catching up with how classes (she kept it short as she did not want to tell him yet that she had not been to a class for the last few weeks) and his work were, they sat in silence as they drove down the long, black road that extended before them. But Hendrick felt at ease and comfortable. He would often get upset and clench his fists as the taxis would stop without warning. But now, even when they did that, he slowed down and

went around them, shaking his head as Xolisa, not even paying attention to the taxis, glanced over at him, smiling.

As they drove, he noticed the cars slowing down ahead of him. When they got closer, it was a crowd of men, jumping around, singing and dancing. But they were angry. No longer content to stand on street corners waiting for a baas to pick them up and give them some money for cheap labour. No, they were standing in solidarity with their brothers who were killed by the police. Hendrick hated slowing down at the scene of an accident, and hated it even more when other drivers did it, but he caught glimpses of a few of the men who were protesting as he drove by. Black faces, white teeth, sweating profusely and frowning, bringing their eyes closer together.

“What’s happening here?” she asked, looking out of the window.

“Strike, probably illegal. That’s the office of the union,” he said. “Did you hear what happened at that mine up north?” he said.

“No. I’m not very up to date with my news,” she said.

“Police firing on people striking. People are very upset. You can’t keep pushing someone for too long before they break under pressure,” he said. “The other unions are also getting angrier.”

Once they had passed the crowd of protesters, they found a place to buy food. Xolisa liked chicken, so they would usually get that, or fish and chips. Today was chicken, and a side of chips. He drove a bit further on and parked in the parking lot of a mall. He stayed on the far end so as not to be disturbed by onlookers. They shared the white box of chicken in the sauce that she loved. He had a few chips, but he most enjoyed watching her clean the meat off the

bones and dip the chips in the sauce. He smiled as she licked her fingers clean, clearly enjoying her meal.

“I swear, next time it’s on me,” she said as they shared a bottle of Coke, with two straws bobbing in the bottle.

Hendrick just laughed and told her not to worry.

“No really, I’m more than just a poor student, you know,” she said with more seriousness than he was used to from her.

“Ok,” he said.

“What, you don’t believe me?” she asked.

“Lisa, of course I believe you,” he said. “I don’t care about things like that. I just enjoy spending time with you and don’t want you to worry about anything.”

She looked at him, frowning. His eyebrows were raised, his eyes waiting for a reply.

“Hendrick, what are we doing here?” she asked. “I’ve seen you so often, and we haven’t even kissed.”

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“No need to be,” she said “I just want to know what’s happening between us.”

They sat in silence for a few minutes, the occasional car breaking it, as they sat back in their seats.

“Well, I know you have a wife. Right?” she said, looking back at him.

He turned his eyes to meet hers and was shocked, but also relieved that she had said the inevitable.

“How?” he asked.

“Lucky guess?” she said.

“A guy your age. The perfume I can still smell in here. It’s not something I would wear. What’s her name?” she asked.

“Lisa...” he said.

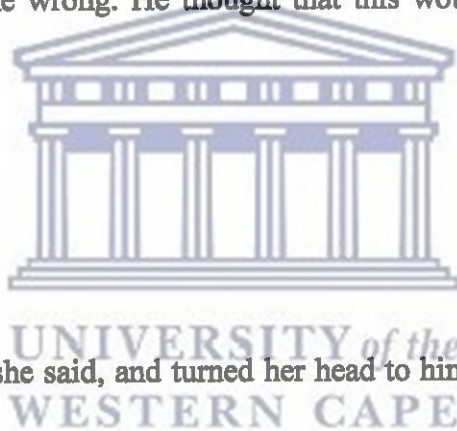
“Oh, too personal? It’s cool,” she said. The silence again.

“Things aren’t so good. I like you. I like spending time with you,” he said, in even, paced sentences. He always spoke in a slow and careful way, especially when Chalita called him out on something he had done wrong. He thought that this would have been one of those times.

“Ok,” she said.

“Ok?” he asked.

“Yes, it’s fine. For now,” she said, and turned her head to him, the beginnings of a smile growing on her face again.



## Part Two

Hendrick had not heard from Xolisa in two days. After their conversation in the parking lot, when she had exposed him as married, things between them had changed. Her text messages weren't as regular. His phone, usually used for business, and for when Chalita would call to hear how far he was when she needed something, had been flooded with messages which he was sure to delete as soon as they came him. They were simple messages thanking him for spending time with her, or just wishing him a good day. The fact that she had not sent one had him worried, but he also felt that she was upset, that he had done or said something wrong, but that he did not want to provoke her. Not sure about what to do, he told Chalita that there was a match on, and that he was going to the pub to watch it. He had not done that since he walked out of the braai; the same night that he met Xolisa. And before that he did not watch a game at a place other than their home unless she was with him, and could spend time with the women in the group. But Chalita did not think too much of it. She nodded her head without much care, not even looking up from the magazine she was reading.

He left and drove towards the university, but he told himself otherwise. Go back, he said to himself, and Hendrick turned around and drove towards the bar. Their bar – his and Xolisa's. He also passed the site where they had first met, when her phone was stolen, which he always turned to when he drove by. Even though she could have been hurt, he was grateful that it happened. He would not have met her otherwise.

Voortrekker Road was the usual mix of people on the streets; police vans with the spinning blue lights, the young crowds walking to whichever of the bars or pool halls would let them in, the cafes open until midnight or later selling groceries, cigarettes and lotto tickets, car dealerships, long after closing hours but lit up displaying the cars, the restaurants, like

Fatima's Take-Aways or Real African Cuisine offering solace to the weary late night revelers. Hendrick drove past all of them looking for Xolisa.

That was the night he walked into the bar where he first spotted her; mellow music, not the dance stuff that they played later in the night, but lots of smoke and a few people playing pool and watching TV on the big screens. The bouncer did not mind him like he did the younger crowd who came in. He nodded at Hendrick, who he knew was there for a beer, and not to cause trouble. As soon as Hendrick walked in, he saw her at the bar. She was not alone.

\* \* \*

The man smelled her before he got a better look at her face as the midriff walked towards him and became a full person. Coconut oil, a slight smell of sweat, men's cologne as she stepped into the car, and there she was. Beautiful. The dark of the night did her no justice as the car's light highlighted what was before him. She smiled without showing her teeth.

"I'm Stefan," he said with an extended hand. She looked at the hand, then back at him, then over her right shoulder at the road.

"I think you better drive mister, unless you want us both to get in trouble," she said. The reality of what he was doing hit him, although not hard enough to ask her to leave and go home. He drove on, but not too far to escape what he had been doing. He parked at the back end of the local high school and turned off the car. He sat there, in his car parked under the trees looking into the darkness where the school was, turning his head every so often to look at the girl. Lady. Young lady. He decided on young lady, that was what she was.

"So, are we going to do this or not?" she asked, breaking through the silence of the dark. He could make out her features as they were illuminated by the soft light of the moon.

“Do what?” he asked. If only he could see the look on her face as he spoke those words; an even mixture of shock, anger and revulsion.

“I don’t have time to waste mister,” she said, “if you don’t want to do anything then take me back to my spot.” She was upset, and maybe a little scared from the way her voice was shaking.

“Or I’ll just walk, I don’t care” she said and opened the door.

“No, no. I’m sorry,” he said. “It’s just, I, I saw you and you looked so, so, how do I say it,” he stammered. Her arms were now crossed and her eyebrow raised in suspicion, but she was not as tense as before.

“Mister if you’re just gonna talk then you still have to pay for services rendered. Ok?” she said, cutting him off.

“Of course, of course,” he said, and smiled. Beamed at her. She smiled again, a tiny parting of teeth now showing. She turned her face from him, and unclasped her arms. It was slow and deliberate. She knew how to play this one. She sat there in silence, waiting. She was waiting for him.

“So where are you from?” he asked.

“Nothing personal mister,” she said. “You can talk all you want but you can’t ask me stuff. Ok?” she said, getting a vigorous nod of the head from him.

“Yes, yes, sure, ok. I understand. Completely,” he said. Her smile grew a bit bigger and she slowly dropped her hands to her lap.

“You look nervous,” she said. She was playing a role. She knew that she had to do this. This was not her. This is not me, she thought.

“Well, I mean wouldn’t you be?” he asked looking straight ahead.

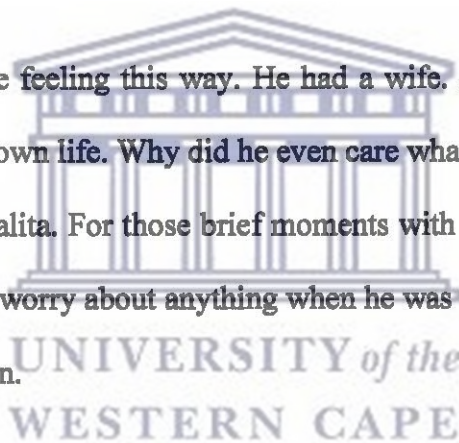
“Tell you what, why don’t we go for a drink first?” she said. “I know a place nearby.”

\* \* \*

Hendrick approached slowly, knowing what he would find. And he saw it. The truth. The girl, or woman, he thought he loved, with some other man. En ‘n wit ou, a white man, some guy he couldn’t compete with. He was everything that Hendrick wasn’t.

They were there in the dark, the moonlight illuminating them just enough for him to get a glimpse of her lying there in the night, her skirt pulled up. She did not even seem to care that she was alone with this stranger.

He was not supposed to be feeling this way. He had a wife. A full time job, family and friends, a life of his own. His own life. Why did he even care what she did? Or was it because she was not his wife? Not Chalita. For those brief moments with her he could forget his life, and just be. He didn’t have to worry about anything when he was with her. And here she was, giving herself away to this man.



Hendrick left. He moved backwards into the dark from where he came and vowed to forget. But he knew he couldn’t. He couldn’t go back to his life, not after seeing her there like that. Xolisa. His Lisa. His girl. The one for whom he would have given it all up.

The moonlight followed him to his car and he left, trying to not imagine the sound, smell and sight must have been as she was with that man.

\* \* \*

“Where were you?” Mike asked Xolisa as she walked into his flat. She had her own key and he told her was welcome there at any time. Mike, whose parents both worked, didn’t



qualify for financial aid. They made just enough to support him and his three brothers, but he had to tutor on campus to make ends meet for himself.

“Out,” she said.

“Where?”

“Rha, mind your own business wena,” she said, and walked to the bathroom. Mike knew by now when to dig deeper and when to let it go. He knew that this was a time when he was meant to dig, but he knew she would not allow him. He stared at her back as she walked into the bathroom, then at the door as he listened.

She turned on the shower, undressed and got it as hot as she possibly could without burning. The water ran over her in sheets, washing away another night. She forced her eyes open and back into the real world. She wrapped a towel around her body.

“You know I’m here for you, right?” he said.

She just nodded her head and sat down on the couch, looking at him sitting at his desk, studying.

“I know,” she said. “Thanks.”

“Wanna order a pizza?” she asked.

“Can’t. I’m broke,” he said.

“It’s cool, I got it,” she said and reached into her bag.

“Rich, are we then?” he said. “Things going better for your mom?” he asked.

“Sort of,” she said. “Now let’s order. When the money is there, we eat!”

\* \* \*

After he saw her in the car with the man, Hendrick left and went home. He was not sure what he felt. Defeated, humiliated, embarrassed? Definitely angry, but why? He still did not understand that. How? These questions ran through his head constantly for the next two days. Work became nearly impossible. He sat and watched the men work, then drove them later.

The next day he got home and Chalita had cooked the usual chicken and potatoes. She was out -- the casino again. When she first started going, they called it Casino Kos, casino food; quick and easy to prepare, not that there was much preparation, after work to leave her enough time to catch the train. That's if she did not go directly after work. It helped her relax, she said. Losing herself in the machines and the lights. Hendrick thought it was senseless. But Chalita believed in the hope that she would one day win, that things would change. That she would have a better life than the one she had at the moment. Hendrick didn't know what his life had become. He didn't know how to explain it. There was no one to talk to. He had tried giving Chalita everything, just to make her happy and to see her smile. The smile seemed like it was gone forever. Now it seemed like Xolisa was gone too. Probably for the best. He hardly knew her. The girl he thought he knew, well, she wasn't that. She couldn't have felt much for him if at the first hurdle she just went with the first man who offered her a drink. He had been a fool. An old fool chasing young dreams. No, better to forget everything about her.

Chalita was walking around the casino, with its red carpeting and the endless noise of the machines ting-a-linging over and over, no light filtering in from outside. When she was there, she was happy. Hendrick knew it. That is why he had brought her here. An attempt to make things right.

\* \* \*

Chalita looked at the flashing lights of the slot machines. The lights came and went, but they always came back, like the memories she left behind, except in the casino she could

forget for a while. She walked up and down the aisles of red and gold carpeting. If this were someone's house she would be sneering at how tacky the carpet was. The windowless room felt smaller and there appeared to be fewer people. She looked down at her feet as she walked; they seemed like they were bare. Chalita smiled. She probably had one too many brandy and cokes, she thought. Nothing was quite what it seemed – it could have been any time of the day in the casino. Her mind wandered back to home, when she was young. The days blended into one another like that – sunrise, sunset, sunrise and the sun would set on the hamlet close to heaven. She would later notice that in Cape Town it didn't shine as brightly. Even at the beach. Life was never as good as it was when she was a little girl. Maybe it was for some people, but right now, for fourteen year old Lita, nothing else mattered but the sunrise and the sunset.

It was 1974 when she was 12 and home for the holidays again. The neighbouring towns, from over the mountains, sent their boys for a friendly tournament. Chalita didn't take notice of them. Rugby was never her game. The tournament took place every year, and this was the year that Bergsfontein was the host.

Chalita preferred long walks in the bushes, and their annual hikes up the mountain. Her cousin Ronnie, who always doted on her, was the only one available to join this time around. As she walked to the shop down the dusty road, she noticed some of the young men laughing and joking on the corner close by. She bought the usual cans of food – baked beans and corned beef. Her grandma gave her the beans, and she would take some bread with her up the mountain.

One of the men, who was tall and fair, and speaking loudly to his friends waved at her and said "Hello". Chalita took no notice of him and walked on.

“Wees versigtig my tjind,” said her grandmother to her as she left. She didn’t think anything of her grandmother’s warning to be careful until later on.

Chalita and her cousin Ronnie hiked up the mountain, which was more hill than anything. They made the fire, cooked their beans and Ronnie got excited when she took out the loaf of bread that Chalita’s grandma had made earlier that day. It was still fresh and he clapped his hands as she pulled a piece off and gave it to him. They looked at the stars and rubbed their hands together as they held them over the fire, watching the sparks pop and jump out.

They came out of nowhere. That’s what she would tell herself later. But they were probably watching them the whole time and followed them up the hill. Or they were just drinking nearby. She was never sure.

“Naand sê, mense,” said one of the men, as they greeted Chalita and Ronnie.

They froze as the three men appeared. Chalita looked at Ronnie and could tell he was scared too.

The men walked around Chalita and Ronnie and looked over at the fire, food and at them.

“What’s this then?” said one of the men.

He leaned down next to Chalita. They had been drinking and the smell made her turn up her nose and look away. He was the same man who greeted her earlier that day at the shop.

“Shy hey?” he said as he leaned down next to Chalita.

“Don’t be. We’re just friendly guys,” he said.

The other were standing and watching him.

“What’s your name?” he said to her as he eyed her up and down.

Chalita stared straight ahead. She didn't take her eyes off of the fire. She could tell Ronnie was uncomfortable. She knew that they were trouble and wished that they would leave. She wanted to be at the river, looking at the sky. She wanted to talk to Ronnie and ask him how school was for him. He was a year younger than her and would go to high school the following year. She wanted to tell him that everything would be ok.

When she felt a hand on her leg, she realised she was still there at the fire with these men. She gasped and swatted his hand away.

"Hey! We're trying to be nice," he said and grabbed her face in his hand.

She looked into his eyes and saw something she did not like. They looked tired. His face was dark and the fire flashed over it every so often. He kept his hand on her face, under her chin, a little tighter than before and his other hand was back on her thigh.

That was when Ronnie tried to run, but the two men were too fast for him.

The hand moved further up Chalita's thigh as the man kept his eyes fixed on hers. She wanted to look away, but he was too strong. She closed her eyes as he pushed her down. The men took turns holding Ronnie down, but he stopped fighting when one of them said they would kill him if he moved again. Chalita lay on the ground, the third man on top of her. She didn't move either. In her mind she was back at the river, looking at the lazy clouds and wishing she could fly all the way up there and sit on them, and look down at the world.

The third man tied his belt and warned Chalita and Ronnie to not say anything or they would come back and kill them both, and their families. The men left and Chalita and Ronnie stared at the fire. It died eventually as the red-orange turned to dusty grey, with the sun coming up behind them.

Not a word was said between them about what had happened as they walked back home. Chalita made Ronnie swear to never tell, and said it was just something that happened. She told him that she was ok, that she would be ok.

After that, her life drifted in and out of time. Her mind would wander and she would get distracted, as she tried to forget what had happened that night on the mountain. She worked hard and left Bergsfontein soon after school.

It was 1985 when she met Hendrick. Chalita had moved to Cape Town and stayed with her aunt. It was far from the dusty roads of Bergsfontein.

She could not recall a time when she felt shy like that. She looked down when they shook hands. He liked that she was a lady. Her hair was pulled back and she wore a beige cardigan with her long skirt. She had a smile unlike the other girls at church. He wanted to look at her – to stare at her – but that wouldn't be right, he thought.

It was 1992 when the bump first showed. Hendrick could not have been prouder. He couldn't stop rubbing her belly and listening for a kick. Chalita smiled when he did that. She looked down at his head, the curly mass of hair moving around, listening for life.

Chalita sat up at night, looking at Hendrick and wondered why he couldn't tell she was not happy. She looked down at the bump, not yet big enough to make her feel uncomfortable, but big enough to scare her when she thought of all the pregnancies she had seen growing up and how big women got. She would cross her arms and look down at the growing bump and frown. One night the bleeding started and would not stop.

It was that year when the life left her; when she started hating herself. Chalita slid her card, always loaded with money, into the slot machine. She pulled the lever and watched the dials spin.

\* \* \*

Hendrick went to the bathroom and leaned on the sink, his arms locked and leaning forward. Chalita was still at the machines. He had heard stories about these places. How they sold adult nappies so gamblers wouldn't have to leave the tables to go to the toilets. It was the gamblers who asked for them. He hadn't believed it until he had seen them in the casino shop with his own eyes. Hendrick turned his head left, and right, and looked at his skin. His eyes. His beard. The grey was starting to come through more and more, and unlike Chalita, he didn't cover his. But he had to get to a barber, he thought. Maybe that would help. Maybe that would help him forget. Unlike his friends, his skin was good. For his age. For a man in his fifties, Hendrick would admire himself, but only for those few minutes when he brushed his teeth and splashed his face. Then he would realise how silly it was, and forgot all about it. But he wanted to forget; he needed to.

He went back to the bar and ordered some wine. He didn't really like wine like Chalita did, but he drank it anyway. He took a sip and held up the glass to admire it, like he would have done with a beer. Savouring the flavor. This always annoyed Chalita who rolled her eyes, or just looked away when he did this. He looked at the wine, and held the glass closer to his face. The world on the other side was now a dark, red almost purple colour, and then it was gone as he emptied the glass in one gulp and pulled the sides of his lips back and cleared his throat. He did not see what Chalita saw in this stuff, he thought. But before he even realised, the bottle was empty. He called the bartender over. The casino was still noisy. Active. Like termites in a hill. It was always like this in here. People didn't seem to care whether it was day or night so long as they could gamble.

The bartender came and Hendrick chose a brandy, 10 year old. It was expensive but what did it matter? What did anything matter? All around him people were pissing their money

down the toilet, feeding it into slots machines like wood into a wood chipper. He shut his eyes. His head spun. He opened his eyes as wide as they would go and shook his head.

The bottle of brandy arrived and the bar tender poured a glass. Hendrick sat back in his chair, and sipped the brandy. He took a mouthful and put the glass down. He sat forward, with his head in his hands and rubbed his head.

“Ruk jousef reg Hendrick,” he said out loud, urging himself to get it together. He was not a boy anymore; hadn’t been for a couple of decades. He had no reason to be acting this way.

Then his phone rang.

They drove home in their usual silence, the world buzzing around them. Back at home, Hendrick got out and kicked the tires, testing their pressure. He told Chalita he was going to the garage to fill them up and to check the oil and water, to save time in the morning, he said. But instead of turning left down the main road, he turned right, toward the university.

“I missed you,” said Xolisa as she hopped into the bakkie later that night. “Are you ok, Hennie?” she asked.

He just grinned. She eyed him and then stared straight ahead.

“How have you been?” she asked.

“Ag oraait,” he said “Just tired, working.”

They got fish and chips and sat in a parking lot again, further down the street where they parked the last time. They ate in silence and did not look at each other. She looked at him when he looked down, and he did the same.



“My second name is Sinethemba,” she said.

“Huh, what now?” he said, surprised.

“My mother couldn’t decide. She thought it was nice,” she said.

“Oh,” said Hendrick.

“Now quick, you tell me something, before the awkward silence comes back,” she said.

He looked at her, and they both burst out laughing.

“Well, I missed you too,” he said. She clicked her tongue and waved her hand at him.

“That doesn’t count,” she said, and looked at him again, “but it is sweet”.

Hendrick looked straight ahead into the darkness of the parking lot, broken occasionally by the spotlights high overhead. He smiled, trying to forget what he had seen the other day, Xolisa and some strange man, alone and in a car. But he couldn’t. He didn’t know what he was feeling. He wanted to punch the steering wheel and wanted to scream until his lungs burned. He wanted to lay her down and stare into her eyes and tell her how much he wanted to protect her, but at the same time grab her by the shoulders and shake her. He was hurt, that he knew, but still felt giddy just being with her.

“Nice of you to buy us food. Did you get a job?” he said.

She cleared her throat, then swallowed the few chips she was chewing.

“Nah, my mom sent me some money,” she said. “So I thought I’d get it for a change.”

He turned to her, the soft light from the moon catching his smile at just the right spot.

“You know what, if we can’t be out all night, then we should at least go somewhere other than a parking lot,” she said.

“What do you mean?” he said.

“Nothing fancy. Just somewhere we can sit and at least be alone,” she said.

\* \* \*

She was spinning, spinning and spinning. She looked so free. Her braids were flying around her head as she was spinning. She flopped down on the bed next to him, still giggling. He smiled as her head lolled from side to side, watching the roof spin too and try to catch up with her eyes. She crawled closer to him as the giggles subsided.

They had decided on the F1 Motel. Hendrick decided he would just say that there was a game on at the pub. Any pub. Chalita didn't care, never asked questions.

Now Hendrick and Xolisa were finally alone. They both had the usual number of butterflies, and both from nervousness and excitement. Hendrick, in his mind at least, didn't care who saw him. He was with Xolisa. It was their time tonight.

“Soen Hennie,” she said, asking for a kiss, her eyes looking up at him. Her hands rubbed his belly as she crawled further up, to meet his kiss. They had a few drinks, just enough to loosen up without getting too drunk.

He waited for her and watched her, expressionless as her long braids tickled his body. The hair, like light fingers, inched their way up his chest as she moved towards him. Slow and deliberate. She leaned down, their lips so close that he could smell the wine on her breath. Sweet, fragrant and pink. His eyes closed, he smelled her getting ever closer. As their lips were about to meet, he said it.

“I can't.”

She waited a few seconds. He could still feel her breath, but it was warm and odourless. No wine smell. It was coming out of her nose now in long steady breaths. He opened his eyes and saw that her eyes were still closed, she was still breathing. She was still crouched over him, her arms locked, her eyes now scrunched tight.

“What do you mean?” she said. “You can’t.”

“I just. I don’t know, Lisa please,” he said and noticed she was trembling.

“Please what, Hendrick?” she said. She opened her eyes and sat up and started moving off of him.

“Please tell me what you would like,” she said as she got up off the bed and moved towards the small seat in the corner.

“Please tell me what it is I should be, seeing as you’re not this kind of guy. You’re going to look after me and protect me and do things for me and you can’t even kiss me!” she said, now raising her voice. She was walking up and down the small room, not looking at him.

“So please tell me exactly what it is I should be, Hendrick! You seem to know best! I wonder if your little wife is even the bad one here! Maybe you’re the problem!” she said, pointing at him, clucking her tongue in frustration and turning away from him, her hair following suit as it swung around.

With this, Hendrick’s face dropped and lost its colour. She said the one thing that she knew would hurt him. She stood there, still in her panty, braids hanging in her face, still fuming. His jaw had lost all tension as he stared at her.

“Are you going home, or must I drop you somewhere else?” he asked, clearing his throat.

They both got dressed and left the room. Hendrick took Xolisa back to campus, and he went home, to his wife and bed.

Later that night, as Hendrick and Chalita lay in the dark, both supposed to be asleep; she was sitting up, fidgeting. He eventually drifted off. Hou op peter, her mother would tell her to sit still through gritted teeth whenever Chalita would tug at her dress or play with the pony tails that Chalita so hated. Her mother knew that she hated them on either side of her head, like two wayward branches maar dit lyk netjies so Lita her mother would convince her of how much neater it looked. She always had to be presentable, and taming the unruly hair was always a challenge for her mother. She would pull and tug at Chalita's head, the brush raking through her head, tears and hair balls forming.

Now she was petering again, fidgeting as she sat up and watched him lying there. Breathing in. And out. In, as she scratched at her skin. And out, as she worked the fingers of one hand over the others, like a guitar player would pick at the strings. It was the same nervous energy she had since childhood, boiling inside of her, always ready to come out at a moment's notice. He breathed in, and out, and he didn't even know she was sitting there right next to him.

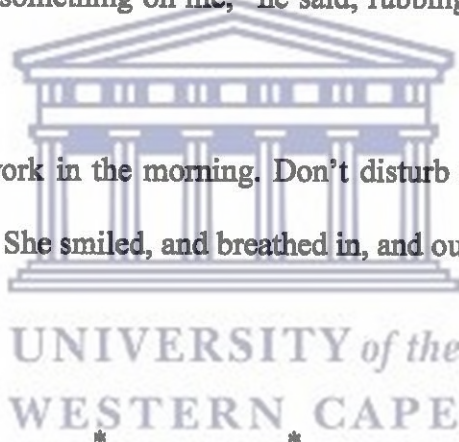
"You don't care, do you? Just like the rest of them," she said to his back. But Hendrick did not respond. He breathed in, and out. She watched his body as it moved as he slept, like big fat dog on a hot day, she thought. She reached out as if to touch him. She kept her hand close to his body and moved it up and down his arm and torso. She kept moving it, getting ever closer to touching him. She slumped back down from the seated position and turned her body, still moving her hand towards him. As she lay down, she scuttled her fingers on his neck and face, like a spider. He twitched. She smiled. She turned her body towards him, still

lying down and did the spider walk across his face, neck and shoulders again. This time he shuddered as she stifled a laugh. She pulled her hand back and kept it to her mouth, careful not to laugh, in case she woke him. When she was sure that she would not burst out laughing, she took the spider back to him and ran her hand, faster and with more force up his arm and back over his face and neck and even in his ear. She pulled back just in time as he sat up, slapping at his face and ear. Propped up on his right elbow, Hendrick stared at the wall in the dark then turned back and looked at his wife, breathing in and out. So calm and peaceful. She turned to him.

“You ok?” she asked, wiping the sleep from her eyes.

“Ja, sorry. I thought I felt something on me,” he said, rubbing his hand over his face and neck.

“Well you know I have work in the morning. Don’t disturb me again please,” she said, turning to face the wall again. She smiled, and breathed in, and out.



The next day Xolisa removed her hair. She sat in her room, undoing the braids that took so long to get in the first place. She frowned as she bent over the mirror on her bed, leaning against the wall. She clicked her tongue every so often as she got upset with herself once again for changing her hair so often. She tried undoing the braids faster than she did before, just for the sake of getting them out. She wanted to remove this part of her and start over. She mumbled to herself as she always did when she was deep in thought.

“All the same... you think you know me, don’t you... just when I thought he was different,” she said as she tugged at the braids and removed the hair.

When she was done, she rubbed her neck from craning over the small mirror. She didn’t have to, but she liked seeing herself transform as she changed her hair. She admired her new hairstyle in the mirror, and rubbed the kinks from the braids in her now small afro.

“Much better,” she said as she observed herself from all angles, running her hands through her hair.

\* \* \*

Chalita looked at herself in the mirror. This time her hair caught her eye. Her short bob was annoying her. She clawed at her shoulder-length hair, grabbing a handful and pulling it away from her scalp, inspecting the grey roots. She had the dye ready to cover up her roots; the open box, colour and conditioner and plastic gloves to begin the process. It wasn’t enough today. She didn’t just want red. She picked up a pair of scissors and held the open blades to a section of the hair she held now between her fore and middle fingers. “Nee Lita, jy kannie,” she admonished herself out loud in the mirror. Then she smiled. She cut, slow at first, and then she started snipping, her laugh surfacing breathlessly from her belly. After a few snips she even closed her eyes, delighting in the sound and feel of her hair disappearing beneath her fingers and caressing her cheeks as it fell over her face.

When she opened her eyes, Chalita gasped when she saw the uneven hair and loose ends standing upright. She smiled again, and knew that she had to get to the hairdresser immediately to fix it. But she liked it. A brand new me, she thought. She mixed the dye and shook the bottle. As she applied the dye and rubbed it in, she gave herself a nod.

\* \* \*

Xolisa sat on her bed looking out the window, like she always did, daydreaming. She felt the familiar pain grumbling from below. She knew she had to make a plan soon. She had to make many plans. She would not be able to keep her room on rez if she did not make a plan to get back into the system. She knew that she had brought shame to her family by dropping out. She held her hand to her stomach. It was not her time of the month, so it had to be the other pain.

Hunger. That word that followed Xolisa through her life. Her mother always told her that they had enough, but she wanted more. The hunger for life; the hunger for new ideas; the hunger for men; the hunger for a new life, it followed her from her home in the Eastern Cape. The hunger to know herself was the pain she felt the most. Xolisa, lying on her bed, stared at the ceiling, white with brown stains and the beginnings of mould, and felt the contemplation from her youth bubbling up again. She was the thinker, the loner, the one who sat at the back of the class. She just wanted to be left alone, but she just wanted to be loved. She rubbed her hands over her starving, aching belly, and then pressed a little harder when it started grumbling, to make the sound go away. She sighed and rolled over. She felt more alone than ever.

She looked over to the shelf where the canned food was, just above the two plate stove, next to the small fridge. She looked at the books and course readers on the shelf above the food and felt a sense of anger at how she had to negotiate between food and her education. She surveyed her stock; two cans of baked beans, one small can of tuna and a small bag of rice, folded over and kept in place with a hairpin.

Xolisa had to decide whether to fashion a meal out the few goods she had left, or wait it out and see how long she could stretch the periods between meals. She flopped down on her bed instead and looked up at the ceiling, hands above her head.

“What to do, what to do?” she said to herself.

She reached over and picked up her bag from the floor next to her bed. She got her purse out and checked what her situation was with regards to money. She had always hated how much she needed money to survive. And she hated what she had had to do to survive while in Cape Town.

“Not even enough to call home,” she said.

She threw the coins out onto the bed next to her and spread them out. She stacked them up, and when they got too high, she threw them over and spread them out again. Just as she got bored of this excuse for a game, her phone beeped.



Hendrick sent the text message to Xolisa. He was also transforming himself. He sat in the barber’s chair in the shed in the backyard of Mr. Davids. He had been Hendrick’s barber for most of his time in Cape Town. The shed, a makeshift structure, a little bigger than an outhouse, was big enough to hold three people; Mr. Davids, someone having their hair cut and the next person in line. The area around the shed usually had one or two other men from around the street waiting their turn, or just there to talk to others. Politics was always on the table, and Hendrick, either waiting or having his hair cut, sat on his own trying to drown out their noise.



Today, despite it being a Thursday, it was full. There were four other men waiting to get their hair cut. Mr. Davids, as usual, worked in silence, moving Hendrick's head in a commanding yet gentle way. The radio that hung on the corner of the mirror was reporting on the recent strike action. The men were all speaking about it too. Hendrick, trying his best not to make eye contact with anyone, kept his eyes down. He was especially grateful when Mr. Davids trimmed the back of his hair, and neck.

"Mister Davids gehoor?" said Ruben, one of the men standing outside, smoking a cigarette, asking if he'd also heard the news.

"Huh?" said Mr. Davids

"Hulle strike oor. Even here in Bellville, Mister Davids," said Ruben, gesturing broadly in the direction of where Bellville was, the main road with its constant noise and filth, about ten minutes away. They were striking everywhere. It was no longer a thing on the news.

"What do they expect with a government like this?" said Mr. Davids. "In the old days it was safer. Everyone had their space, and an opportunity. Us and them, we never had to mix," he said.

"Country's going to the dogs, neh," said Ruben.

The men were all agreeing with him.

Everything was coming to a head politically. Hendrick, even less interested in politics than ever despite the brewing trouble in South Africa, and Cape Town, had one person on his mind.

He looked different. New. Fresh. He felt cleaner, like a little weight had been shaved off his head and face. The mirror was a little spotty from the spray and shaving foam that Mr.

Davis, in typical barber style, splattered in tiny drops onto the mirror. Hendrick looked at himself, and for once he also saw the good side of himself. Not bad, he thought, and really believed it. Mr. Davids held his hands on Hendrick's head, rubbing in the styling gel, as if he were praying for him. As Mr. Davids brushed the rest of the loose hair off Hendrick's neck and head, he left feeling good, but still incomplete. It was her he missed. It was her that he loved. He had to see her. He took out his phone and called her. He didn't wait for a response to his message; he wanted to see her.



## Part Three

The glitter and shimmer of the street lights danced as he stared at the broken glass. Sparkles on a black road. Remnants of a fresh accident. No time to wonder about what had happened to the people involved, probably just hours before. He pulled away into first gear, already rolling forward waiting for the stream of cars ahead of him to subside and drove on, into the night, his wife in tears next to him. How did it come to this? he wondered as he looked over at her. He sped up as she was in a great amount of pain. As the cars went past him in the other direction, he looked at his eyes in the rear view mirror. They were dead. Lifeless. Something he had only heard of in story books, but there they were. Bloodshot and dark. Droopy. She was sobbing next to him and rocking. In one motion he could have snapped the wheel to the right and into the oncoming traffic. He could have ended the last month for the two of them and everything would have been over. He was close to doing it. His hands trembled, they were copying his lips. How did this happen? Why me? I deserved this. I did this. All my fault.

Hendrick woke up in a gasp, sweating. He looked over at Chalita, sleeping. He wiped his hand over his forehead, slow and hard and rubbed his hand over his head. She looked peaceful, like she always did. He looked over at the clock – 02:36 – it would be three hours until he would be awake before the alarm and pretend he was asleep so he wouldn't have to wake up to her.

\* \* \*

“Have you heard about all this protest action lately?” said Xolisa

“Yip. They are even striking on campus,” said Mike. “Solidarity with the unions.”

Xolisa sat on a chair, with Mike lying on the floor, his head on a thin pillow. They were fanning themselves with old magazines.

“It’s only a matter of time before they come for you; before they come for us,” he said. He looked past her, into the night.

“In my country, they came for us. People were killed and things went up in flames. Nothing ever stays the same, Lisa. There's always a change, a turn.”

She looked at him and waited for him to come back from wherever he was. But he was still far off, eyes glassy, staring straight ahead out of the window.

“Relief. There's always relief. Look at this weather. It can't go on for much longer. Too much heat and the opposite will happen,” he said.

“Do you miss home, Mike?” she asked. “Do you ever wish you could go back, to your life and the way things were?”

“Yes. Yes I do,” he said and turned his face back towards her, but his eyes took their time in returning their full gaze to Xolisa. “But my family is happy here. The parents work hard, my brothers fitting in well. They are even learning Xhosa, for goodness sake,” he said, and they laughed together.

“I just don’t get how black people can kill other black people, just for being foreigners,” he said.

“I know,” she said.

Xolisa didn’t have any answers. She just thought about how grateful she was to know her friend, and how alone she would have been without him in her life. But she missed him too, her Hendrick. She missed what they were. How close they used to be.

She thought about him often. Every day, in fact. She couldn't help herself. She would be staring out of a window, watching the world go by, and see his face. She wanted him to herself, not to share him with someone else. She didn't want to be just the girl on the side anymore.

"So," she said, trying to lighten the mood, "what are the plans for next year? Still going to travel the world when you get your degree?"

"Oh, I'm trying to not think that far ahead," he said. "What about you?"

"Eish I don't know," she said, looking at her phone in her hand. She had agreed to see Hendrick the next morning. She was undecided about him, about them, about her future about everything really. She wanted to stay in Cape Town, but missed her family back home. She was a drop-out at the age of nineteen, and had no idea how she was going to take care of that situation. She was in love with a married man, coloured, older. And she needed to make money, and she couldn't keep doing what she had been doing. She knew she was smarter than that. But what else?

"Lisa," said Mike. "Zoliswa!" he said in a loud exaggerated voice, mocking the way the white lecturers would butcher her name.

"Nxa," she clucked her tongue at him, smiling, and shooed her hand at him.

"You know I've got your back, right?" he said. "Don't forget that."

"Hayi!" she said, sitting up, looking at him, surprised "What's wrong now?"

"Nothing. I'm just saying, I do. Whatever you're going through, whatever you got going on, I'm here for you. I know things aren't going the way you wanted them to, but it will be ok. And I'm here."

He was still staring out into the night, cars speeding by below, coming to a stop at the red robot. They always sped off again when it changed green. A police siren sounded. The blue lights making a brief appearance down below, and then it was gone. Two homeless people were fighting over something, drunk, slurring and tugging for something precious only to them. Probably a bottle. The decay of the city coming out in the night. They were fighting in front of Adult World, the yellow storefront and sign in red lights framing the two bergies, an anti-postcard. Mike's cheap flat off Voortrekker Road always provided an endless amount of noise, if not entertainment from the street down below.

"Thank you my friend. That means a lot to me," she said.

They sat in silence. She waited a few seconds so that he wouldn't see her reaching up to her face and wiping the tear from her left eye. It mixed with the sweat on her face. She wiped it away and wiped her forehead too, and ran her hands through her afro.

She needed to change. She couldn't live like this anymore.

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The logo of the University of the Western Cape, featuring a classical building facade with columns and a pediment.

\*UNIVERSITY of the  
WESTERN CAPE

It was the first time he had seen her without her braids. It was the first time she had seen him with his new haircut. Xolisa had asked to see Hendrick again. She missed him and she knew that he missed her too. Not being with each other was just stupid, she was convinced of this.

"Don't go. Don't even go back. Stay with me. I can make you happy," she said, holding his hand.

They were sitting in his bakkie in a parking lot, not far from where they had first met – that night when her phone was stolen and Hendrick "saved" her.

“Come on, I know it’s been a few weeks only, but this could be it for us. The country is going to the dogs. Think about it, your last day alive, would you rather spend it with me, or with her? Come on,” she said.

She moved up closer to him, her chest at eye level with him. She rubbed her hips up against him and wrapped her hand around his neck, feeling the lower traces of his hair. Razor sharp straight edges after his haircut. Straight, the line from his eyes to the necklace, the jewel nestled in her bosom, the glint in his eyes in the moonlight. Straight down was the cleavage in her top. His eyes met hers once more.

“I know,” he said.

“You know? What?” she said.

“What you’ve been doing. With other men,” he said and looked out the window.

“Hen...” she said and reached over to touch his hand.

“I saw you. I know everything. If you want me, it stops today,” he said, looking at her.

“Yes. Yes. I’ll stop,” she said and looked past him at the world outside.

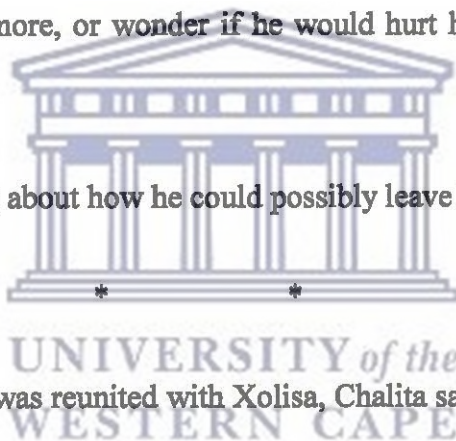
“I’m sorry,” she said, and looked down, her hands rolling over themselves and rubbing in circles.

“Fine. But it stops today, ok?” he said. They looked at each other, faces blank, Xolisa wondering if he was still angry. His face softened and his smile grew, ever so slightly.

She smiled back and they kissed. Their lips met and it was everything that they ever wanted. It was the kiss that Chalita never gave him, soft and slow, innocent and gentle. For her it was the opposite of the way boys would do it. They were rough and only kissed to get to her body. She lowered herself onto him and their hearts met. She was convinced they were

beating in time, the way she would read about in stories, or see in movies. Every beat matched at the same time. But they were not. He was thinking about how he would explain this to his wife, because he knew this could not go on forever. Nothing lasts forever, as he was taught growing up. Xolisa was thinking how lucky she finally was. She thought back to how boys would take her out, and eventually put their hands up her skirt. They would get what they wanted and not call again. They would take a little part of her and not give it back. She wanted more. She always wanted more, but would never get it. Sleeping with men for money had become her way of not only getting some money, but getting back her power. She hated herself for it, but it was something that she thought of as necessary. She was thinking about how he had come at the right time in her life, to take her away from all of this. She didn't have to be strong anymore, or wonder if he would hurt her. She was thinking about how blessed she was.

Hendrick was still thinking about how he could possibly leave his wife.



That evening as Hendrick was reunited with Xolisa, Chalita sat on her bed looking out the window, like she always did, daydreaming. She had already finished the bottle of red wine in the kitchen. She swayed as her vision blurred and the room moved before her eyes, back and forth. She closed them tight and opened them again, watching the tree sway before her through the lace curtain. She fell back onto the pillow behind her, with more force than was necessary, and looked up at the ceiling. She closed her eyes and felt the room spin all around her. She had always enjoyed that feeling. She let gravity pull her lips down into a smile and allowed her head to sway around on the soft pillow. She exhaled, emptying her lungs as she took delight as the room spun faster and faster all around her. She giggled. It was soft at first,



the usual start to her drunken laughter. Then she started laughing at full volume. Moving side to side, the room seemed to spin even faster.

And then it stopped. Chalita sat up, the smile on her face gone. She got up off the bed, the tree still swaying through the lace curtain. Chalita moved slowly, her hands kept out for balance. It was the early evening and the lights were not on, but the sun was setting enough to give the house a sense of darkness. She got to the kitchen and sat down. She looked at the bottle of wine in front of her.

Inhale, exhale. The curtain blows in and out. Floral, dull, indistinguishable blots of flowers. In... and out. Gentle, calming. Cool and careless. Then the cold.

Rainbow Crescent had a row of houses that each had gardens and lawns. Walking up the street with all these houses, each one was unique, yet the same. As one got to number 94, Hendrick and Chalita's white-painted home with the razor-sharp edged hedges and blue post box, there was a manicured lawn and path leading up to the door. Saturdays were spent trimming the lawn, being careful to clean up any last bit of grass left. The ladder was hauled out and the tops of the hibiscus bushes were pruned, as well as the hedges between the neighbours' properties. The paved driveway was hosed down, but only after everything got an equal yet liberal amount of sustenance. Everything here was neat and pretty. Everything was in place. From the outside, everything was just...

"Perfect, just perfect! It really was everything I thought it would be, and so much more," said Mari to Chalita. She had asked to see Chalita to tell her all about their holiday and show her the photos from their two weeks in paradise.

“And you know what, and then I realised that so much has happened in my life, and many situations I wish I could’ve changed or done differently,” said Mari, illustrating her story with her hands, eyes looking in the distance. “But then I thought that if I changed anything in my past, I wouldn’t be the person I am today. And I realised that I’m not lost and I’m not finding myself, I’m making myself, creating myself, shaping myself. It’s like all my “mistakes” or experiences shape me. And I’m going to continue shaping myself and not try to find myself, because I’m not lost. I’m here!”

Mari put down her glass and looked at Chalita, who was listening to her. Chalita could think of a million other places she would rather be than sitting in her kitchen, listening to Mari go on and on about her “two weeks of bliss in paradise” with her perfect husband Karl. You selfish bitch, thought Chalita. She imagined herself standing up and slapping Mari, throttling her, laughing as her friend struggled for breath. Can’t she see that I’m hurting? thought Chalita as Mari went on about perfect blue waters and friendly, welcoming people.

“Sounds lovely. Just lovely. So happy for you both,” said Chalita as she nodded her head.

“But enough about me,” said Mari “You still haven’t told me about you, and the new ’do. What made you cut your hair?”

“Not all of us can afford the holiday, so I had to go for the change,” said Chalita, deadpan.

Mari looked at her, then down, and tried to hide her discomfort. Chalita, realising that she went too far, laughed and said, “I’m just kidding. It was actually a dye job gone wrong, so I thought, why not?”

After Mari had left, Chalita stared at the bottle. She saw it all there -- her past, her former life, her childhood, the innocence. She saw the times she missed desperately, that she would have given anything to get back, but she always shoved it back to where she would forget whenever it threatened to appear. But most importantly, she saw herself. She saw her face in

the dark red bottle, not the best quality mirror by any means, but enough to clearly see the person staring into it. It was really her. Lita. She looked old. Her face sagged; she looked tired. Her mouth had a natural frown to it. Her lips razor sharp as she always kept them pursed, nervous and tense, lines forming around them, clearer every day. She could not remember when this happened to her. She smiled; a fake one just to remind herself how she looked when she did. She didn't like it. Her mouth went back to the frown, the grimace it always reverted to. She touched her hand to the frown line between her eyes. She rubbed the lines gently, then pressed and rubbed at them harder, as if that would erase the lines, and everything else. She picked up the bottle and walked over to the sink. She emptied it. She watched the red glug out and wind its way down the hole. There was a dull pop as the last glug of the wine left the bottle. She opened the tap and rinsed away all traces of the wine. The red was gone. She sat down again and looked at the bottle in her hand. She hardly saw herself now. She too was nearly gone.

