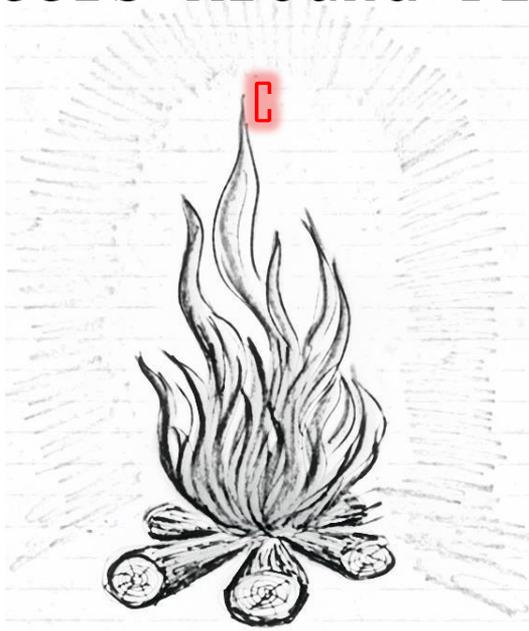


Letters Around Fire:



Stories by Njabulo Goba

Contents

The First Letter (Author's Hopes)

Granddad's forte

Diced People

The Code on Her Shoulder

Christian Lady Down

Fish-end China

Acknowledgements

The First Letter

(Author's hopes)

Dear Reader

I hope you wake up one day and realize that some of us aren't as smart and as fast and as confident and as liked and as whatever as you are, but we'll never stop trying.

I hope you wake up one day and realize that we know the rules, we know what we should and shouldn't do, but we've tried to follow those and failed so we created our own rules that we constantly change so we fail less, but we still fail more than you do.

I hope you wake up one day and realize that we don't say or do bad things because we're evil or crazy, we just want you to stop ignoring us; we just want you to know we're here.

I hope you wake up one day and realize that some of us, a few of us, don't want anything we don't deserve, but we're desperate for accolades on the little things we work hard on.

I hope you wake up one day and realize that I write the good stuff for me, to entertain myself with my unentertaining experiences, and the bad stuff for you, to try and make you think I'm more talented than I am.

I hope you wake up one day and realize that this is the good stuff, and enjoy it!

Sincerely yours

Me and others like me.

Forget each story before you read the next one or you'll confuse yourself.

Granddad's forte

Everyone except for me and grandma thought granddad was crazy; I thought he was funny and grandma thought he was a genius. He would sometimes write "Dear son, my memory is losing me, what are balls?" on the kitchen wall at dad's house with a permanent marker and when dad shouted at him, he'd knuckle up and try to box him. "Come on boy, if you can throw words like that at me, you can throw punches too, come on, let daddy whoop ya ass up like it's 88 all over again," granddad would say.

In 1988 when dad was 19 and had begun drinking, he came home drunk and got in an argument with grandma that ended with dad saying "fuck off" to grandma. When granddad returned from his book signing tour a week later, grandma told him what happened and granddad went to dad's room with a tray of eggs and came out with a swollen lip and a blue eye. "I thought it was just eggs being thrown around there but it turned out there had been a serious fight, your granddad had a swollen lip and a blue eye and we had to take your father to the hospital, in the words of your foulmouthed granddad, 'he was fucked up,'" grandma said. When I asked granddad about 88, he laughed and told me to never disrespect mom and then try to overpower dad when he tries to discipline me. "If you do that, I'm sure he'll fuck you up too, but not as much as I fucked him up, oh I almost killed that boy," granddad said. Granddad and grandma told the doctor exactly what happened and they say he said he'd have done the same too had his son disrespected his wife like that and then fought him when he tried to discipline him.

Though granddad annoyed mom and dad sometimes, they didn't want him and grandma to stay alone or at an old age home, they loved their company but dad sometimes claimed that he loved grandma and tolerated granddad.

One thing the whole family had in common is we all loved granddad's books; mom, dad and my twin sister had read all of them but me and grandma preferred to start a book and get the rest of the story from the horse's mouth, and granddad hated that

reference. "I hate horses and I hate mouths, except for mine and my lady's, and you call me both for giving you a summarized better version of a good story? Where's the gratitude?" he'd say. Granddad's favorite quote was the title of one of his books '*Live until you leave or die until you die,*' and in that book he said "Your body growing old is dying you can't run from, but your mind growing old is a slow death that doesn't catch up if you enjoy the little things like children do and cuss a lot."

My favorite book by granddad was '*My Forte,*' it was a true story about his relationship with grandma. He claimed that charming grandma was his forte and he'd do it even when he's dead. On the book, on grandma's first birthday after granddad had died, while she's watering her garden she sees a unicorn taking a shit and she just knows it's him. "From the moment we met, I've done everything I could to impress her but she's never as impressed as I want her to be," granddad said. "He said he wants me to be so impressed with him that I abandon my Christian beliefs and tattoo his name on my skin, I told him I won't do that until he goes to heaven and asks God for permission, and he promised he will," grandma said. Grandma loved *My Forte* too and she agreed that granddad's forte really was sweeping her off her feet; she said everything written on the book was true except for him dying and the unicorn defecating in her garden on her birthday.

Granddad died at age 82 when grandma was 79 and only dad cried at the funeral but later claimed that a fly flew into his eye. "I saw it, it was a big blue one, it was wearing a nice red belt," grandma said when I told her what dad said.

Everyone who had read *My Forte* waited for grandma's birthday, they all wanted to be where she was so they would see the unicorn, thousands of people. I doubt they believed there'd really be a unicorn but everyone just wanted to be there. They wanted her birthday to be a huge event at a stadium somewhere and air live in different channels and were willing to pay for all of that but dad denied, he wanted it to be a family thing. "Sweetie, these people loved your father, they love his work, these people love me, they love us, we have to at least allow them to watch from their homes," grandma said, and dad finally agreed to have a small camera crew in the house for the party.

The party was great, grandma had a lot of fun watching dad try to keep the few people who were invited to the party away from her; they wanted to hug, kiss and take pictures with her. To avoid fans flooding grandma with too many gifts, dad posted on granddad's blog that whoever wants to send her a birthday gift should donate to charity using her name.

Later in the afternoon, dad pushed grandma's chair to the garden and gave her a hosepipe. Everyone stood behind her quiet as she began to water it. It was what everyone wanted to see and when they saw it, they weren't as excited because they knew there wouldn't be a unicorn. After a minute or so of watching grandma water the garden, people started applauding, signaling that she should stop, but she didn't. They stopped clapping their hands and continued to watch her with tears growing in their eyes from realizing that she really believed there'd be a unicorn.

Mom, in tears like everyone else, gently pushed dad to go and stop grandma. When dad got to her and tried to take the hosepipe she said "Don't, the unicorn is coming, he promised, he always keeps his promises." Dad looked back at everyone with teary eyes and then tried to stop grandma again. "Mom, please," dad said. "60 years... for 60 years he never lied to me, you don't know him, the unicorn is coming," grandma said.

Dad stood next to grandma looking at the garden, it was a few minutes but it felt like hours in that sad silence, and then he began to walk towards the garden. People's faces began to light up; I knew what they were thinking but was sure my dad wouldn't do something like that. He got to the garden, took off his pants and took a shit. Everyone went wild; laughing, cheering, hugging and kissing grandma. I laughed so hard I missed the critical part, I did see shit come out of his ass but I didn't see if he wiped or just put his pants back on without wiping. When I asked him later, he said he did neither of that, he said he just sprinted across people with his pants on his knees and went to the toilet. His shit was never recovered, even the video didn't show where it went, as soon as it came out of his ass there was too much chaos and nothing was clear.

Grandma says that was the best day of her life and from that day on, she called dad "Unicorn," and we all did too when he wasn't around. The sales of granddad's books increased unbelievably and

all the money was taken by Unicorn, grandma said he needed it to buy a lot of pants so people never see his ass again.

And now, four years later, my 83-year-old Christian grandma has a tattoo on her shoulder; it reads "Musawenkosi is bae."

Forget.

Diced People

Too many people go missing these days, and the ones you know about, the ones who make it to the news, are the rich ones.

I know a place that's responsible for most of these disappearances, and the founder of that place was a friend of mine, Obed Chawuke. Chawuke was born into the human trafficking business, his father and his father before him stole and sold people for a living, that's why Chawuke was so good at it when I met him, experience. He was a young man, on his early 30's, but he was so wise he made me feel like I was the one 20 years younger than him.

We met at an auction, I was there to buy a few young girls for a new whorehouse I had built and he was there to sell. The auctions are held at random locations for obvious reasons, that Saturday morning was father's day and the location was a church in an old Lesotho town, one of those big beautiful churches which are surrounded by shacks and poverty, a picture that makes any sane human question if the people who run the church practice what they preach... most of the time they don't.

The men and few women who were there to buy looked like saints, it's funny how suits, ties and long dresses can make people like us look so innocent. Me and Chawuke sat next to each other, he constantly looked around the church and smiled, I think he too was impressed by the setting and how Pastor Kubeka even prerecorded a fake service to play out loud so whoever passed by the church would hear what they expected to hear. Another genius thing the pastor did was to make sure that everyone in the room was there for the auction and not the father's day service, and I guess it's a little easier to do that when no resident can afford a good suit.

The day went on too slow as the auctioneers pulled one ugly girl after the other out of their basement, their prices were ridiculous, plus delivery wasn't included. I would have left early but in auctions, doors don't open until the end unless something is wrong. "Ugly girls for ugly price ha my friend?" Chawuke said.

"Yeah, everything is ugly," I said, waking up from a mini nap I didn't see coming. He smiled and said "Well you not worry, me have something good for you when this complete, and my friend, sleep in church is not good idea." He reminded me of what grandma used to say when I was a kid, "If you sleep at church, all the demons the pastor casts out of people come to you," and in a church with people like that, I was lucky the pastor wasn't casting any demons out, I had enough already. "So you sell?" I asked Chawuke, and he shushed me.

After the auction, Chawuke invited me to his Jeep and told me he had four beautiful girls for a beautiful price at home. "What car you drive?" Chawuke asked.

"Mercedes," I replied.

"Okay you leave Mercedes here, we drive Jeep, Jeep good for bad road home," he said. I listen to my gut feeling, and it told me Chawuke was legit, but one thing I had learned about the business is extra security is never a mistake. "Well let me go get my phones then... in my car," I said. My phones were in my pockets, it's my gun that was in my car. When I returned to his car, feeling extra safe with a Glock in my waist, Chawuke looked at me and said, "You won't need gun my friend, but it's okay, in this business, extra security is never mistake." At that point, my gut feeling told me to get out of that car but my pride didn't let me, instead I just looked at him and said, "I hope you're extra safe too young man," a statement that was followed by a cold silence as Chawuke pulled off the parking lot and drove to the gate. I told the security I'll be leaving my car until late and Chawuke weighed in to say "Tell Pastor Kubeka that Chawuke steals dissatisfied customer again until his people give good girls for good price."

It was a long ride through a forest that looked like it was hiding something hungry, something that would jump out and eat us if we got out of the car. I kept quiet even when I had something to say because unlike Chawuke, I wasn't comfortable with my voice vibrating when I spoke, the ride was too bumpy. "You know, me once sold a dead seven year old boy to Russian man for three hundred thousand, I still not know why Russian man wanted dead boy," Chawuke said. Our love for money is one thing me and Chawuke had in common, we both would do anything for a good cheque, but he had more connections than I did back then and I was hoping we became friends so he'd share.

We arrived at Chawuke's home late in the afternoon, his wife and his three year old daughter came out to greet us. He picked up his daughter and said "This my daughter Kaweme, and this my wife." His wife shook his hand and then shook mine, I hadn't seen that happen before, a wife shaking his husband's hand, I thought it was a means to hand him something until I got to know her over the years doing business with Chawuke, she believes hugging or kissing in front of a visitor is bad mannerisms.

Chawuke's house was a stunning piece of work; it was the type of house you'd expect in the suburbs by the ocean, not there, in the middle of nowhere. His wife insisted we come inside for some tea but I denied her because of time. A distance from the house, but still in Chawuke's yard, was a warehouse-like building, and it too was too much for its location. "That where your girls are my friend, we walk now," Chawuke said. He was carrying his daughter as we walked there, his wife had returned to the house, and I was growing impatient. "You know what Kaweme mean?" Chawuke asked.

"No," I replied.

"It mean 'the beautiful one,'" he said, rubbing noses with his daughter, smiling. Seeing that side of him made breathing easier for me, it kind of assured me that he won't do anything stupid.

When we got to the door of what I thought was a warehouse at best, he asked me to carry Kaweme for him and then he opened the door. "Welcome to my fridge, it is not fancy something but me try," Chawuke said. He took Kaweme from me and then walked in, I followed. "Now before you ask question my friend, me will not answer, this is secret of mine," Chawuke said. The place looked like the meat section at the grocery store but the fridges stretched out on both sides and the passageway in the middle was big enough for a car to drive through. Inside the fridges were diced pieces of people, it seemed like the person or people who cut them didn't have time to remove their clothes because I saw one perfect vube that had a piece of a red belt in it, half of a black Nike sneaker, and a gold necklace around a head of a penis. It wasn't a lovely sight but I knew there was big money in it, there had to be, and the look on Chawuke's face as we walked through confirmed that. "We walk fast, Kaweme cold," Chawuke said. Kaweme didn't look cold, she was pointing around and speaking in a foreign language, at some points she sounded and looked like she was counting.

At the end of the long passageway was a door. We got there, Chawuke opened it, and I saw four young girls that didn't look worthy of the time and risk I had taken coming there. "Eh, dirty, cold, hungry, but me clean them for you and you see better," Chawuke said. He called the girls out, closed the door and as we walked through the fridges again, he explained to me that the girls were going to end up in the fridge too but he saved them because they looked good. "I'm good business man you see, me not waste beautiful girl because man like you want beautiful girl, but more money come if beautiful girl in fridge," Chawuke said.

When outside, Chawuke picked up a hosepipe and told the girls to undress. One girl decided to make a run for it and I expected Chawuke to make a move on her but he didn't, instead he dropped the hosepipe, gently put Kaweme down on her feet, closed her ears with his index fingers, and told me he was selling three girls now. The girl sprinted through the yard and when she was close to the fence, she was shot down, I quickly looked around hoping to see the shooter but I didn't. "She lack gratitude, you lack gratitude?" Chawuke asked the other girls. They began to take their clothes off, crying. Chawuke picked up Kaweme, took his hosepipe, and started spraying at the girls. They weren't as beautiful as I hoped but the prices were.

When we left Chawuke's place with the three girls that evening, the fourth girl was still lying dead by the fence and I knew then that if Chawuke had meant bad for me, he'd have succeeded. We went back to the church to get my car and from there, he delivered the girls the traditional way, I led in my car and he followed with them in his Jeep until we arrived at my building.

We stayed in contact and I bought all my girls from him, that's how we ended up as friends. He told me what he did with the diced people and how he got so many people to begin with. Rural areas were his goldmine, he enlightened me on how the police are easily bribed in rural areas (if they are there,) how parents or grandparents drink too much and abuse kids which makes them think a kid ran away when the kid was actually stolen, and many other factors that make it easy to get away with taking very poor people.

It's been four years since I first met Chawuke, and for three years I watched him do things that I didn't completely agree with. A year

ago, he died in a car accident and I thought his company would shut down and they'd stop killing innocent people but they didn't, it's still going strong.

Now listen carefully, I'm not a saint, I do bad things, but I don't kill people, at least not intentionally. I write this to the government, to the people who claim to care; **Give the poor people a fighting chance, protect them as much, or continue to let us feed on them, we love the easy money.**

Forget.

The Code on Her Shoulder

Growing up in a very Christian family, I never got to date and explore like other kids did. When I turned 18, I felt I had to get myself a girlfriend and get a first kiss just to know how it felt like and the easiest way to achieve that was social networks since I was a little afraid of girls. The app that was in style those days was Mxit, and I had it.

I met a 16 year old girl from Pietermaritzburg, Nokbonga Mkhize, and she was beautiful and very nice to me. We texted for a while then started calling each other but most of my calls didn't go through, I got used to hearing "The number you have dialed does not exist...", especially at night. I didn't care about anything and even her mood swings didn't bother me after she told me she loved me too, in my mind, I had found the love of my life and was going to get my first kiss soon.

In time, I got used to her just telling me she loved me and I began to want more. Every time I asked to see her she'd tell me she can't and when I asked why, she'd say it's because she doesn't want to lose me. Without knowing why she said that, I promised her she wouldn't lose me, and I aimed to keep that promise.

When she finally told me, it was nothing I had expected, all along I had thought she had a boyfriend or a kid, but that wasn't the case. She told me that men in black suits came to her this other night while she was asleep and took her to hell. The men showed her around hell and told her secrets. When she woke up, she thought it was just a bad dream until she saw a red permanent tattoo on her shoulder. Though I had heard a girl describe a similar situation in her testimony at church before, it was hard to believe that Nokbonga was a devil worshipper.

She told me that for weeks she hid the tattoo from everyone and went to churches hoping the pastors would detect that she had demons and pray for her but they didn't, she was scared to tell people, she didn't want people to think she was evil. The men returned and took her to hell again where they forced her to drink

human blood, and when she woke up in the morning, she could still taste it in her mouth.

She told her mom she had flu that morning and didn't go to school, and after her mom left for work, she overdosed pills trying to kill herself. Her big brother whom she said was my age found her unconscious in her room when he came back from school and called for help.

She survived and spent two weeks in hospital, and her family then knew her situation because she wrote everything in her suicide letter. While in hospital, several priests came to pray for her but no one managed to make the tattoo go away. The doctor she told about the tattoo said it could be cut out of her skin but that would probably make things worse if that really wasn't a normal tattoo, and Nokbonga didn't want to take that risk.

"When I returned home, mom took me to different churches until the men came to me and told me that if I went to church again, they would hurt someone I loved," Nokbonga said. Her mom thought that was a good sign, she thought it meant the demons were scared and insisted they continue going to church. The next Sunday, while they were in church, two strangers entered their home and beat up Nokbonga's big brother. The neighbours didn't see anything and her big brother said the two men were wearing black hoodie jackets and their faces weren't visible. Her mother refused to stop taking her to church and said that God would protect her family, and then while they were in church again, she received a call saying her sister (Nokbonga's aunt) had been in a car accident and she's dead. "So babe, if you're gonna tell me to go to church, you can just stop talking to me and forget about me *like everybody else does*," Nokbonga said. I pitied her, even her close friends had left her, someone had to be there for her, so I stayed with her, as a friend.

I asked her many times what the tattoo was and she never told me, but from the testimonies I'd heard in church, I knew it was a code. I believed that if she came to my church, my pastor would help her, I had seen him cast demons out of young girls many times without fail, but Nokbonga didn't want to try.

A month later, she decided to let me see her. I was scared, very scared, but I believed God knew I no longer had lusty intentions for

her, I just wanted to help. We met in town on the corner by Shoprite (yes,) she was more beautiful than she was in all of her pictures. "Here's this amazing soul," she said, and then she hugged me and held me long enough for all my fears and nerves to fade away. We then began walking around talking, the conversation was so good that I didn't care where we were or where we were going; I was just lost in the realness of a moment that felt like a dream, meeting the girl that loved me. I think an hour passed with us just walking around talking, she told me she was tired and we stopped, we were then in a quieter side of town with only a few people passing by.

While standing there talking, our conversation went somewhere and I don't know how but I found myself kissing her, and she was kissing me back, her lips, ah. She gently pushed me back and said, "My love, we're in the middle of the street here, what are people gonna say?" I didn't care, I pulled her close and she let me, then we kissed again, and we kissed more, we kissed until my hands couldn't help but touch places they weren't supposed to. "Babe, no, not here, not out in the open like this," she said. I looked around and saw an abandoned old building on the other side of the street.

At that point, all I wanted was her, I wasn't thinking about sex or anything, I wasn't thinking at all, I just wanted more of her, all of her. As we walked towards that old building, I realized I was letting lust get the best of me but I told myself "Just this once, let me just be young and stupid, just this once." The building had no door, there were trees and weeds growing on the floor, the windows were all painted black but most were broken and there were signs that some street people slept there; cupboards on the floor and some old blankets. I gently pushed Nokbonga to the wall and kissed her. "We need his blood, make it fast," a strange deep voice said, out of nowhere.

I opened my eyes to blackness, I had gone blind, I let go of Nokbonga and used my hands to check if my eyes weren't covered and they weren't, I could feel my eyeballs with my fingers. I tried to touch Nokbonga but she was no longer there, then I called her name and she didn't respond. I thought that was it, I thought that was the end of me, but I also knew God knew I was a good kid, he knew the real me.

I fell on my knees and prayed, I begged God to forgive my sin and save my life, I shouted the name of Jesus over and over again, in tears, scared, and still blind. "What is this? Who's this? We told you not to bring Christians here," the voice said. "But he has sinned, he's weak," Nokbonga said. I prayed louder, honest to God, owning my sin, admitting my weakness, and begging for forgiveness.

After praying for what felt like hours afraid that if I stopped I would lose my life, I heard a voice of an old woman. "Hello! Hello!" the old woman called. I opened my eyes and my vision was back, but I continued to pray because the building I was in was different from the one before, I thought something was still going on. The old woman's voice was coming from beneath where I was, and then I heard a male voice that wasn't as deep and as strange call out too. "Is anybody there? Hello!" the two voices said. I stopped voicing out my prayer but kept it going inside as I waited to see what'd happen next.

The old woman and a cop came up the stairs and saw me still on my knees. "Hey, are you okay? Who are you?" said the cop. I told them who I was and told them what had happened, the cop didn't believe me, but the old woman did, she said she was just passing by and she heard me screaming so she went and got the cop. I found out I was still in the same building but on the second floor, I don't know how I got there and I don't remember screaming. The cop didn't waste his time with me, he just told me to go home, but the old woman took my number and invited me to her church, apparently she was Christian too. When I got home, I deleted Mxit, Nokbonga's number and all of her pictures then I forgot about her, *like everyone else does.*

It's been eight years since then and I didn't even remember how she looked like until I had the dream I had last night; Nokbonga was in my room, standing next to my bed, naked, blood flowing down her eyes, she pointed at her tattoo and told me it's her code, 448, and then she told me she's not done with me.

Forget.

Christian Lady Down

So I finally had a hot girlfriend I had regular sex with, I finally lived the life a 23-year-old guy should, until the Christian lady situation happened.

I thought mom and her were old friends because when she first visited our house, mom allowed her to go to the kitchen and make herself her third cup of tea. I never entertained mom's too many friends, matter of fact; I disliked many of them because they only appeared when they needed something from her.

The Christian lady did not wait until the second visit at least to give me a reason to hate her; when it was time for her to leave, she wanted to pray first and she wanted the whole family to be there. This is one of the disadvantages of not having a father in a household; mothers are more likely to let a stranger call the shots, especially if that stranger is a Christian person. Mom called us (me and my two little brothers) into the sitting room to pray with the stranger and when we got there, she introduced her, not as 'the Christian lady' but as Aunt Gloria or Aunt Gladys or Aunt Margret, I don't remember.

Instead of closing her eyes and praying, she started a song, and another one, and another one, and before I knew it, I had been on a Sunday morning service on a Saturday afternoon. But the Christian lady did more than bring church to our sitting room, she also avoided eye contact.

I know it's a small thing but if a person is gonna put their hands on you and pray for you without your permission, it's only fair they allow you to look into their eyes and give them that -what's wrong with you?- look. For those few moments while the Christian lady was singing, praying and preaching in our sitting room, I thought avoiding eye contact was the in-thing in the Christian world, I thought she did it to avoid giving away some of her holy spirit or something, you never know.

After she left, I asked mom about the 'no eye contact' thing and she said "You saw that too? That was so weird." The lady didn't

have a lazy eye or something, she'd look at you when you aren't looking at her and look away when you do. I told mom there was something wrong with the lady but she defended her and said maybe she was just shy, which was a stupid point, there wasn't and there'll never be a grown up Christian lady who visits someone's house for the first time, drinks 3 cups of tea and prays for people she has never met before without their permission... but is shy.

Days passed, and on Wednesday, my girlfriend came around and we had fun. I never quite understood relationships though, I thought they were some complex shit I wasn't built for until I met her, she made everything make sense, she let me kiss her, and that's all I had ever wanted in a relationship.

The next Saturday, the Christian lady returned. Sitting alone in my room writing my girl a love poem, I could hear her and mom talking, reading the bible, drinking tea, having the time of their lives in the sitting room, which was okay, I had no problem with that, the problem began when she ordered mom to call us for the prayer again.

My door wasn't locked but mom knocked (she knew I wasn't single anymore,) and I told her I was busy. She went and told the Christian lady that and the Christian lady came to my room and let herself in without knocking, mom followed. I tried to give the Christian lady the -what's wrong with you?- look but I couldn't get her eyes so I gave it to mom, mom shrugged and gave me a -no, what's wrong with her?- look.

"Child, don't let the devil ruin your life, God has big plans for you but those plans are not going to happen if you're going to be too busy for the Lord, and also, you're a child in this house, if it's prayer time, it's prayer time, don't be disrespectful," the Christian lady said. Mom stood next to her, quiet, useless, leaving me with no choice but to pull the 'man of the house' card and put the Christian lady in her place. I was on my feet and ready to talk my shit when mom quickly tapped the Christian lady on the shoulder and said, "Can I talk to my son alone please." The Christian lady shook her head, disgusted with mom, and walked out.

"Ma, this is bullshit, I'm sorry for cussing but come on, this is not right, who's this person?" I said.

"She is so weird, you have no idea," mom whispered.

"Why the fuck are you whispering? This is your house... I'm sorry ma, I'm sorry... but come on," I said.

"Oh Jesus! The devil is in this place, help us father," the Christian lady whispered aloud right outside my door. Mom opened the door and looked at her, she looked at mom's shoes, I looked at mom's shoes too before I remembered the Christian lady was just avoiding eye contact. "Please," mom said, and the Christian lady went to the sitting room.

Mom closed the door and leaned her back against it. She closed her eyes, inhaled, exhaled, and then said, "Wow, I'm mad, this is bad, you wanna go tell her to leave?"

"Ma, she's your friend,"

"No, we were classmates in high school, that's it, I don't know her,"

"But you let her go to the kitchen and..."

"I know, she insisted, and I didn't want to call one of you guys to make her tea for the third time,"

"Wow,"

"Okay I'll get rid of her," mom said and left the room.

After a few seconds, I heard the Christian lady shout "I knew it!" then there was silence, then mom shouted "Get out!" and then there was silence again. About half a minute later, I heard a scream from outside, it sounded like mom's, then I heard another scream, it didn't sound like mom's. I ran outside and found mom and the Christian lady whooping each other's asses up, it was surreal, I had never thought mom would swing like that or take a punch like that. For a moment I just paused, like, my mind just froze; I didn't know what to do.

My neighborhood is highly populated and the street I live next to is never empty, plus, the people here are very nosy. The neighbors quickly came outside, strangers in the street stopped to watch, my two little brothers came out of the house too, and it was obvious to anyone watching the fight that the Christian lady was gonna win, she had skill. I went there knowing that I had to be fair, that I had to stop the fight like a gentleman because there were people watching, but when I tried that, the Christian lady elbowed me twice on the chest and I got mad.

I hate to admit that even though it was two against one, taking down the Christian lady was very hard, and when she was finally

down, I raised my eyes and saw my girlfriend, she was standing in the crowd on the street.

There was no way she was gonna stay with me, not after seeing me hit a 45 year old woman with a uppercut and then trying to break her leg. But at least me and mom didn't get arrested for beating the Christian lady up until she passed out, apparently she was mentally ill and had beat up people before but her family thought that wasn't gonna happen again since she was taking medication so they let her loose.

Thanks to that crazy Christian lady, I'm back to being this guy who sits alone in his room all day reading books, writing poems and writing stories that offend humorless people.

Forget.

Fish-end China

"It is easier to stay out than get out."

~ Mark Twain

"The exit is usually where the entrance was."

~ Stanislaw Jerzy Lec

My name is Jimmy Ngubane, I'm an Exit Artist at Fish-end China, one of the biggest exit strategy providers in South Africa.

We provide exit strategies to people who are stuck, whether it's prison, a bad business deal, a bad relationship, being a parent, being alive, etc. if you want to get out, and you can afford us, we get you out. And I know what you're thinking, why hire us when you can do it yourself, when you can get a good lawyer or hire a killer? Well, the answer is simple, with us, you get exactly what you want, whether you think it's possible or not, plus, your conscience, your hands, and your name stays clean.

The customer always gets exactly what they ordered, and sometimes their order involves death. There are many jobs I've done where I had to get somebody killed but I hate those, I prefer the simple ones where everybody wins, like the one I did for Amanda Mdlalose, a smart girl that made a smart decision but later regretted it because life's a bitch.

Looking around and seeing many successful women who were 'just baby mamas' or single in their thirties, when Amanda finished her Master's degree in Economics at age 24, she decided to stop gambling with the random hot guys she met who always turned out to be players and she went to church. A few months in, she caught Sizwe Kubeka's eye, a guy who was a saint so much that he only first kissed her when the pastor said "You may now kiss the bride." He was a good man, and Amanda was a good woman, but Amanda sometimes wanted to be fucked, and when she did something wrong, she expected to at least be shouted at but Mr Kubeka only wanted to make love to his wife (missionary only) and when he was mad, he prayed.

When she turned thirty, Amanda had two kids and was married to a man of God, then Pastor Kubeka, and in all of the many prayers the family had every day, she prayed for dying in each one of them, she thought it was the only way out. She believed she was cursed, that God was punishing her for using a good man she didn't really love to get what she wanted. Her life had become too contained that she wasn't doing anything she wanted to do, there were many rules she had to follow to remain a good leader and a good example to people who were more Christian than she could ever be. She wanted to be freed from her husband, from church, and even from her kids, which I thought was fair, if you're gonna leave a man, don't take away his kids too.

We keep the customer's hands, conscience and name clean, so, the pastor had to be blamed for Amanda's freedom. We couldn't find anything on the pastor except for his alcoholic brother Qhawe, and I asked my colleague Pearl to pay him a visit.

Everybody has a forte, we all have that one thing we naturally excel at whether we know it or not, it might be running, singing, thinking, being ugly, being stupid, etc. and for Pearl, it was being sexy. She was a mind blowing combination of divine accidents, from her voice to her eyes, lips, chest, waist, walk, down to her cute little lickable toes.

Pearl walked into a bar and approached Qhawe using an impossible pick up line, "What should a lady do to get a drink around here?" and Qhawe replied, "She gotta tell the gentleman in front of her what she drinks." After a few drinks, she started talking about religion and told Qhawe she had questions she thought she'll never get answers for. "Throw em at me, my little brother's a pastor and I've heard enough of his lies to answer any question," Qhawe said.

"Lies? No. Pastors don't lie,"

"I've been his brother forever,"

"So you're saying... no way... was he a ladies man?"

"He was,"

"Then he changed?"

"From being that guy to being a guy who complains that his wife demands too much attention and sex from him when all he wants to do is spend more time praying and doing God's work, doesn't that sound like a cover up story for some dirty business going on in church?"

"Oh come on, people change Qhawe, my ex-husband Jimmy used to love prostitutes, that's why I divorced him a year after we got married, he said prostitutes are the most honest females on earth and he will be a prostitute man till death, but now... well... I make him pay me after sex," Pearl said, and they both laughed.

Qhawe probably thought it was a joke but it's true, Pearl and I are honest to each other now and I pay her a lot more than I pay other girls since she has to raise my son and live with the guilt of having sex with her ex-husband when her current husband is a very good man. I don't believe in curses but I believe that good guys are cursed, they just don't know how to handle a woman, they either care too much or too little, but they are never good in bed.

"The exit is usually where the entrance was."
~ Stanislaw Jerzy Lec

After listening to Pearl's conversation with Qhawe, I called Amanda and told her to get serious about getting attention from the pastor and pull whatever strings she could to make him focus on her. Even though she didn't understand why she had to go in when she was supposed to be getting out, she did as I said. She complained to her husband and reported her misery to the older pastors at church saying that she understood God's work had to be done but she needed a husband and her kids needed a father. The older pastors talked to Pastor Kubeka and told him he had to be a husband and a father a little more when he was home, that taking care of his family was part of God's work, and he listened, but the more attention he gave, the more Amanda wanted.

Soon, Pastor Kubeka was having more sex and spending more time with the kids, which meant praying less and feeling a little less holy. "Jimmy, I don't know if I should tell you this but for the first time since we got married, he went down on me," Amanda said. And that was a green light for my next move.

Everybody has a forte, we all have that one thing we naturally excel at whether we know it or not, it might be running, singing, thinking, being ugly, being stupid, etc. and for Pearl, it was being sexy. She was a mind blowing combination of divine accidents, from her voice to her eyes, lips, chest, waist, walk, down to her cute little lickable toes.

Pearl walked up on Pastor Kubeka at the mall when he was out to buy groceries with his kids. She took our son and pretended to be a heartbroken single mother. Her outfit was as innocent as could be; the pastor never saw the temptation coming. "Well, I bet the pastor's wife gets all the love she needs, I've been alone for so long that even a hug from a man who's heart is full of love not lust would mean everything to me," Pearl said.

"Throwing yourself at men will only..."

"Nooo, I didn't mean it like... No... I'm sorry it came out like that, I meant..."

"It's okay," Pastor Kubeka said. He invited her to church and told her that God would give her the love she needed, but deep down, the pastor wanted to give Pearl exactly the love she meant.

Pastor Kubeka blamed himself for what Pearl did to him, he thought it was because he was not praying enough anymore, but that wasn't true, Pearl would have done the same even if he was a hundred percent prayed up. While the pastor was on his way home, I called Amanda and told her to say, "I wish I could go to Medical school, the best in South Africa, but I can't leave the province without my husband and kids, that'd make me a terrible wife," as soon as her husband got home, and she did.

The pastor called a meeting with the other pastors and told them what he was going through, he also told them what he thought could be the solution. They agreed that it'd be wise to let the wife go study so he could get the time he needed with God.

Amanda really signed up for medical school and was young again. She enjoyed that she could still play preacher's wife and see her kids on holidays if she wanted to, she said I had given her more than she wanted.

The customer always gets exactly what they ordered, and sometimes their order involves death. There are many jobs I've done where I had to get somebody killed but I hate those, I prefer the simple ones where everybody wins, like the one I did for Amanda Mdlalose, a smart girl that made a smart decision but later regretted it because life's a bitch.

Two years later, while Amanda was away, her home accidentally caught on fire and Pastor Kubeka and the kids burned to death. Amanda blamed herself and hanged herself.

"It is easier to stay out than get out."

~ Mark Twain

Now Pastor Kubeka lives in a different country with his kids. He has changed his name; he is no longer a pastor, and he plans to never marry again. That's exactly what he ordered.

Remember.

Whatever it is that you still remember, that's what I wanted to say to you.

Acknowledgments

Cover art by Google.

My little brothers Kwanele and Gcina Goba, and my friend Njabulo Mahlaba, have the best stories.

God keeps me alive and keeps weird things happening to me and around me.

My family got my back still, even though I think they should throw me out now, I let them down always.

Everyone else is stressing me out.

Njabulo Goba keeps telling me I'm the shit.

Thank you.