

III

This Isn't Awkward

And so it began, the 'Your son got our daughter pregnant'.

Followed by 'Your daughter hid the child from our son'.

Which led to 'Your son broke our daughters heart, she was just protecting herself' and ending off in 'Well, if she knew what protection was we wouldn't be here, would we?'.

My mother could never hold her tongue and now we were at war. However the biggest battle she faced today was in her heart, the person she saw as her daughter hid her grandchild from her. Her words expressed her anger, they expressed her sorrow but they couldn't express the betrayal she felt.

I looked at Namisa, looking back at me, wondering what was going through her mind. Did she feel the guilt I felt? Our families used to get along. Our mothers used to be best friends but

now they attend different mass services to avoid one another at church. Before her father passed, he was like a father to me and losing our son broke his heart. Even though Namisa and I had dated for six years, we first met in primary school, so he knew me from childhood and even helped me fill out university application forms. He was sad that his children grew up too soon but happy that we went against our instincts to abort and came clean.

Namisa's mother, MaKhuzwayo was happy her only child was giving her a grandchild and my mother was more worried about Namisa than she was me. Even though I was her son, she shared Namisa's fears, that a man's life moves on after a child but a woman has to adjust. As a single mother, I couldn't blame her. My father died when I was two years old, one of his mistresses had a jealous boyfriend who would kill for what was his. So my mother had to learn to parent on her own and although she tried to find love with other men after him, it was Namisa's father who filled the role of a father in my life.

Jabulani Khuzwayo said he would always be there to hold the family together but he joined his grandson a few weeks later and that is when our worlds started to fall apart. Our break up forced everyone to pick a side.

Today, the family he held together was tearing at the seams. The Khuzwayo's sat on one side of the table and the Motaung's on the other. It had been two weeks since I found out about Oratilwe and five days since she got discharged from the hospital.

In between the screams and shouts I recalled the conversation with Namisa. "Angelo, I didn't mean to hide this from you and I'm not sure if you believe me but Oratilwe is your daughter. She is our daughter". She put her hands on my shoulder as she said those words. We stood over her incubator, the sight of all the tubes broke my heart. The doctors said she would be okay but still I feared I was days away from attending another funeral. I was going through my wardrobe in my mind, looking for a black suit and wondering who I would invite to say goodbye to someone we didn't even know existed 24 hours ago.

I always felt we messed up the first time. I had just turned 20 and in three months Namisa and I would be the same age again. I don't know what made it worse, that we had just started university when Namisa got pregnant with our son or how we fought to spend time with him. We recorded everything; Orabile's birth, his smile and his cry. We praised him when he crawled and our parents made sure he lacked nothing. It takes a village to raise a child and we were a happy village.

Despite the fact that Namisa and I tried to keep the relationship going for a year after his death, I hadn't spoken to the other half of my village since his funeral and now here we were sitting face to face to discuss how I abandoned their daughter. In their eyes I got her pregnant, she lost a child and my life moved on.

“Can I go to the bathroom?”

“Ummm... Are we allowed to do that?... Can I go to the bathroom?”. His question broke my concentration and silenced the room.

Namisa laughed, “Yeah, sure Kyle. I'll show you the way”. She was grateful for the silence. They were discussing how our lives would proceed but we were expected to just sit and listen to whatever decision they made. She got up and led Kyle to the bathroom.

Malume Ntando was not impressed with Kyle, “What is that white boy doing here?”, he asked. As Bab'Khuzwayo's younger brother, he was the new head of the family. “He should not be here. In fact, what are the women and children doing here? This is a matter for the men.”

My uncles, Tsebo and Nhlanhla agreed with him or at least for a moment they did until their eyes met my mother's gaze. “This is not a matter for men, it is a family matter involving our children”. Nokukhanya Jasmine Motaung was a woman many would rather avoid than deal with, her sharp tongue and quick mind made her a dangerous opponent.

“But Khanya, this is not in our culture.”, Lungelo spoke calmly in support of his older brother, “Women are not normally part of this, let alone the children”.

“But hiding children is part of your culture, right?”. My mother responded with no hesitation.

The room went quiet again.

MaKhuzwayo stood up and called to her friend, “Jasmine”.

My mother looked at her, “Yes, Nomthandazo.”

“Come. Let's go to the living room. I want to show you this new dress I bought yesterday morning when we got here”. She held out her hand, uncertain if my mother would take it. MaKhuzwayo was the total opposite of my mother. She preferred to avoid conflict and always tried to calm the situation down. I was surprised when I saw her in the room when we arrived and I thought she would excuse herself after greetings had been exchanged but a big part of me felt she stayed because she missed her friend, her sister. They stood staring awkwardly at one another until he walked back into the room.

“So what did I miss? Is it going to be a goat or cow?”, Kyle always had bad timing but today his timing was at its worst.

My uncle Tsebo burst into laughter and Nhlanhla put his hand on his forehead. Malume Ntando clicked his tongue, he was annoyed and his words only echoed his mood. “What are you doing here? What do you want here?”.

“Well. I'm dating this girl and I want to marry her, so I'm trying to understand as much about your culture as possible.” He knew he put his foot in it, after the last word his face cringed. I admit even I was a little offended, we were meeting to discuss my daughters future and Kyle had his own agenda. I needed moral support and he was using us as guinea pigs.

Malume Ntando stood to say something but my mother rushed in, grabbing MaKhuzwayo's hand and then Kyle's. “Noma... Friend... That dress. I would love to see it. Come on Kyle, maybe you'll find something for Jessica.”. She led the way laughing.

Namisa stood up and walked towards me, “Angelo, can I talk to you?”, she whispered. I had nothing to say. I tried to justify her in my mind and always fell short of feeling like I deserved this. I stood up and started to make my way to the front door with Namisa shortly behind. As I reached for the door handle, I heard Malume Ntando shout out, “Don't make a third one”. Her face turned red, she always found him embarrassing. If he wasn't drinking, he was busy chasing a new skirt.

I stood on the patio and stared at the street. This was the second time I had been to her family home. It had lost everything that made it feel welcoming.

“So what’s her name?”, she asked.

“What are you talking about?”, I knew playing dumb wouldn’t work but what right did she have to information about my life?

“I know you.”, she said. “Since we exchanged numbers I can see your Whatsapp statuses, I know how you post when you are in love. So what’s her name?”.

“Lonwabo. Her name is Lonwabo”.

She smiled, “Lonwabo, that is a beautiful name. Have you told her about us?”

“Us?”. I asked surprised.

“I mean Oratilwe and I. Not... Ummm... I am talking about Oratilwe and I”. Her words came out almost like a stutter. “Angelo, I know no words will ever excuse what I did but I was figuring things out.”

‘Figuring things out’, would I be able to accept that? Was that reason enough? I lost 2 years of my daughter’s life and her reason was that she was figuring things out. “Well, have you figured them out now?”, I asked.

She shook her head and I let out a sigh.

She moved closer, “I am happy that you could find love again. I have been thinking what you said that day at the restaurant. I didn’t know that I was hurting you. I really thought everything was okay. I hope you will forgive me some day”.

Her lips were moving and she said the things I waited a long time to hear but there was no emotion in it. It sounded like she was saying what she thought I wanted to hear and if she couldn’t be honest, one of us had to lay it all on the table. “Namisa, I want to unlearn all the bad habits

loving you taught me. You made me feel small for wanting to have a career, every opportunity I had to be greater, you feared it was an excuse for me to leave you behind. Our relationship was toxic and I learnt to be comfortable in that.”

“Toxic???” she exclaimed. “No, not toxic, we had our issues but we weren’t toxic. I made you happy. You were happy. I did the best I could, so I deserved a man who would keep his promises.”

“And I deserved to be in my daughter’s life but I guess we don’t always get what we deserve do we now Namisa?”. I was annoyed. I was so annoyed. Here I was telling her that we had so much to work through and all she cared about was what she deserved. She was the victim again.

“We played pretend, I acted like the things you did didn’t hurt. When I spoke and you didn’t listen or when you apologized and your ‘I’m sorry’ carried more weight than mine. I would need to beg you for forgiveness and you’d question my love for you if I didn’t forgive you immediately. You had to...”

“That’s not true”, she interrupted, “We were fine. After he died, we were fine. We still laughed together, we still spoke”.

I shook my head, “I made jokes because the awkward silence was too much for me. I had to make conversation, if I didn’t call or text you wouldn’t make an effort and then you would be upset and say that I got too busy for you. You were mourning our son. I was mourning our relationship. I couldn’t deal with you noticing me anymore. I wanted to be seen. Talking to someone who doesn’t listen is the same as being invisible. Our relationship was toxic. You acknowledged that I was using words but they never reached your heart. You only remember the painful words. You could always tell me how I made you feel but could never acknowledge how you made me feel. You stopped being the person I was in love with.”

“I can change”. She moved closer and put her hand on mine, “I can change. I can do better. Don’t we owe it to Ora to do better”. I couldn’t believe it. She was using our daughter. I moved away. Being near her was making me sick.

I felt the phone in my pocket start to vibrate. I looked at her and she understood she needed to give me some space. “Hey Loni... Yeah... We will be spending another night in Durban. My

mother wants to go visit her sister. So you only need to fetch me at the airport tomorrow. Okay... Bye... I love... you". I don't know what made the call more awkward. This was the first time that I had ever said I love someone else in front of the mother of my child who I once thought was the love of my life but this was also the first time I had ever told Loni I love her.

Namisa and I just sat outside quiet, occasionally looking at one another with nothing to say. Just silence. 15 minutes of silence until Kyle came to get us, it was lunch time and he was excited to try African food. We went in and said grace, we knew this was a short break before the conflict would start again. At least this time, we would argue over Ora's future on full stomachs. Namisa went to sit in her corner and I sat in mine. If we had anything more to say to one another, it would remain unsaid for today, we were parents again, we had bigger priorities.