

## VI

### What Should Have Been

She looked at me. I looked at her. We looked at each other and the noise began. I was out of faces to make and she was just beginning to make her presence known.

“Loni. Loni”, I called to her hoping she hadn't run away. “Where's the milk? Are you done?”.

She rushed in, “Angelo. Give me a second. The video is still buffering. I told you to get faster WiFi... Do I put sugar in the milk?”.

My mother wasn't answering, none of our friends had children and Loni's Mother was the last person we would call. This was more challenging than I thought.

With Oarabile, Namisa and I had a system. She would breastfeed him or prepare the bottles in advance, I just had to warm them in the microwave.

“No, don't put milk.... No, I mean sugar... I used to taste OB's milk, there was never any sugar. Don't make it too hot.” I picked up Ora, “She won't stop crying. Let me try my mother again, while I walk around with her”.

I wanted to spend time with Oratilwe and looked forward to the day I would introduce her to Loni but this was not how I expected it to happen. This must have been difficult for her, being stuck with two strangers for the weekend.

Namisa got a call from her office that she had to travel to Cape Town for the week, her family were still in Durban and she didn't trust any of her friends to watch Oratilwe but after what happened to Oarabile, I couldn't blame her. I also wouldn't trust anyone who wasn't family with my child.

I appreciate her trusting me and bringing our daughter here but this was so mistimed. Loni had just opened up to me and I wanted to show her that Namisa would not cause any conflict for us. Unannounced visits from an ex definitely lead to conflict.

At least she brought a baby bag with all of Oratilwe's things and gave us a break down of her favourite blanket, which teddy she slept with, which toy she bathed with and what she was allergic to but she didn't tell us what to do between now and bedtime.

I walked her to the guest room and back. Up the stairs, down the stairs and out to the patio but Oratilwe would not stop crying.

Loni finished making milk and that didn't help. She continued crying.

“Angelo. Did you check her nappy?”, Loni asked.

“No. Namisa dropped her off like an hour ago. She must have a clean nappy.”, I responded.

“Your mom just texted. She said we should check her nappy”, she took Oratilwe from my hands, lay her down and began undressing her.

“Ummm... Loni... Do you need to do that?”, I asked.

“Yes. How will we know if her nappy needs changing or not?”, she responded.

“Checking her nappy, I agree but do you have to take off her beanie, jacket and everything. You could have just lifted up her dress”. I looked at her and she looked at Oratilwe and then we both started laughing.

We were both thrown in the deep end here.

Other than her students, she hardly engaged with children and my experience of parenting involved a child who was always ready for playtime. I was studying and we had the support of both of parents when it came to Oarabile. He lived with Namisa’s parents and I was staying at the university residence. I saw him on weekends or holidays but I never had to do much. It wasn't because I didn't want to be more involved but they said Namisa and I still had to be children and so they took care of his expenses, doctors’ visits and made sure he never lacked. Namisa’s involvement was limited to playing and feeding.

Looking back, I guess we should have insisted we do more but then again it was her father who made the rules despite objection from my mother and his wife but now he was no more, that meant Namisa had been doing more for Oratilwe by herself. For the past two years she was probably parenting on her own.

“Her nappy is wet.”, Loni said almost relieved.

“Okay. I will go get one of the nappies from her bag.” I started to make my way to the living room and heard Loni screaming behind me.

“Don't worry about YouTube this time. Your mom sent instructions. I think it was a joke but I'm grateful anyway”, she giggled.

I went and got the nappies, read the instructions while Loni changed her nappy and then dressed her up again.

Finally the crying stopped and the house was quiet. At first it was good to have peace and quiet but the silence quickly became cause for alarm. Growing up I was always told about the ‘Terrible Twos’ but Oratilwe was quiet, almost mute. Loni said maybe it's because she wasn't used to us, that's why she wasn't talking to us or saying anything.

We carried her to the living room and sat her down. I tried surfing through DSTV to find something but all the shows we found seemed to be mature content in cartoon format and so we settled on Captain Underpants on Netflix. Oratilwe continued with her silence but now she was watching television, occasionally pulling a face to show that cartoon had her attention.

“Do you think she knows who I am yet?”, she asked.

“What do you mean?”, I responded.

“That I'm the reason her parents aren't together. That I'm the home wrecker?”, she said.

I shook my head. “You're not a home wrecker... Her mother and I separated before she was born and I have no plans of getting back with her”.

She gave me a look, “Her mother still has a thing for you. I saw the way she looked at you... Look, I'm not asking if you still have feelings for her. I don't think I'm ready to hear that. If you say yes I will be hurt, if you say no and I don't believe you, I will be stuck with the paranoia. Please just be sure this is what you want.”

She stood up and fixed her blouse, “Why don't you try putting on music or something and I will go start preparing for lunch”.

I went to pick up the remote to change the program and Oratilwe was staring at me. I wasn't sure if she was threatening me or trying to signal she knew what she wanted to watch. If ever I needed an ice breaker, it had to be now.

I was about to put the remote down when my phone started ringing. I went to pick it up but I saw Oratilwe was kicking her feet. She must have liked my ringtone. I rejected the call and connected my phone to the speaker, turned up the volume and started playing the song Banomoya by Prince Kaybee. It was Saturday and the office could wait.

The song got her feet moving but I knew it wasn't enough. If acting like a fool was what I needed to connect with my daughter, then a fool I is what I was going to be. I started with the move I first mastered growing up, the robot.

From the robot I moved on to the dougie and worked my way through every house dance move I knew. Oratilwe must have not been impressed because she got up and started showing off moves of her own. Quickly our stare off turned into a dance off and eventually became a dance party.

Loni heard the music and came in to check on what was going on and then the three of us started a dance battle. The day carried on with us trying different things. Dancing, playing PlayStation and watching movies.

Her shyness slowly faded away and quickly she reminded me of her older brother. Her smile and the way she laughed. I could tell Loni was having a good time and just like I was thinking about Oarabile, she was probably thinking of her child but we had to be strong and be in the moment.

It was finally bed time and I was tasked with giving her a bath while Loni prepared the blow up mattress in the bedroom. We agreed that she couldn't sleep in the guest room on her own but we also weren't both ready to share a bed with her.

I dried her up and put on a nappy, put on her pyjamas and lay next to her and Loni.

“Do you want a bed time story princess?”, I asked.

Both ladies nodded their heads. Loni seemed happy to see me in a new element, either that or she was just happy that for once she wasn't the one telling a children's story.

“This is a story that was co-written by two authors. Sapphire and Jane Novelist, or Jake or... Umm... It was Jay something... You make me so nervous...”, I found myself stuttering over my words and Loni was laughing.

“Anyway... Once upon a time, there was a young king who fell in love with a queen of a neighbouring kingdom. The king and queen eventually got married and their bond resulted in their two kingdoms being united and forming one kingdom under their rule as king and queen.

On the third month after the union of the kingdoms, the king and queen given a gift by a fairy. It was something they never thought they could ever have.”, I looked to Loni and kissed her on the forehead. She held my hand and then held Oratilwe’s.

“The gift was a baby girl, who would become the princess of the kingdom and she would bring joy to the two kingdoms. This princess had all sort of magical powers. She had the voice of an angel, the dance moves of a goddess and the site of her smile brought happiness to those around her”.

Oratilwe yawned. She was finally getting sleepy. Loni nodded her head signalling that I should continue the story.

“You see this princess was very special and very loved but also very needed to cure the hearts of many, so the king and queen could not keep her to themselves because there was another kingdom that needed her. So the kingdoms agreed that they would raise the princess together and love her equally putting her happiness first”.

She yawned once again and closed her eyes.

“Hey”, I whispered. “You stay with her and make sure she stays asleep. I will go make sure all the doors are locked and come back”.

I got up and made my way downstairs. The memory of her falling asleep in my arms heavily engraved in my mind. She was beautiful, my wingless angel on earth.

Seeing her smile made it clear to me that I would do anything to keep her smiling. I wanted to give her all of me but in order for me to love her properly and give her more of me, there was something I had to do.

I still held on to a brother I wasn't sure she even knew. I knew he wasn't coming back but the pain was still there and in order for me to love her completely, I had to go see my son, I had to say the things I've been holding back and face the demons I've been running away from all these years.