

Dumani Mandela

Young and on the run from Apartheid

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Young and on the run from Apartheid

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Sandile walked slowly and sombrely through the local park on his way to school, carefully looking for warm cow dung to pack into the plastic bag in his hand. Thoughts of his great love ran through his mind. He thought how he would present the bag of cow dung to the love of his life Anelisa when he got to school. He had been in love with her since he could remember. He was ten years old and for all of his life that he could recall he had been in a love with Anelisa. She had moved into one of his grandmother's flats in the back of her house by the garage when they were three years old.

His grandmother Rhundu was a local businesswoman in the town of Cofimvaba. She was deeply religious and had an immeasurable social conscience. She was hard-working and honest to a fault. When Sandile was three years old, she had used the revenue from her spaza shop to build some flats in the back of her property for low-income people who could not afford their own housing in the town of Cofimvaba. Anelisa's family was the beneficiary of Rhundu's religious zeal and efforts to make the world she lived in more egalitarian for all.

He and Anelisa played together every day after school – sometimes marbles and sometimes a stick game that had been invented by the local kids from the nearby village of Emcumgu. They both attended the primary

school in Cofimvaba called Village. Except on Friday mornings, they would walk to school together through the local park to Village School, which was about five minutes from their home.

On Fridays, Sandile would get up at five and go to the local park, where some of the cows grazed, looking for warm cow dung. The cow dung was used to clean and maintain the floors in the school's classrooms. The boys would gather warm cow dung in the mornings, and it was the girls' responsibility to apply the cow dung to the classroom floors during their lunch breaks.

Sandile's mother and father were separated by their work but he had learned all he needed to know about love from them. His mother was a social worker in East London and his father worked in the mines in Johannesburg as a shop steward. He did not know what a shop steward was, but he surmised that his father was union representative and was in charge of managing the people when they went on strikes in the mines. This was a regular occurrence since his father would often come home during the many strikes and tell Sandile that he was negotiating with the mine owners for his future, by guaranteeing himself and all the other men who worked in the mines a better life by negotiating for liveable salaries.

His mother's job as a social worker was easier to understand and he knew that, like his grandmother, she helped people in need. His mother Phumla was a staunch Catholic who was very religious but extremely open-minded when it came to the needs of her children Sandile and Nobuhlali, Sandile's older sister. Although she seldom made Nobuhlali and Sandile go to church with her, since she lived East London, she did insist that they had to know the bible. She asked that Rhundu their grandmother have daily bible study with them. They would read some verses from the bible chosen by Rhundu and then she would recite biblical stories to them every night before bed.

She had made sure that they both memorised the Lord's Prayer and, every evening after their bible study, they would recite the Lord's prayer together.

Rhundu was a Methodist, but her religion and her daughter's Catholicism were not in conflict. Sandile and Nobuhlali's father Aggrey was a Catholic and therefore, when he'd married their mother Phumla before they were born, she converted from being a Methodist to being a Catholic. For Sandile it was all much of a muchness. Jesus was Jesus and God was God, Jesus' Father, and Mary was Jesus' mother.

He had difficulty, however, with the Holy Spirit since it was incorporeal and did not have human representation. For him, the closest thing he had seen which resembled the Holy Spirit was lightning during a thunderstorm. He was the kind of person who needed physical representation of everything in order to understand religion.

On many of his walks to school with Anelisa, he spent the time narrating to her the religious stories that his grandmother had told him and his sister the night before. His sister Nobuhlali did not attend Village but attended a nearby Catholic convent run by some nuns from surrounding villages. Their grandmother had witnessed so many young girls in the village of Cofimvaba getting pregnant that she thought it was best to shield Nobuhlali from this phenomenon by sending her to the local Catholic convent.

Since Anelisa did not have the privilege of going to the convent, Sandile thought that, in his daily narrations of his biblical stories to Anelisa, he could also impart to her some of his spiritual wealth. In some way he hoped that this would shield her from any harm that would befall her in life. He wanted to protect her and for her to feel safe in his presence, as his mother felt protected and safe with his father.

“**G**ood morning, nkwenkwe.” This was a name Sandile had come to hate because every time someone called him inkwenkwe it was a reminder that he was not a man and that he still had a long way to go before he could be with Anelisa as his girlfriend. He was still a boy and uncircumcised [inkwenkwe]. Sandile was late for school again for the umpteenth time and he was going to get another beating from the teacher that he loathed the most, Mrs. Nontish.

Mrs. Nontish was rather sadistic about the corporal punishment that she gave out to students who came into school late. She would ask them to stick out their hands with their palms facing downward and then she would take the edge of the ruler and hit them several times on the top part of their hand. Sandile tried in vain to explain to Mrs. Nontish that he was late because he could not find cow dung, but his pleas fell on deaf ears.

“Mam Nontish, excuse my tardiness but I could not find fresh cow dung. I had to walk behind the cows in the park for two hours, waiting for them to poo so that I could collect the cow dung.” He wanted to tell her exactly why he was late, but he also did not want to beg since Anelisa was looking at him from the corner of the classroom.

“So why did you not wake up earlier, Sandile? You knew you had to bring fresh cow dung today since it is Friday. You have delayed your whole

class. Class, what do you think I should do?"

All the children wanted to see Sandile squirm just a tad, since every year since the children were in Sub A he'd come at the top of his class as the number one student. They were now in Standard 3 and Sandile continued to outperform the other students in class.

"Everyone who thinks Sandile should get a hiding for being late, raise your hand."

All of the children raised their hands except for Anelisa, who simply put her hands over her mouth as if anticipating the pain for Sandile. Sandile could not control his annoyance and blurted out, "Bloody heathens! This class is full of opinions."

"Nkwenkwe, what are you saying now? Do you want a double beating for your foul tongue? Are you implying that the students are overly opinionated because their consensus is for you to rightfully receive punishment for being late?"

"Kind of, Mrs. Nontish, but as my mother always says – opinions are like arseholes. Everyone has one, so please do your worst."

Sandile closed his eyes and stuck out his hand and prepared for the ruler to make contact with the back of his hand.

"Well done, nkwenkwe, you have just earned yourself another well-deserved trip to the principal's office and to get another sjambok beating yet again. But before you go, I must administer my own punishment for your tardiness."

Mrs. Nontish took out her wooden ruler and struck Sandile ten times on the back of his hand, one lash for every minute that he was late for class. Sandile kept in the tears from the throbbing pain, not wanting to seem less of a man in front of the class, and especially not in front of Anelisa.

Anelisa still had her hands over her mouth and Sandile could see tears flowing from her eyes. As always, she felt the pain for his punishment as

she had on so many occasions. He could not tell if she was crying because of the beating he had just received from Mrs. Nontish or for the one he was going to receive from the principal. She reluctantly raised her hand to get Mrs. Nontish's attention.

“Mam, but he told you that he had to wait on the cows for two hours. I don't understand why you had to do that.”

There was an eerie silence in the class, with Mrs. Nontish staring at Anelisa, hoping she would be intimidated, turn away at some point and recant her words. But Anelisa did not back down. She stared straight back at Mrs. Nontish. Sandile was rubbing the back of his hand, trying to abate the pain, while mentally preparing for the beating that he would get at the hands of the principal and his sjambok.

“I just found that so unnecessary. And you knew that the class was not going to vote in Sandile's favour because they never do. Maybe you should stop giving him such high marks and he might make some friends.”

“Young lady, I am not doing this for your entertainment or mine. I am doing this for Sandile's benefit. I am assisting him to become a responsible young man. It's not enough that he has good grades. He has to learn to be more responsible for his actions. And you are not here in my class to make friends, young lady, but to learn.”

Anelisa was not going to back down.

“So why send him to the principal's office then, if you have taught him his lesson?”

“You know why, Anelisa: because of that devilish mouth. This child is bright but, dear God, his mouth is of the devil. He is going to the principal's office and that is that!”

There were no further words between Mrs. Nontish and Anelisa, just a staring contest to see who would back down first. Sandile did not want

Anelisa to be sent to the principal's office as well and chose to defuse the situation.

“Well, I guess that is my cue to go to the principal's office then.”

The whole class let out mellow laughter, knowing how intense Anelisa's loyalty was to Sandile. She had a deep love that the children in her class had come to understand in her intensity for her feelings for Sandile and she always sought to protect him from harm from others and himself.

Mrs. Nontish took her eyes off Anelisa and took a seat behind her desk. Anelisa was the one student who could intimidate Mrs. Nontish, not only because she was a good student – she always came in second in her class, closely behind Sandile – but also because she was loyal to Sandile to a fault. Mrs. Nontish thought that Sandile and Anelisa behaved and acted more like husband and wife than many married couples that she had observed. In the year of teaching Sandile and Anelisa, she and the students had come to harbour a secret respect for their love for one another.

Mrs. Nontish began to organise the papers on her desk in preparation for the mathematics lesson of the day. She always started off the day with math and ended with English, since she found as the day progressed the children lost interest in their lessons. Her position was that the children could always learn English outside the classroom whilst watching television or practising with one another, but math had to be taught in the classroom.

“Alright, Sandile, please go to the principal's office. I am sure you will sweet-talk him as you always do and find a way to escape your punishment.”

Sandile glanced lovingly at Anelisa, as if to thank her for her intervention. He was not scared to go and see the principal Mr. Dabula. Mr. Dabula was a short, soft-spoken man, who only administered corporal to his students as a last resort. He preferred to talk his students through any problems that emerged during their studies. He took a special interest in

Sandile because of his performance in school and also because of his sharp wit.

He had at first thought that Sandile's relationship with Anelisa would slow down Sandile's school performance and personal growth. However, after watching them for a number of years and seeing how they supported and motivated one another, he'd also developed a secret respect for the children.

Mr. Dabula used the times that Sandile was sent to his office as a chance for him to develop Sandile's interpersonal skills and to introduce him to the art of morning tea. As Sandile approached the door to Mr. Dabula's office, he tried to think of the perfect opening line to a conversation with Mr. Dabula. Mr. Dabula appreciated happy and grounded children and would not discipline them if the child immediately showed remorse for their actions. Sandile knew he had one sentence to make an impression on Mr. Dabula. He knocked on the door softly twice, in case Mr. Dabula was in a bad mood and did not want to be bothered. He would be able to tell what he should say based on the way Mr. Dabula answered the knock.

"Nkwenkwe, is that you again? Dear God, you are coming to my office every Friday now?"

Sandile slowly opened the door to give Mr. Dabula time to open up to the idea that he might not need corporal punishment this time around. He stuck his head through the small opening of the door.

"Yes, it's me, Master Dabula. Mind if I join you for tea?"

Mr. Dabula let out a bellowing laugh, knowing that he would not have to administer punishment to Sandile today since he'd shown some remorse and his quick wit yet again.

"Sure, Nkwenkwe. Come in and take a seat."

Mr. Dabula's office was a small room in the middle of the two long parallel face brick buildings that constituted the Village School. In the

centre, between the buildings, were the morning registration grounds where student's names were called out in the morning. Mr. Dabula's office sat at the back of the school, behind the registration areas in between the parallel buildings, next to the teachers' lounge. He could see every classroom from his office window and had a clear view of the whole school.

"Nkwenkwe, you know I can see everything from this office, and I noticed that you walked in ten minutes late to class this morning."

Sandile snapped back. "Sir it was not my intention, but the cows would not poo, and I had to walk behind them this morning for two hours in the park waiting for them to poo so I could collect fresh cow dung for the class floor."

"Nkwenkwe, I can't tell if your obsession with fresh cow dung is a result of your concern for your class floor, or if it's to make Anelisa's job easier than the other girls', who might receive hard cow dung from the other boys when they have to clean the floors."

Sandile looked down and fiddled with his fingers and could not tell if he should be on the defensive with Mr. Dabula or should stay calm. He decided to opt for respect in order to pacify Mr. Dabula.

"Master Dabula, I like to do things correctly and properly. Like yourself, I like perfection, whether it's for myself or for Anelisa, since she is like a sister to me."

"Nkwenkwe, you already have a sister and I highly doubt you think of Anelisa as your sister."

It became increasingly clear that Mr. Dabula did not want to administer punishment to Sandile and he decided to take a more relaxed tone with him.

"Sir, one day she will be my wife!"

"Well, you already behave like husband and wife. All you need now are the rings and the wedding ceremony."

Sandile was confused, as he did not know exactly what husband and wife acted like, except from the example of his father and his mother, who had a loving relationship, although they lived so far apart. Sandile's father Aggrey was from Accra, Ghana, and also used to be a teacher in village. But he thought his services were needed elsewhere in South Africa and so he had gone to live in Johannesburg to be a shop steward and work with trade unions. He spent a lot of time educating his fellow employees on how to exercise their rights and also lobby for better work conditions.

He enjoyed his work and was a community leader in the village of Cofimvaba. He'd come to South Africa in 1972 and had met Sandile's mother Phumla a year later, in 1973 and soon after they had Nobuhlali in 1974 and Sandile two years later in 1976. The year now was July 1985 and a state of emergency had been declared in South Africa.

Mr. Dabula wanted to talk to Sandile about what this meant for his father's work. He also had other things on his mind like manhood and the meaning of love, but was not quite sure how he should structure the conversation with Sandile.

"You know, Sandile, we live in difficult times, and I am sorry that this will be the last time that we will speak for a while."

Sandile was confused and did not know how to respond to Mr. Dabula. Was he ill and was he going to die on that day?

"Sir, is everything okay?"

"You know, Sandile, going to the mountains to get circumcised does not make one a man. It is just a ritual that we have been going through for centuries so we pass it down from one generation to the next in hopes that we will also pass down lessons of manhood to the next generation."

Sandile wondered if this was it. Would Mr. Dabula put him in the back of his van and whisk him off to the mountains to get circumcised on this day? He was somewhat excited and at least hoped that now people would stop

calling him inkwenkwe. But at the same time, he was fearful of the manhood cut. His initial thought was to delay Mr. Dabula as much as he could and then, when he was not paying attention, to run out of his office to his grandmother's house and tell her that Mr. Dabula wanted to take him for initiation at such a young age. His grandmother would certainly be furious, he thought.

“As I was saying, Sandile, I have learned a lot about manhood from you in the way you treat Anelisa and how she treats you. She is becoming a woman in developing her nurturing abilities.”

Sandile took a deep breath. Perhaps Mr. Dabula was leading elsewhere with his conversation and he was not going to take him away to circumcision school.

“Sir, do I have to get married to Anelisa now? Should I not go to circumcision school first?”

Mr. Dabula laughed out loud, stood up from his desk and walked over to Sandile and hugged him. He looked down at him.

“Ideally, Sandile, in five years from now you would have gone to the mountains for initiation. I don't think, however, that you will get that chance as you have to leave here in the next hour when there is a window to take you to the airport in East London, where you will fly to Johannesburg and then from there to London. You will meet your father and your sister. Your grandmother applied for a passport for you already, and a US visa, and has packed your bags. They are in my car for me to take you to the airport in East London. Your mother is already in the United States of America. She left five months ago to get things ready for your family's arrival. Please, you must understand, Sandile, that we live in difficult times and that is why I must help you to leave.”

“But what about Rhundu, my grandmother? I have to tell her I am going. I have to tell Anelisa where I am going.”

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