

WHEN  
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SLEEPS  
A NOVEL  
Sindiwe Magona

## CHAPTER ONE

A-aah! Blessed day—  
Saturday!

Busisiwe wiggled her toes. With all her heart, she hated her life. Not all of it – people like that committed suicide, her mother once told her – not that anyone took what Phyllis said seriously. Yes, Busi hated her life, but one of the few blessings, one thing she really appreciated, was the sixth day of the week. Not only was there no school, there was no one else in the house. Phyllis, her mother, gone; Aunt Lily, in whose house they lived, gone; Lily’s husband, Uncle Luvo, gone. The whole lovely morning, she was alone.

OMG, she had all the space to herself. Just herself, by herself, no one else but herself!

Saturday! The grown-ups were away at work. They all worked over the weekend, including half-day Sundays for the two women, Mama and Aunt Lily. The two older boys, her cousins, were out, attending funerals. Funerals were opportunities for feasting. On Mondays already, Themba and Sazi started prowling for houses with tents in their yards. Tents meant death, and death meant a funeral, and a funeral meant food galore. Food for all, and not per invitation either. Nobody would turn people away from a funeral. Funerals were much better than weddings. The ancestors (*and God and His angels?* wondered Busisiwe) were present. Now, what host would dare appear graceless before the ancestors and God, and demand an invitation card? The bereaved family welcomed all who came to honour the dead with proper respect. Therefore, on weekends, the boys went funeralling. They were veritable funerongers. Busisiwe smiled as she shook out a blanket. The boys often chattered about how they helped the men slaughter a beast, how fantastic innards roasted on an open fire tasted, what was served during the Friday night vigil, how the really good meat was cooked and distributed. Lately, even her little brothers Owam and Esam had started tagging along, following the older boys, who didn’t seem to mind the tails.

A week after the burial, the following Saturday, the family would be cleansed with the Washing of Spades ceremony, observed by all. Not as lavish as the funeral, it was nonetheless a feast for amahonkco – all aboard the gravy train. Because she was a girl, Busisiwe was not allowed the same privileges. Women could go to funerals, of course. It would fall on them to clean, scrape and cook the veggies – a job tedious and back-breaking, with absolutely no reward. The older women saw to it that the job was done properly, for such a weighty affair as death; but they imposed their authority on younger women, who did the work while they supervised. *I don’t need such supervision*, Busi thought to herself. She had had the best teacher on cooking samp and beans, steamed bread, vegetable preparation and making ginger beer – her grandmother.

*Khulu had me watch her since before I was even six or seven years old. Then, one day, she turned the tables on me – watched while I prepared. Said the way she saw things, my mother was not teaching me anything. Said that behind Phyllis’s back, of course.*

But it was the truth.

Her uncle Luvo, like the boys, was hardly ever indoors on weekends, because Sunday was the day the bereaved, having buried their loved one the day before, were drinking herb-infused and bitter water as though to say: accept the bitter taste of death and know that you will live, must live.

These were the two inescapable sides of the coin. Accept death as you accept the skin in which you live, the skin that gathers all you are – protects you from harm that lives in the air.

Not that Busi gave such matters much thought. At first, she had resented being unable to benefit from the funeral bonanzas. But she would be dead in the water if she went mooching for food; yes, she would be ridiculed by both her kasi neighbours as well as her classmates at her posh Model C school, where she did not dare wear poverty too brazenly. Sometimes she even resented

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that her grandmother's former employer, Mrs Bird, paid her school fees so that she could have what the grown-ups called a 'decent education'. Nobody spoke about the pressure Busi felt, how she was always out of step at that school. Now, brows scrunched, she surveyed the fruits of her labour: bed made, just so, as Lily liked; furniture dusted; floor swept ... She put away the duster

and looked around – all she still had to do was to scoop up the little mound of inkunkuma and go put it in the cardboard box under the kitchen sink. That would spell HOUSE DONE!

In the comings and goings of the family members, she had no power or influence; hers was to do what she was told, and, according to her mama, be not only cheerful about it, but grateful; very grateful, in fact. Well, grateful was choking her, killing her – except on Saturdays.

Then she *was* tremendously grateful.

She could breathe.

She could hear herself think.

She could sing out loud.

There was no one in the whole house to tell her, 'Stop it!' or 'Heyi, wena! You are not here all by yourself!'

Oh, yes! For one day of the week, she was truly happy.

Saturday meant a lot of chores, and of course, nobody regarded *her* work as their skutete, a blessing. No, they expected her to welcome it, enjoy it, and never forget she had to pull her weight, contributing to the wellbeing of the family, 'as we all are contributing to yours'.

Stepping outside, she picked a small piece of the peppery fennel bush along the hedge, took it back into the house and put it in a little fishpaste bottle on Aunt Lily's dressing table. She always left this room for last. With a long, deep breath, she braced her shoulders and lifted her tired arms, waved them about two-three times, stretched. She smiled as she reached for the remote and sunk herself onto the little sofa at the bottom of the bed. Now was the time to steal a look at the TV; sometimes *Utatakho* was on. It entertained her, but also made her sad when it reminded her of her own plight – tata-less. But now the smile stayed on Busi's face, an idle smile, but a smile all the same. *My heart is light*, she thought. See how I am watching television in Aunt Lily's bedroom; the only room in the house that has such a luxury. Who else has money not only to buy a set, but keep it running – pay for the electricity and DSTv – to say nothing of paying for the licence – *every year?*

Busisiwe clicked, and up on the screen came: 'Heroines of Our Time!'

The only hero who came to her mind was, of course, Tata Mandela, whose picture was on every coin and note of South Africa's money. Perhaps he had a mine? Busi left the thought hanging as she turned back to the programme, where an advertisement for funeral cover for everyone in the family (including beloved pets) was playing. Aargh! What a waste of time.

She still had to wash the laundry soaking in the huge red plastic tub. Well, let it soak, she wasn't going to hang it out before she'd gone to fetch water for the house. She knew better than to take an eye off it; one wrong move and the clothes, the whole tub would be gone. Drug thieves had no qualms about stealing even wet clothes. Things simply vanished without a trace, and people became sightless to avoid being implicated, which could have nasty consequences. She glanced at the bottom of the screen. Yhoo! Ten o'clock! A girl who did her chores late was considered lazy – that was why the smart ones always started with the laundry – visible industriousness. What's the point of doing anything if no one knows about it? Brag is the name of the game ... even about the most insignificant matters, such as who puts out the garbage bin first, or whose white laundry is whitest. Which reminded her: she had better get going. As she got up, remote in hand to switch off the TV, an insert at the top right corner of the screen came alive: a group of young men performing the gumboot dance. A young woman, all smiles, with a clear café-au-lait complexion, glowed on the screen. Her long black dreadlocks were swept up in a knot, crowning the top of her head. She wore a brown shweshwe dress that left her arms and one shoulder bare. Her well-toned

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arms rippled as she gestured. Brightly beaded bangles rose half-way up both her arms, and a necklace of the same colour draped across her chest. Two big silver rings flashed on each middle finger, big silver hoops dangled from her earlobes.

'Maybe this is what Aunt Lily calls African Elegance ...' said Busi to herself. Introduced as a social worker, this elegant woman, her voice sweet and carrying, explained how she got involved with this group of gumboot dancers as part of a programme to address the perennial problem of youth unemployment in the townships. She encouraged these young men to do gumboot dancing instead of milling around in frustration, their self-esteem draining away like water in a leaky bucket.

'Anything is better than doing nothing!' she said, adding, 'And the boys took to it immediately.' The camera zoomed onto this group of fit young men in overalls of different colours – red, yellow, blue, orange – some with one sleeve off the arm, and a few with both sleeves off and tied around the waist. Their bodies ... yhoo! The muscles! Busi's eyes bulged. All wore black gumboots, and their makarabhas finished the mgodi look. Right now, the group was shuffling around, warming up, gearing for performance. The social worker said she had even found sponsors for the group. 'There is a lot of help available for programmes of social upliftment,' she said. 'People must help themselves if they want to get anywhere in life!'

On cue, the young men sprang into performance mode. The leader blew a whistle and like a well-oiled machine:

Tshisa Bo!

Paqa-paqa!

Tshisa Bo!

Paqa-paqa!

Tshisa Booooo!!!

Paqa-paqa-paqa-paqa-paqa-paqa!

Their smiles and the fierceness with which they exuded confidence were beamed straight at the TV camera. Aware of her blessedly untrammelled morning, Busi got up and paqaza'd right along with them, no matter that her paqaza came sans the rhythmic boom of the gumboots.

What a performance! The thunder of their heavy boots, accompanied by the insistent 'PREE-PREE-PREEEEE!' of the leaping and gyrating leader's whistle, was in turn accompanied by rhythmic hand smacks. These hand sounds didn't quite alternate, didn't quite follow, but rather shadowed the stamping feet, coming just after them, so the two blended in a kind of thud-and-echo, thudand-echo ... it was a perfect – NO, brilliant – orchestra.

'They have improved,' said the social worker.

'They are miles better than before!'

'Walala, wasala! You snooze, you lose!' said the host as he gave out the social worker's contact details in case anyone out there wanted to start something similar. 'There is a lot of help available. Don't just sit on your behind and expect things to fall into your lap. M-O-V-E! Move yourself. When you do, you'll find other things begin to move. Your life moves! Daxa phantsi; daxa your life too!'

Busi wished they had someone or something like that in her neighbourhood – a group right here in Kwanele that she could join. Scores of people around her were jobless, young people especially. Maybe if she joined a project like that, she could at last make a little bit of money.

And daxa phantsi is what she was doing right now.

'The laundry won't up and wash itself,' she muttered. Snatching the remote, she got up and made for the door. There, just at that teeny moment between pressing the remote button and the TV actually turning off, her eye caught something, and no sooner was the TV off than she switched it right back on again. The social worker and the TV host had moved to the audience for a Q & A session. Now questions flew.

'Did you enjoy that?'

'What did you think of the dancing?'

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‘Would you like to do something like that too?’

‘What do you want to be when you grow up?’

Busi squirmed. Ridiculous! Grown-ups asked such dumb questions. Children want to be grown-ups, of course; at least, she did. Grown-ups could boss everyone, every single child. It was the worst thing in the world to be a child – especially a child in miserable Kwanele. Most of the spectators were young people; some simply responded with smiles, shy in the sudden limelight. Then a hand shot up, like a kid seeking the teacher’s attention in a crowded classroom when they knew the answer to the question, and another kid had just said something they knew, absolutely knew, to be incorrect. The host stretched his microphone towards her. This little girl, younger than Busisiwe, but bold as brass, said something Busi couldn’t catch. The host gulped visibly and urged,

‘Again? Please repeat what you just said? What do you want to do when you grow up?’

‘I want to marry a deformed man!’

‘Yii-yhoo!’ Busi gasped and took a second look at the scrawny little girl with her tired hair, the unnatural rust colour telling of long-faded chemical treatment. She could hardly believe her ears. Where had the child come upon such a mind-boggling idea?

The host, clearly also staggered, asked, ‘Do you mean a man with a disability? Why?’

‘So I can get a lot of money!’ the girl replied without hesitation.

‘Where will you get that money?’

‘The grant! Everyone knows deformed people get more money!’

*How much more?* Busi screamed silently at the girl on the screen in the shapeless gym dress, her shoes badly in need of more than just polish – even the laces were frayed. *How much?* Why was the host not asking that question? Ask! Ask! But the stupid man just thanked the girl and turned to the viewers:

‘There you are!’ he announced, ‘You heard it on Mzansi 1017!’

And, flashing his all-teeth-bared smile, he exhorted: ‘Remember, your future is in your hands!’

Busi stood a long time. Then she made sure she left no trace she had been relaxing in Aunt Lily’s room – put everything as she’d found it, the two remote controls just so, crossed, with the smaller one on top, at the corner of the bedside table. Long after the programme ended, the girl’s words rang in Busi’s mind. That child knew what she wanted, all right! She would not judge her. She’d heard the words, and they echoed what she’d heard before, but never so blatantly, so boldly; and never before from the lips of someone that young. How could such a child already know how to solve the ever-present crisis of money? Maybe a disabled husband could get one money for airtime, for that swanky cell phone, new sneakers, a dress to wear to her best friend Thandi’s party in a few weeks, the school’s choir tour ...

Take Thandi, for instance. Three years older and twice as glamorous as Busi, her father gave her his card to shop at Splendour, and her sugar daddy gave her a fat envelope every time they met. But how much did Mama get for her, Owam and Esam? Was it three hundred a month for each child? Less? More? No, surely not. Phyllis was always, but always, short of money. And then Busi had a new idea: for a disabled child, the grant must be huge: a thousand ... *at least!*