

## THREE

**Thabo**

MY FAVOURITE NIGHTS WERE THE ONES WHEN MANKWE WAS sick and Zanele had to do the show instead. It was not that I wanted Mankwe sick. No.

When Zanele came instead of Mankwe, the regulars weren't happy, but who cared about them? I chose who played at the shebeen, because Sizwe had made me manager.

And sometimes Zanele came to play the piano when Solly was not in town. Then it was both of them, Mankwe at the microphone and Zanele at the piano. Solly had taught her some chords last year near Christmas. Zanele loved the blues and her piano playing was much better than her singing. But when Zanele was playing, all she could see was her sister. She never looked at me.

Of course, in my business, it was stupid to put the one thing that mattered to you on stage in a red dress for everyone to see. Even back then I knew that.

I'd been running after Zanele for years, and because she ignored rather than laughed at me, like she did when some of those other *bafana* chased her, we just carried on doing the same thing. Which was nothing. Like she said. Old news.

What was new was Zanele hanging around President Street after school. Where Billy, Vusi and the rest smoked other people's cigarettes and talked about fighting the government, revolution, all that *kak*. But Billy was in jail now. Not my problem.

I didn't exactly tell the policemen about Billy. What kind of fool gets caught talking to *abo gata*? There was a local

informant, and he wasn't hard to find. There was only one man who wasn't a *tsotsi* who tried to dress as nicely as me around here, Sam Shenge. He spent the money the police gave him on blue and orange bow ties. Everyone knew the money for his bow ties didn't come from the wages he earned taking pictures for any newspaper that would take them. Any fool could see that, but they chose not to.

The wisest thing Sizwe had ever told me was: be nice to your friends, nice to your mama, and nicest of all to the *abo gata*. But Sizwe didn't know that I earned a little something on the side from telling Sam about the boys and their stupid plans. When I heard the rumour about Billy planning to blow up the power station, I got five rand for passing along rubbish about something that was less likely to happen than the sun falling on our heads. The *abo gata* actually believed the crazy stories about Billy, because next thing I know Billy's arrested and there's a big court trial for him and that pretty girlfriend of his.

That was not a problem for me. Actually it was a good thing. Now Sam and the *abo gata* thought I knew who the real troublemakers were.

But now that Zanele was making friends with Billy's friends, my business with Sam was going to be trickier. Here she was hanging around President Street, even though I had warned her to stay away from here. I thought about dragging her back home. I wanted to. But Zanele didn't work that way.

Some trouble got you a fine, some sent you to Robben Island with that old man Mandela, and some got you killed. Maybe I was thinking too much about the kinds of things Zanele might be doing.

So I waited for her to walk out of sight, then I walked to Pillay's to get the owner to pay us. He earned good money. But like most of the Indian shopkeepers around here, he treated us like we were dirt under his shoes. It was going to be an easy job

to convince him. I could have sent one of my boys.

Inside, Pillay was there behind the counter, and so was his daughter. I'd bought cigarettes here many times before.

There was no security, a little lock at the cash register. Useless. I walked in.

"Please, sir. No smoking." Pillay was big on his "sirs" and "pleases." He didn't recognize me. Disappointing, for a store owner on President Street not to be able to tell the difference between a clever and a boy still in school. The girl just stood there. She was wearing her school uniform, which was too big for her.

"I've been watching you, Mr Pillay," I said. "Watching for a long time."

"Please, sir. No smoking," Pillay repeated.

"You've been earning your money off us for years."

I ground the cigarette on the newspaper on the counter. The paper caught fire for a second or two, flaring up into yellow. Then it went out.

"Sir. I think you should leave," Mr Pillay said.

"No. So as I was saying, you make good money. And do I have a problem with this? No." I shrugged. "Me and my boys, we are simple people. If a man is earning some money, white, Indian, black, good for him."

Pillay turned to the girl, who'd stopped reading her newspaper. "Meena, go upstairs."

"No," she said, and watched me like she couldn't see enough of a black man in a nice suit.

"But then I realized," I continued, "the reason why your business is doing so well." I lit another cigarette. "My boys and I are keeping your store and your family safe."

Pillay looked at my cigarette and said nothing.

"Don't you think that we should have a share of your earnings, Mr Pillay? Isn't that something we deserve?"

The man just watched the cigarette smoke. The girl froze.

The man folded the newspaper where I'd put my old cigarette, and put it into the dustbin. "You know that some people like you came here six years ago. I said the same thing I'm going to say to you now. No. You're working for someone, aren't you? Who?"

"Sizwe. The Black Berets." I leaned forward. I could see the places on his face where his light brown skin had sunk in. The name "Sizwe" meant something to him.

I put a hand over my left jacket pocket. "I don't want to make things bad for you, Mr Pillay. Or your family." And I looked at his daughter.

"Get out!" Her voice went high, cracked at the end.

Then quietly Mr Pillay said, "How much?"

"Ten rand, and guess what? I'll only make you pay once a month, as a special favour."

A little girl came running down the stairs. She had long hair like her sister. She was maybe six, seven years old. She hid between her father's legs and made faces. I winked at her. She giggled.

Pillay handed the money to me slowly, like it was his blood. Indians can be like that with money. I looked from the little girl to the older one. Then I pocketed the money and left.

"We'll call the police." The older girl had followed me down the street. I turned around, and she looked scared. She didn't know not to run after a tsotsi. Her father started running and shouting after her. I stared at her, then at her thin father, and laughed.

## Meena

MY GREAT-GRANDFATHER STOOD BAREBACKED AND BLACK against the grey of the dock. He was in a line of Indian men walking toward the outline of sails. It was 1860. In a few minutes, they would board the SS *Belvedere*. Begin to know the rough grain of the wood on their skin as the ship rocked. Twenty people would die of cholera on that ship before it docked in Natal. But he would survive. A pen sketch of the ship is framed in our upstairs room, a sign for my grandmother of promises made and kept.

There were many Indians, like my great-grandfather, who were lured across the sea to work in fields of sugarcane. Now my dad bought large bags of sugar to sell in the store.

So yes, I was a descendant of desperate people who had come looking for a better life. I didn't usually think like this. Most of the time, I was thinking of bones and blood and incisions, school exams and being irritated doing shifts at the store. The way the cash register drawer always seemed to jam. Why didn't Papa for God's sake get a new one? But the tsotsi's visit had changed things. His burgundy vinyl shoes. The sound of them against the floor as he walked away from the counter with our money in his pocket. His laugh. He'd said he was from the Black Berets, but he wore a fedora.

At dinner, Papa didn't say anything about the tsotsi to my grandmother. But of course, Jyoti kept asking about him, calling him the fancy man. Like he was an old friend of ours who had dropped by to give her a treat. I told her to keep quiet, but that only encouraged her.

Papa helped himself to more food and ate as if he'd completely forgotten the tsotsi.

I got up from dinner, putting a last piece of roti in my mouth.

"Falling out, it's falling out." Jyoti pointed at the roti.

My grandmother made a disapproving noise.

"Where are you going?" Papa asked.

"Out. Study group."

Papa said nothing. The mid-year exams were coming, and Papa knew as well as I did how hard you had to work to get into medical school. The idea that his own daughter might become a doctor gave him something to look forward to.

Study group was the best thing to say when I was going to a SASO meeting, and Krishni and her brother Prinesh were good camouflage. Krishni was also trying to get into medical school. Prinesh, who was older, with his neatly groomed hair that shone from hair oil, liked telling people that he had met special requirements and was already at Wits University. My grandmother liked repeating the same nice things about Prinesh every dinner.

Prinesh told me when the SASO meetings were happening—even though he knew my grandmother and father disapproved. I don't even know why he went to the meetings. He never really talked about politics. He just agreed with whatever anyone else said.

It was a twenty-minute walk from President Street to Wits. We took Rissik Street, skirting past old, red-brick office buildings with their elaborate hooded entrances and newer buildings that smelled of paint and cement. Every few minutes or so, headlights from cars flared up behind us. Ever since the tsotsi came, I kept thinking that every car, every footstep was him or one of his men. Tossing their cigarettes, picking their nails with knives.

I needed a plan for when he came next.

The campus was quiet when we got there. We stopped at corners of cement-and-brick walls and watched for policemen.

Because of the arrests over the past few weeks, the SASO meeting days changed often. Last week there were four policemen standing outside the back entrance of Senate

House. They hadn't questioned us. To be neither black nor white was to have different, unclear loyalties. It wasn't assumed that we were political agitators.

And anyway, Prinesh always seemed so innocent.

Still, it was worrying that the police had sent four policemen to disrupt what was, for now, still a legal meeting.

We circled from the back of Senate House to its front, passing the long flat steps below the pillared façade.

PRINESH PICKED SEATS AT THE BACK AS A SMALL GROUP OF university students collected at a table that held a thermos of coffee. They poured the coffee into plastic cups, not noticing how some of it dripped to the floor and onto their shoes. I scanned for missing faces. Of the usual four people chairing the meeting, one was missing. A smaller man had taken his place. He stood at the table, his eyes darting to different points in the room. He hadn't taken off his beanie, which looked dusty. I imagined he was the kind of man who didn't sleep in beds, but in hidden spaces. A man who wasn't supposed to be here. Not officially.

Ten minutes later, younger students burst through the door and took seats at the front. On the left side of the front row two students in blue cardigans sat on either side of a guy in a loose, green-and-yellow printed shirt that went to his knees. He was having a good time, nodding at people he knew, his arms spread over the backs of the chairs next to him. The boys either side of him were silent, strangely alert, as if they were his bodyguards. One of the boys had a pair of sunglasses resting above his forehead. The girl who I'd given my pamphlets to wasn't here. It was silly to imagine she might be.

I learned later that the boy in the printed shirt was the one who everyone would follow on the day the protests started. His name was Masi Ngumede.

But all I knew then was what I had read in the newspaper

the previous week. A judge had sent four students from Morris Isaacson School to jail for planning to blow up the Orlando Power Station with help from trained ANC operatives in Mozambique—the Umkhonto We Sizwe. Some of the SASO members at this meeting must have been working with them. But something had gone wrong.

Like me, Prinesh was staring at the students sitting at the front. He looked scared.

"What's the problem?" I asked. He didn't reply. A light film of sweat had collected over his narrow cheeks and forehead, his small moustache. The sweat made his face look like a mask.

The man with the beanie at the front stood and saluted the students. Then he slapped the table. "The Afrikaans Medium Decree Act." He slapped it a few more times. "Forcing the language of the oppressors on our brothers and sisters here. Making sure that they will be servants to the Afrikaner. Do we accept this?"

"No." People stood up. "No, no, no!"

"We're leaving. Now," Prinesh said, pushing Krishni in front of him and trying to do the same with me. I shrugged him off, but followed. We pushed past the crowded room to the exit, Krishni accidentally tipping over the thermos. I picked it up. Eyes on me, including the boy with the green and yellow shirt, and his friend with the sunglasses. I wasn't sure they wanted me here. And we went out into the street. I felt the coffee bleed through my clothes. Krishni and Prinesh walked ahead, fast, but I lagged behind, nervous, angry.

And not just because Prinesh had forced us to leave the meeting early.

All I could do was sit in the shop, study, collect pamphlets, pictures of Steve Biko's determined face, with his large forehead. He's a doctor too, I wanted to tell my father. But I never would. Somewhere out there was the book of pamphlets that I'd thrust into a stranger's hands. All I could do was wait.

## WHEN MORNING COMES

Maybe it was better that I had given the girl my pamphlets. After I'd seen the car again, I knew I should never have kept them. If she tried to report me, I could turn the story on her. As my grandmother liked to say, police would always believe an Indian over a black.

The two figures ahead of me were toy-sized pieces in the dark. I ran to catch up.