



# In the valley of death

Zoe Bikwana

## CHARACTERS:

NARRATOR:	Person who tells the story	NONTOZIMBI:	Nonkosi's mother
PHINDISWA:	30-year-old single mother	SIBONELO:	Handsome young man in MamGcina's village
MAMGCINA:	Nonkosi's sister		

## SCENE 1

*Phindiswa is at her mother's funeral. She walks with the other mourners to the grave site singing the hymn "Bakhangela Kuwe Nkosi". A violinist plays the melody and the sad notes drift across the cemetery as the sun begins to drop and the shadows lengthen.*

NARRATOR: This story is a sad one. It is the story of daughters who never knew the love of their mothers; and of mothers who kept secrets from their daughters.

*The mourners gather around the grave as Nonkosi's coffin is lowered into the ground. They scatter earth over it. When the ceremony is over Phindiswa and MamGcina remain behind at the grave. Phindiswa helps MamGcina over to a bench nearby and they sit together.*

PHINDISWA: MamGcina, I buried Mama today but I never knew her; she didn't let me. She never tried to get to know me either. Sometimes I think she hated me – she used to look at me with such anger. Why did she abandon me when I was a baby? Why was I sent to live with her and my half-brothers when I was eleven? I have so many questions that I need answers to – so many things that I want to ask her, but it's too late, so I am asking you.

MAMGCINA: Perhaps you are right and it is time to tell you the truth. But I must warn you that it is a sad and hurtful story. Your mother did to you what her mother did to her. I will tell you so you don't do the same to your own daughter.

*MamGcina sighs and pulls her blanket around her shoulders.*

MAMGCINA: It started a long time ago with your grandmother – my sister, Nontozimbi. We were still in high school when we went to the river to fetch water that day ...

NARRATOR: It was sunny that morning as MamGcina and her sister left their kraal and walked down the path through the long summer grass. They chatted as they walked to the river.

NONTOZIMBI: Gcina, my sister, do you think our brother will let me leave our homestead to start a life for myself in the city?

MAMGCINA: Yho, Zimbi, you know how strict our brother is. I don't see him agreeing to let you go. Khona, why do you want to leave the village? It's not like we are struggling; bhuti tries his best to provide for us.

NONTOZIMBI: You are right. We aren't really struggling, but life could be better. Look at us walking to the river to get water when in the city we could be turning a tap and watching the water pour out. Besides, I can't see myself living my dream in this village.

MAMGCINA: *(clapping her hands)* Hee, hehake Ntombi yakwa Gcina, uthini na apha kum, ufuna ukuba ngumlungu? Oh wow, Ntombi yakwa, you're telling me you want to be a white person?

*MamGcina stops in her tracks She has noticed Sibonelo standing on the river bank.*

MAMGCINA: *(laughing and nudging her sister)* There's your admirer. Isn't he handsome?

NONTOZIMBI: Hayi suka! Leave me alone.

MAMGCINA: Who would not want to be seen in the company of such a man? He's got it all: the looks, the wealth – you can see that his kraal is full of cows. With him you may have the life that you want.

NONTOZIMBI: And he dresses smartly too. But he's still a village boy and I don't like village boys. My dream is to be in the city with a city man who will give me the life I deserve. I want to live like white women do. I want to do as I please – have hot showers, do my nails all day long if I want to – that's the life I would like to live; not this.

SIBONELO: *(spots MamGcina and Nontozimbi on the path)* AmaGcina amahle, I'm so blessed to have come across you two beautiful girls. Molweni, zinkosazana. Indeed, my ancestors are with me today.

MAMGCINA and NONTOZIMBI: Molo, bhuti.

SIBONELO: I decided to take a walk to listen to the sound of the river and the croaking of the frogs. I had no idea that I would see you two. Today is indeed my lucky day.

MAMGCINA: What makes you say so? Are we your good-luck charms?

SIBONELO: *(laughs)* Meeting you has given me an opportunity to have a brief word with you, Nontozimbi – if you will allow me. Gcina, may I please borrow your sister for a few minutes while you're busy filling your bucket?

*The girls stare at each other and Nontozimbi looks down shyly.*

SIBONELO: I promise not to keep you for long, Nkosazana.

MAMGCINA: *(to Nontozimbi)* Kulungile, hamba wethu sisi. I'll fill the bucket for you.

*Nontozimbi and Sibonelo disappear among the dark green willow trees where they can't be seen by Gcina or the other girls who are filling their buckets at the river.*

SIBONELO: *(taking Nontozimbi's hand)* My dear Nonto, I am very happy to have met you today to talk to you face to face. Your reply to the letter I wrote you a week ago was unclear. I don't know whether there was a 'yes' to my request to be your lover or not?

NONTOZIMBI: But the message was clear, njena bhuti. I can't be your lover – well, not yet at least. I have not made up my mind and, besides, I have other plans.

*Sibonelo pulls Nontozimbi close and tries to kiss her.*

NONTOZIMBI: What are you doing? I came here to fetch water not to kiss you.

SIBONELO: I know, but just a little while – this won't take long.

*Sibonelo pulls Nontozimbi to the ground. He starts to kiss her.*

NONTOZIMBI: *(pushing him away)* Sibonelo, no! What are you doing?

SIBONELO: Don't worry, Nkosazana. Today is my lucky day and yours too. From today onwards we'll be intertwined like a rope, you and I.

*Suddenly Sibonelo forces himself on to Nontozimbi. MamGcina doesn't hear anything from the river. She has already filled her bucket and Nontozimbi's when Nontozimbi comes running out of from among the willow trees towards her. Her clothes are a mess and she is distressed.*

MAMGCINA: What is it, my sister? What did Sibonelo say to you?

*Sibonelo emerges from behind the trees.*

SIBONELO: Nonto, please forgive me, nkosazana. Believe me, I love you. Just rest assured that I am yours and you are mine. I want to send some cows to your kraal if you will let me.

NONTOZIMBI: *(shouting through her tears)* Save your stinking cows. I ... I do ... not ... want to hear from you or see you ever again!

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## SCENE 2

*It is getting late in the graveyard. MamGcina pauses in the telling of the story of Phindiswa's mother. Phindiswa wants to know how the story ends. She takes MamGcina's hand and squeezes it.*

PHINDISWA: What happened then, MamGcina?

MAMGCINA: My sister never breathed a word of what happened with Sibonelo among those leafy green trees. But from that day on she complained about a painful stomach and she refused to fetch water from the river.

PHINDISWA: Was she pregnant?

MAMGCINA: Yes, and Sibonelo was the father. Nine months later your mother was born. The elders wanted to know who the father was and she told them she did not know.

PHINDISWA: Why didn't she tell them it was Sibonelo?

MAMGCINA: She did not want to have anything to do with Sibonelo. She knew that if the elders knew of it, they would have made him marry her and they would have thought it was a good match. Our brother would also have been pleased to have a man who could bring wealth to the family kraal. But Nontozimbi hated him and she had other plans – to go to the city and escape the village. The elders threatened to take her to 'Enkundleni' kwa Sibonda. It was rumoured that there the elders knew how to force the truth out of a person. But before they could go, she named Golomile, one of the boys in our village, as the father of her unborn child.

PHINDISWA: Why him?

MAMGCINA: He was one of the notorious boys in the village; for a girl to have anything to do with him was a humiliation to the girl's family, so my sister reckoned that accusing him instead would save her the pain of having to meet Sibonelo again.

PHINDISWA: Did the elders believe her?

MAMGCINA: They did and since Golomile didn't have a good reputation none of the elders believed him when he said she was lying and he wasn't the father. They forced him to go and work for his soon-to-be-wife and child.

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