

Bulelani, My Brother

By Dorothy Dyer

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CHAPTER 1

Gugulethu, Cape Town, 1976

“Your brother is so handsome,” Nwabisa giggled.

“You mean Sipho?” I said innocently. “Yes, he’s cute. But a bit young for you.”

“Not Sipho, man. You know I’m talking about Bulelani!” she said and threw a pillow at me. “But he’s very serious. Does he ever smile?”

I smiled. “Sometimes. He’s got very serious lately though. He’s arguing a lot with my mother.”

I tried on some lipstick Nwabisa had brought. My mother didn’t like make-up so it was exciting to experiment. I looked

in the cracked mirror above my cupboard. “This pink doesn’t show up.”

“It’s more for white skins,” Nwabisa said.

“I wish I didn’t have such a dark skin,” I sighed.

“Hey!” It was my brother shouting from outside my room.
“How can you say that?”

Nwabisa looked at me in shock. “Do you think he heard what I said about him?”

I shrugged my shoulders at her. “What are you talking about?” I called back to my brother, and he peered round the door.

“I was passing your room and heard you complain about your looks,” he said. “Your skin is dark and beautiful, my sister.” He wagged his finger at me. “Not like those so-called whites with their pink and red blotches. They would do anything to have such a smooth, dark skin as yours. Haven’t you seen pictures of them on the beach, trying to go brown? You girls are beautiful.”

And then he winked at us and his head disappeared round the door.

“He said I’m beautiful,” said Nwabisa, flopping back on my bed. I didn’t have the heart to point out that he was talking about us both.

“Imagine whites wanting to be black,” I giggled. “They’d soon stay out of the sun if they started having to carry passes and get caught by police all the time.” We both laughed at the absurd idea.

The next morning after I washed, I looked at my skin differently. As I smoothed cream into it before I went to bed I thought that, maybe, my dark brown skin was pretty after all.

That was typical of Bulelani. Always making me feel special. He wasn’t like my cousin who teased us, and sometimes even bullied us to make him tea or bring him a meal. Bulelani had always listened to me, laughed at my stories, encouraged me to stand up for myself.

He has also always been tolerant of my fears. When we went to the beach at Christmas he would stop my uncle taking me into the waves. I used to scream in fear, and my auntie would call me a baby, and tell me I should be paddling and having fun like the other kids. But then Bulelani would guide me back to the safety of my mother and her big rug, and Tupperwares of polony sandwiches and sweet juice.

“She doesn’t have to like the sea now,” he would say. “She will enjoy it when she is older, and ready.” And I would stay there and try to read my aunt’s magazines as Bulelani went back to the sea himself.

CHAPTER 2

I was glad when Bulelani agreed to come with me to town, to the pharmacy, to buy Mama’s medicines. Lately he had been

out often, and sometimes too distracted to notice me. So I was really happy that he was coming. A day together with just us, not with Mama or little Siphos, and not his friends who were taking him away from us these days.

And I was also nervous of town, with its 'whites-only' benches, and white policemen. I didn't feel safe there. It felt like there was always a law I may be breaking.

It was also like the world that I saw on the Dlokweni's TV; the one with the glossy, white, plastic models in the shop windows, wearing expensive clothes. There were lots of real white people too, most of them also in smart clothes and all looking important and busy. They reminded me of Mama's madam and baas, and they scared me. But they hardly looked at us – it sometimes felt that we were invisible to them.

I managed to get Mama's medicine using all the right forms, and then we went to pay. I had to wait for ages, even though I was there before a white woman who looked like her white-blue hair had been glued in place. Bulelani was walking up and down the aisles, so he didn't notice the assistant looking right over me to help the white woman. I knew he would have caused a scene.

I didn't often encounter whites. The assistant was as rude as many of them. She had been chatting to the woman with the glued hair, talking about the wind, the weather. Finally, she looked at me waiting.

"Blacks that side," she said, pointing to an empty counter. I started walking over but then she called me back. "Oh, Hilda's on lunch, come here," she said impatiently. She just put her

hand out to me to get the piece of paper I was clutching. My English dried up, and I mutely handed it over. She shuffled back and got the medication into a packet, and handed it to me.

“Thank you,” I stammered, but she had already turned her back.

Bulelani found me in the paying queue, next to a display of little chocolates, each one wrapped in shiny paper. I picked one up to look at it. R10 for this tiny little thing?

“Don’t touch!” A white shop assistant was immediately behind me. I quickly put the chocolate back. “Sorry madam,” I mumbled. She gave me a sharp look and then turned away.

Once we were on the bus back home Bulelani put his hand into his pocket and brought out a little, red, glossy ball. I gasped. “You stole one?!”

He handed it to me. “It’s immoral. Importing chocolate like that for the rich while us blacks live in poverty. That’s where the real theft is. Mama works like a dog and the whites get rich.”

I looked around. Had anyone seen him? Was anyone following us? “You could have got arrested!” I felt close to tears.

“Don’t worry, I’m careful,” he said. “I wouldn’t go to jail for that kind of shit.” He pointed at it. “Come on, I saw you looking at them,” he said. “I want to see you enjoying it.”

I still felt a knot in my stomach from the fright. But I unwrapped the chocolate slowly, and the smell was sweet and tempting. I bit half of it and offered him the other, but he shook his head. I popped it all in my mouth. It didn't taste very different from the usual slabs we bought, except for a strange taste of alcohol, which wasn't very nice. But I loved it. Because it was from my brother, and he had stolen it for me.

That night I wrote about my day that I would never forget, and carefully stuck the red, shiny wrapping into my diary. It was a symbol of Bulelani's love.

CHAPTER 3

But Bulelani was changing, along with the world outside our home. Every night we listened to the news on the radio. There was so much trouble everywhere. It made me feel terrified. Students, young people like us, had been shot and killed in Soweto.

That night I couldn't take it anymore, and I got up to leave, because my fear just choked me.

"Where are you going?" Bulelani said to me. "History is being made here." He touched my arm. "We are going to change things now." But I couldn't listen.

"I've got homework," I said, and rushed off to the room I shared with my mother. I envied Siphon, still so small that no one expected him to do anything except play.

Bulelani started going out more and more, and even when he was home we didn't hear his laugh like we used to. And he didn't have time for me as he used to. One Sunday at lunch his friend came over to call him just when we were in the middle of our special meal, chicken and rice, that Mama and me had spent the morning cooking. He pushed his chair back to leave.

"We are eating, Bulelani," my mother said.

"I will eat later," he replied. "This is important."

"How can you be like this?" My mother was angry. "You sit with us now. And you need to focus on your schoolwork. Not go to all these meetings. You will get into trouble."

Sipho started crying. It was not often that Mama raised her voice. Bulelani ignored him.

"Ma, the time has come," he said. "We've got to stand up now. It's our chance. We can't leave it all to the people in Soweto."

"And throw away your future? And maybe even your life?" We seldom hear my mother shout. "You can't do that to me after how hard I work for this family!"

"I am doing this for all of us!" Bulelani shouted back. "What life have we got here? I don't care about throwing it away. You may be able to pretend that life is fine, and have your Tupperware parties and your teas! You may be able to forget

how you are treated in your own country! But the youth are rising and you will be thanking us later.”

Sipho started wailing harder, and I pulled him onto my lap to sooth him.

Bulelani looked at me at the kitchen table, over our Sunday tablecloth with its happy pink and yellow flowers. “You should stay at school for the meetings as well, Ntombi. It is important.”

CHAPTER 4

I felt a jolt of fear. “Ntombi’s too young,” my mother interrupted.

“Too young?!” my brother exclaimed. “She’s sixteen. There are kids younger than her who have joined the meetings. She can speak for herself.” He turned to me. “Don’t you want to come?”

I so wanted to please him, to see him smile in approval, with those dimples in his cheeks. And now he didn’t seem to forgive me for my fears. So how could I tell him of the fear that froze me when I heard of what was happening in Soweto, and imagined it happening here? The world was already a dangerous place. I was terrified of the white men in that blue uniform, with those enormous guns.

“Someone has to help Mama,” I said. “She needs me to help with Sipho.”

Bulelani clicked his tongue angrily and I felt a hot shame.

“We would never have spoken to our elders like you do, in my day,” said my mother.

“Well it isn’t your day,” said Bulelani. “It’s ours. And we are going to make sure that things don’t stay the way they were in ‘your day’”.

He went out, slamming the door behind him. My mother and I looked at each other over Siphó’s head. Then she sighed.

“I don’t know what to do, Ntombi,” she said. She came over to pick up Siphó gently, and put him back in his chair. We finished our meal in silence.

That night, after I had helped Mama clean up and taken Siphó to bed, I went to write in my diary, and saw the red sweet wrapper. It made me sad. I knew I had disappointed Bulelani. And I was frightened to think of the days to come, when I might fail him further.

I couldn’t write about what he had said, how he had stormed out. I closed the book and put it back in the drawer.

CHAPTER 5

The next day my mother came back tired and late from work. I had fetched Siphó from crèche ages ago. “Ntombi, make me some tea,” she sighed, as she settled down and put her swollen feet up on a chair in front of her. “I had to take the little kids to the park,” she said. “It felt even further than

usual today.” Then she smiled. “But Charlotte had a lovely time.”

Charlotte. With her big blue eyes and her cute little white girl curls. I hated it when my mother talked about her. I suppose I was jealous. My mother should be at home with me, or taking Siphon to the park, not wiping another child’s bottom. Bulelani was right. Things were not fair.

There was a knock at the door. I went to open it. There was Vika, Bulelani’s best friend, his glasses and his smile twinkling. “Good evening, beautiful Ntombi. How long has it been since I saw you last?” He had always been Bulelani’s best friend. And even though he was part of the meetings now, he still could joke and tease.

“Too long,” I laughed. “We’ve been missing you.”

“I hope you’re not coming to take my son away again,” my mother said. “Never home, that boy. And your mother says the same. You boys are looking for trouble.”

“Don’t worry about us, Mama,” Vika said. “We can look after ourselves, I promise. And speaking of my mother,” he said, and rummaged in his bag, “she sent you these.” He put a packet of the homemade sugar biscuits that his mother was famed for, on our table. “Make sure you don’t let Bulelani eat all of them.”

“Bulelani does anything he pleases these days,” my mother grumbled. “But tell your mother thank you. She is too kind.”

And soon, as my mother had predicted, the two boys left to go into the darkening evening. After supper, my mother switched on the radio. There were reports of riots and shootings. It felt like the world had gone mad. My mother switched it off quickly. I went to bed early but did not sleep until I heard Bulelani come home late that night.

CHAPTER 6

I wasn't surprised when it happened. I felt like I had been waiting for it. We were in Biology when an older boy popped his head around the door and interrupted the teacher. "We are marching. You must be at the gate in twenty minutes."

"Excuse me!" the Biology teacher shouted, trying to pretend that things were normal, and the boy just a naughty schoolboy. But the boy had gone.

The whole class looked at each other. Bulelani and his friends had been going to meetings after school for days, there had been rumours, reports of riots in other townships, and police cars had started patrolling the township. It had felt like a big bonfire waiting for a little spark from a match. I knew that this was the spark. I felt sick.

Mr Khumalo tried to continue his lesson. But we could hear other students in the corridors outside. And we were all talking.

"What are we going to do?" I asked Nwabisa.

Her eyes were shining with excitement. “Do? We are going to march.”

Bulelani had educated me enough that I knew things were wrong here. I had seen the madam’s house compared to ours, had even walked past Charlotte’s school once, with its big green lawns and trees and beautiful redbrick buildings. I knew how unfair, how bad things were, that we had no vote, had to carry passes. But I didn’t feel brave enough to fight for my rights. I just wanted to go home.

There was no chance of that. The school gates were locked, and the students were buzzing like a hive about to explode out and sting whatever was in its path. One boy started shaking the fence like a madman.

I saw the headmaster remonstrating with Bulelani. It just would be Bulelani, in the thick of it. I saw him wave his hands, point at the gate. Eventually the caretaker shuffled forward and unlocked the padlock. The first students pushed the gates wide open and we all started walking into the street.

The front students started singing. Nwabisa grabbed my hand and sang next to me, walking tall. My voice was shaky. But singing made me feel better. We were united, strong. For a moment, I felt it was going to be alright. There were older and younger students all around me; we were safe and strong. What could happen to all of us when we were together?

We made black power salutes, started another song. I got goose-bumps. I could do this. I could help to change our land. Bulelani would be proud of me.

Sizakubadubula ngembayi-mbayi

Bazobaleka

Dubula ngembayi-mbayi

The singing made me feel powerful, like a brave soldier. But as we got to the corner of the street, there was a ripple through the crowd, the song went ragged.

“Police!”

I tried to see above the heads but I was surrounded, with no view, no way out. Then suddenly there were bangs and shouts and people started running in all directions.

“Teargas!” somebody shouted.

And then smoke was all around me. My world shrank to my burning eyes and choking lungs. I had dropped Nwabisa’s hand, or she had dropped mine. She was gone. I started running back to school, away from the smoke. Someone pushed past me, I half fell onto the gravel, bumped against a gutter. I would die under all those pounding feet!

But then I felt a strong hand grab my arm, pull me up and drag me out of the crowd. Someone guided me as I staggered away. The sounds of screams, and shots, grew fainter, and some pure air managed to enter my lungs.

CHAPTER 7

I heard myself sobbing, gasping in deep breaths. “Tears; good to get rid of the teargas,” I heard a familiar voice say. It was Vika. We were in a little dusty road next to the school, out of sight of the main road. A few students were near us, leaning against the wall, wiping their eyes, coughing.

“Take the back streets home now,” he said to me. He gently tilted my head towards him. “You’re okay?” His face was blurred, I could see his eyes were red, but his mouth was resolute.

“Are you coming home too?” I asked. He shook his head, patted my cheek and disappeared back into the main street, from where I could still hear screams, songs, and the sound of firing. Some other students followed Vika. I started running home.

Mama was waiting at the door. “You’re alright! I heard there was trouble. Oh, I’ve been so worried. Madam even let me come home early.” She embraced me, looked at my face. “Your eyes!”

“I’ll be alright,” I said, collapsing onto the couch. It was only now, on this familiar blue cushion, that I felt my heart beating as if it would jump out of my mouth, felt that sick fear of being hunted. How could anyone hate me so much that they wanted to hurt and kill me?

“Ntombi, we need to fetch Siphos. I was waiting for one of you.”

“Won’t Mam’ Lizzie keep him longer?”

“But I want him back before dark.” My mother looked out of the window. “There will be trouble tonight.”

She started taking off her slippers, forcing her feet into shoes. I knew that I should offer to go. Yet the thought of going back into that street made me want to vomit.

But when my mother pushed open the door I knew that the guilt would be worse. “I’ll fetch him, Mama.”

She looked back at me. “You’ve had too much this afternoon already. I will go. It’s more dangerous for you as a school student. The police will want to catch you.”

I knew she was partly right. But what if she were hurt? I imagined Bulelani: ‘You let Mama go out into the trouble?’

“I will change out of my uniform. And then I will go.”

CHAPTER 8

Out on the street it was deserted. I rushed down the familiar streets to Mam’ Lizzie’s. It looked like no-one was there but when I knocked she opened immediately, and I saw lots of tiny faces with big eyes looking out at me. I scooped Siphon up and started the walk home.

Then I saw a police car coming slowly down the empty street and I felt my legs beginning to tremble. “Police!” shrieked Siphon. He dropped my hand and started running away. In two

steps I had caught him and smacked him hard. Running away from a police car – did he want us to get shot? I had heard all the stories.

As Sipho yelled and cried, the police car slowed down. A white face peered out at me; there was a black one next to him. “What are you doing on the street?” the black policeman asked.

“Fetching my brother,” I said, trying to stop my voice from shaking.

“Go home fast,” he answered. “There are troublemakers around.”

I nearly fell to the ground with relief as they sped up and passed me. Troublemakers! They were the troublemakers. I felt a flash of rage. Then I hoped no-one had seen me talking to them. That would be even more trouble for me.

When I got home Bulelani was home too, and Mrs Dlokweni, having tea with Mama. “The township’s gone mad,” Mrs Dlokweni said. “These young boys think they are the bosses now. They are telling us not to go to work tomorrow.”

“Mama,” said Bulelani. “It is time for us to rise. For too long we have been puppets and slaves of the whites.”

“We know that,” Mrs Dlokweni said. “But these young men – they even threatened my husband when he wanted to work. Have they no respect?”

“It is like a war, Mama,” said Bulelani. “We have to be strong, united; otherwise we fall.”

“Mam’ Lizzie’s daughter couldn’t even get her medicine this afternoon,” my mother said. “She will be in pain tonight.”

“I’m sorry, Mama.” Bulelani was getting impatient. “But the struggle has to come first. Otherwise nothing will ever change. We need to make sacrifices.”

Bulelani was not the gentle boy I remembered anymore. I wondered if Vika had changed like him, too. But he had been gentle and kind to me.

I had always liked Vika, I realised. However, he would never be interested in me, this cowardly little sister of Bulelani’s, who didn’t understand how politics worked. And besides, he would be far too busy now to even think of me. He and Bulelani were turning our world upside down.

That night it took me ages to go to sleep. Every time I started drifting off I would shock myself awake, my heart thudding, for a moment imagining screaming, or the clang of a teargas canister landing. And then I would have to soothe myself, listening to the sounds of the night.

CHAPTER 9

The next morning the instruction was sent out: we were all meant to go to town, for a demonstration there. Bulelani told us, his eyes alight with purpose, and went off to find the other leaders.

“Wear your school uniform,” he called back to me as he left. “The police are saying that it is agitators, not students. We want to show them who we are.” He clenched his fist in the salute. “We are making history!” he said, and went out into the chilly morning.

“You can’t go,” my mother said. “It’s dangerous. They are shooting with real guns, these police. They are mad.”

“I need to go,” I answered. Bulelani had spoken as if there was no question. How could I stay back, and let others risk their lives for what was my freedom too?

“Don’t go, Ntombi,” my mother begged. Siphon heard her words and came to put his arms around my legs. “Don’t go, Ntombi,” he repeated. “Stay with me.”

“Ntombi, Bulelani is going to be in the front, you know him,” said my mother. She came over to me, stroked my hair. “I would die if anything happened to you too.”

My mother didn’t often touch me so gently. But that wasn’t the reason I knew I would stay. I was too terrified to go. I would be sick – those terrible white men with their guns, the burning air, the screams. I would die if they caught me, I would die if they shot me. And I felt a sick shame at my cowardice.

“I will stay, Mama,” I said slowly.

But I couldn't even feel a puff of joy at the relief on her face. Because it made me feel worse. I was pretending to be kind, to hide being a coward.

The day passed slowly. I had to help my mother clean and cook, and also play with Siphon, as his school was closed too. I didn't go out. I didn't want anyone to see me. I didn't want to think of what Bulelani would say when he heard I didn't go.

The township was eerily silent and empty. Most of the young people had gone to town. And others stayed in their houses. During the morning, there were a few police vans cruising, but they disappeared, probably when they realised where the real trouble really was.

Then in the afternoon we heard the rumble of feet, of voices, of people coming back from town. My mother went over to Mrs Dlokweni, and came back with stories of teargas, shootings, arrests. "They say it was like a war zone," she told me worriedly. "They are just children!" She shook her head. I hated to see my mother so vulnerable, unprotected. She looked old.

At first, I was glad Bulelani hadn't come home, so I didn't have to face him. But then it got later. And then my worry for him got even greater than my shame. My mother grew silent, Siphon started whining. We were all in waiting.

There was a knock at the door. It wouldn't be Bulelani; he wouldn't knock. But news perhaps. I rushed to open it. There was Vika. But no smiles, no dimples today. "Is Bulelani here?" he asked, and saw the answer in my face.

My mother rushed up behind me. “What happened? Where is he?”

CHAPTER 10

Vika stepped inside, my mother closed the door behind him and leaned back on it. “Vika tell me, where’s my son?”

“Mama, I think he must have been arrested,” Vika said. My mother started wailing softly. I felt numb. “We were together,” Vika said. “Then the police told us to disperse. Bulelani went up to the front. He stepped forward to challenge the policeman with the loudhailer. I went to join him. But then they stormed us, shot teargas. I didn’t see what happened to Bulelani. I was hoping to see him here.”

He looked at me. “So, you were okay?”

“I didn’t go,” I whispered, an arrow of shame piercing the fear I felt for my brother. But Vika was hardly listening, and was giving us more information. “He will probably be at Roeland Street. I will find out more if I can.”

He led my mother to the couch. “I must go, Mama. He will be alright.” As he left, Vika said to me in a low voice, “I think there were some who died today. The police used their guns later. But I know that if Bulelani isn’t here then he was arrested. He is at least luckier than those who lost their lives.”

The evening meal was quiet. Hardly any of us ate. I couldn’t help imagining Bulelani. I had heard about what police did to prisoners. The beatings, the torture. How could Bulelani bear

it? Then I felt guilty. What about those who had lost their brothers, their sons or daughters today? How could we carry on through all this pain?

That night I couldn't sleep. I opened my diary and saw the shiny red wrapping from that far-away day when Bulelani was safe, and had stolen me a chocolate. Those police, did they not have sons? Did they not have brothers? I felt the tears in my eyes and I started to write about my brave brother.

CHAPTER 11

The next morning Mrs Dlokweni came round. She had heard that Bulelani hadn't come home and now wanted all the news. She was the one who usually gave my mother all the latest gossip. My mother was often irritated by how she knew everything first. But today I wished she was coming to give news, not get it.

“They arrested Samuel yesterday, did you hear?” she told my mother. “And Andiswe said that she had heard that Bulelani had been taken by the Security Police before the trouble even started – early in the morning. But then I heard from Ntsika that he had seen him later, during the shooting so—”

But my mother shook her head wearily. “I don't know, Yola. All I know is that they have my son. And I don't know where he is. I need to go to town today and find him.”

“Let me know if you want me to come with you,” Mrs Dlokweni said.

You just want to be the first one to know, and then to tell everyone, I thought, but I knew I was being unfair. Mama Dlokweni loved news, but she was kind too.

“Thank you, my dear, but I have Ntombi,” my mother said. “Can you just look after Sipho?”

Together we got ready to go to town. Every time I felt a wave of fear I would think of Bulelani: hurt, lonely, beaten. And I would squeeze my hands into fists and feel stronger.

When we got to the big police station, called Caledon Square, there were many people milling around, and lots of white and black men in uniform. My mother and I held each other’s hands tightly as we pushed our way to the desk.

“I am looking for my son,” my mother tried to say. A policeman waved her away. “Wait, girl. Can’t you see we are busy?”

“Please,” she said. “He is a young boy. He didn’t come home yesterday.”

“You people need to control your children,” the man said. “Can’t you see there are lots of people here? We can’t help you till we have processed everyone.”

“But—” my mother tried to say. The man had turned his back to her.

Another woman in a purple hat came up; she had heard us talking. “I am also waiting,” she said. “My daughter.” She gulped. “But they have moved them, taken them to different

places. That lady said they would release the names this evening.”

A young man standing nearby touched my mother’s shoulder. “Mama, I’m sorry, but they will not give you information now,” he said. “Give me your details. We are compiling names and tracking people. Go home and we will send a message to you as soon as we know.”

A policeman was already shouting at everyone to leave the office. My mother and I looked at each other. I was sure Bulelani would know what to do in this situation. I wondered if he were nearby, if he could feel that we were here. The woman in the purple hat started laboriously writing her name down for the young man, and then my mother did the same.

“Out, julle mense!” the policeman was shouting, herding us as if we were lost cattle. “Out! Otherwise I will arrest you.”

CHAPTER 12

Outside in the street, my mother wrote down Bulelani’s name and our address, plus the neighbour’s phone number that we sometimes used. And then we started the long journey back home. It felt painful, getting further away from where we thought Bulelani was. My mother turned her face to the window and didn’t speak for the whole bus ride.

I couldn’t think of anything but Bulelani. I had to stop imagining him being tortured, or murdered, by those white men with hard faces.

I got out my diary and started writing again about him, about how when we were little he had taught me chess. And how he tried to teach me how to box, when I was bothered by the bully Andile down the road. Then one day Bulelani had followed me to school and then jumped on Andile when he was coming to steal my lunch. He had shouted and threatened him, but then he and Andile had talked and he had learnt that Andile didn't get any lunch. So every Monday my mother would put in an extra sandwich for Andile, and my brother got other people to help too. That was the kind of person Bulelani was. I felt myself smiling in pride as I wrote the words.

I heard Vika's familiar three knocks at the door. My mother rushed to open it. "I heard news," he said. "Someone saw him at the Woodstock Police Station. Peter was there looking for his brother. And Bulelani called to him – they were moving him somewhere. He was in the passage."

"How did he look?" my mother asked.

"Fine, he was fine," Vika said, not looking at her, and my heart jumped in fear. What was he not telling us? Vika saw my face, came over to where I was sitting. "What's this?" he asked, pointing at my diary.

"Nothing," I said, embarrassed. But he saw the word 'Bulelani'.

"What are you writing?"

"Just something about Bulelani," I said. "It soothes me when I'm feeling so worried."

“Can I read it?” Without waiting for an answer, he pulled it towards him and started reading. Then he looked up.

“Ntombi, this is really good. You write well.”

I felt my cheeks warm up in happy embarrassment.

“Ntombi, can I take these pages?” he asked. “I want to show them to someone. Would that be okay?”

I nodded, speechless. Gently he tore out the two pages from my diary, so it didn’t spoil the whole book. “I will bring it back,” he said. He left soon after, and I noticed he had folded my pages carefully and put them into his pocket.

CHAPTER 13

The next two days were the longest of our lives. I didn’t go to school – I didn’t even know if school was on; many people were not going. There were demonstrations in several different places that we heard about.

Each day Mama had to get up in the morning, after tossing and turning all night with worry about Bulelani, and put on her pink overall and apron and doek to go to Charlotte’s family. I stayed at home with Siphon, and waited for news. It felt like the world was going to end.

On the third morning Mrs Dlokweni came round early, before we had even warmed the water for porridge. “Ntombi, you are in the paper!” she said, waving a newspaper in her hands.

“What?!” My mother grabbed it from her, spread it out on the table. There was a headline: ‘My brother is a good person’. And there was my story about Bulelani! About how I loved him, about how special he was, and about how I missed him and feared for him. Underneath it had my name, and a sentence about the fact that Bulelani had been arrested in the recent protests.

I felt like I was about to faint. My writing, in typed letters, all over the newspaper! What would happen now? Would police come after me? Would I be in trouble? But underneath the familiar swarm of worries that buzzed in my head there was a different feeling, a feeling of pride. This newspaper had thought that my writing was good enough for others to read.

My mother was reading it and crying. “Oh, Ntombi, oh Bulelani!” she said and came over and hugged me. “This story makes me weep, my girl. How can you share our pain with the world like this?” But she wasn’t asking angrily.

“I didn’t know, Mama,” I replied. “It must have been Vika. Remember how he took the writing from my diary? This is it.”

“What is that boy thinking,” my mother said, wiping her tears away with her apron. “Why does he want everyone to know about us?”

“Vika is a good boy, even though he is involved in all this trouble,” said Mrs Dlokweni. “He must have had his reasons.”

She was right. He did have his reasons. We heard on the radio how white people were phoning in, white women who had

sons, who were moved by my story. “Where is Bulelani?” they asked. “He needs to go home.”

In the newspaper the next day there were letters about me, about Bulelani. All of them except one were showing care, concern about what had happened to him. The one letter said that if he had been in the demonstrations he wasn't innocent, because he was asking for trouble. But that was the only negative one.

That afternoon our door never stopped flying open to the next neighbour or friend who had seen the letter, or heard about it. I wasn't used to people wanting to talk to me.

Even Dumi, the serious student who never smiled, popped in. “Well done,” he said to me, before he went off to a meeting. I felt a fraud. I didn't write it for anyone else but me. I had never thought of it as a letter of protest. But here were people congratulating me as if I had done something brave.

Vika came too. “Vika,” I said. Just seeing him made me laugh and cry. He was the closest thing to Bulelani, but also something very different.

“I hope you don't mind,” he said. “It was so good. I knew it would make some whites sit up and see what was going on.” He smiled at me. “Your letter is doing its magic. Your words are doing their work.”

CHAPTER 14

Later that evening that we heard a commotion outside. My mother and I peered out at the sounds of singing, and

chanting. I felt my usual fear. Where there was singing and chanting, trouble would soon follow. I started drawing back from the window, when my mother gave a strangled cry. “Bulelani, my boy, Bulelani!”

The singing faded, and the group parted. There was Bulelani, making the black power salute and shouting “Amandla!” as the group responded. Then he saw us. His clothes were torn, his face was swollen and there was a cut on his arm. But he smiled at us, and the group hung back as he approached.

My mother ran towards him, crying, hugging him. He hugged her back for a while, then gently extricated himself. I stepped forward and hugged him too. He felt thinner, he smelled of sweat, but he was my brother back, and I could feel he was as strong as he had ever been.

We went inside. Some of the comrades stayed and talked as Bulelani ate and drank. Mama put all the food we had on the table, said nothing when the comrades sat on all our chairs and took over our house.

Bulelani told them the police had wanted names, names of student leaders, but he hadn't given them any. They asked if the police had beaten him. Bulelani looked at my mother, who was busy at the stove mixing a bowl of scone mixture, to make Bulelani's favourite treat. He nodded, pointed to his face.

Then Vika came, as most of the comrades left. Bulelani stood up and they embraced. Vika turned to me. “You know that you can thank your sister for your release,” he said. Bulelani and I both looked at him, shocked.

Vika told him the story of the article, of the uproar it had caused. “I wondered,” Bulelani said. “I didn’t tell them names. I know they still wanted to break me. Then suddenly I heard someone in the station ask for Bulelani Govuzela. I thought they were going to take me for interrogation again. But they let me go.”

He sat in silence for a moment, shaking his head. “White people. There are many sons and brothers being tortured, killed. What makes me so different?” He frowned. “Released because of white people’s pity.”

I didn’t care why he had been released. I would have even gone on a demonstration, even been in the front, if it would have meant his release. He was my beloved brother. But I knew what he meant, so I didn’t say anything.

His face cleared as he looked at me. “Thank you, my sister. I can’t say that I wanted to stay there. But I cannot help thinking of the others, still in their cells, still getting tortured by those pigs.”

“It is a pity you can’t write a story about all the people in prison,” Vika said.

“I couldn’t—” I started saying.

“I’m not being serious,” Vika said. “But, words can be as powerful as weapons. Perhaps that will be your role in the struggle.” He smiled at me.

I looked at Bulelani, who was nodding. Perhaps they were right.

“You are right, Vika,” my brother said. “And perhaps one soldier is enough for this family.” He frowned and looked at me. “Sisi, I am going to leave the country. I managed to talk to Ntsika in the van and I know what to do now.”

I knew then that I was losing a brother to the struggle.

I felt tears prick my eyes. But I felt calmer inside than I had for a long time. I wasn't very brave. But perhaps I could do something with words to help change things to make our lives better, to make Siphos life better. Not only to write for white newspapers, but to help everyone, even people like my mother, and the young comrades, so they did not have to fight so much when we all wanted the same things. And we all could help, in different ways.

I looked at Vika. “And you?”

“I am staying,” he said quietly. “There is a lot to do here too.” He smiled at me. And I saw his dimple that I hadn't seen for a long time.

There probably wouldn't be much space for romance in future dark days. But I couldn't help feeling another kind of hope entirely.

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