

by force

Nokuzola Dyantyi-Achi

Ngolunya

Ukukhula kwilali yase Mhlakulo kwakumnandi, umntu ongumzali engumzali kumntana wonke welali. Ndingumntana wentombi yakwa Mnguni, abazali bam babengatshatanga. Ndizalekwe eKapa ndaze ndakhulela ezilalini kumakhulu wam. Ndikhulile ndikhuliswa ngumakhulu umama ozala umama. Wayengumntu oziselelayo ke kwiziselo ezinxilisayo ezonwabela ngohlobo lwake.

Growing up in Mhlakulo village in the Eastern Cape was a pleasant experience. A parent was a parent to all children. I am a child born out of an Nguni girl in Cape Town. My parents were not married, so I was raised by my mother's mother in the rural areas. My grandmother drank alcohol and was just enjoying and living her life that way.

One day my grandmother left me at a neighbour's house – the house she usually left me when she went to the places where she regularly enjoyed her alcoholic drinks. I was six years of age and remember that day as if it was yesterday. The sun was shining, the sky clear, the weather mild and beautiful. I was just playing outside with other kids, running around, enjoying my day.

Then a young man arrived where we were playing. He lived in this house where my grandmother usually left me. I knew him, I trusted him. He was like an older brother. But he turned my day into a horror game, making me regret the day I was born. He vanquished my life and steered sorrow and hatred in me towards myself, making me feel as if I am dirty.

I was still playing when he grabbed me by the wrist. 'Come!' he said, with an unrecognizable, monstrous, creepy voice, and dragged me away. Despite this my instincts did not warn me of any danger or trouble as he was our neighbour's relative. Besides, I knew of nothing that could go wrong so initially I thought it part of a game. He dragged me to a half-built rondavel situated so far from other houses that I began to worry. He pushed open the door. Once inside, he closed it and looked around as if to make sure that it was only the two of us.

He toppled me over so that I lay on my back. I was startled. I have never seen him in this kind of state. I panicked, then became fearful, then numb with shock staring up at him in utter terror.

'My brother, please can I go play, I am missing my turns in our game?' I said this in a shivering small voice, hoping that this will make him change his mind seeing I was actually a little child who really only liked to play. It didn't happen the way I anticipated. Instead he was on his knees looking down at me with eyes that were bulging and feverish. 'Take off your clothes!' he said hoarsely.

As he said that, he was already aggressively plucking and ripping my clothes from my body. This broke my heart as I was so fond of my clothes. Every year I received clothes from Cape Town and people in the village always complimented me saying,

‘Hayi, Cape Town second-hand clothes are the most beautiful’, while touching them as if trying to ascertain the quality, discussing whether it was satin or linen.

Now I was dragged over a rough floor as he was ripping my panties down with hands hard as pliers. When done, he halfway dropped his trousers and underpants. I went numb with shock and horror. I knew it was taboo to see anybody’s genitals, to reveal the private part in the presence of a person of a different gender. This erect penis was the foulest thing I had ever seen. Used to the genitals of boy toddlers, I had no idea that it could get big to that revolting form. It was very dark, dull and looking like a snake.

My eyes were all out. My mind was roaming, not knowing what on earth was to happen here!

‘Shhhhhh, don’t cry, don’t even dare to make a sound. What we are about to do will stay between the two of us. Understand?’

‘Oh my God! What is he talking about?’ I asked myself in silence.

‘If you say a word about this to anyone, even to that grandmother of yours, I will catch her when she is drunk and stab her to death, and you will not have a grandmother!’

Lose my grandmother? What would I be if my grandmother died? I had no one. Drunk as she was, she was all I had. I immediately resolved not to cry or say a word to anyone. At the same time, I did not know what this serious business between us had to do with this rigid penis. Why should I not cry? It didn’t matter, I would not make a sound. I would save my grandmother. Drunk as she was, she was vulnerable and her life clearly threatened. I would not be guilty of her death.

He lay down on top of me. I could smell his bad odour of sweat and felt painfully crushed by his heavy weight. I had no idea what was happening. Initially the sorest was that I was lying nakedly on the rough hard soil of the rondavel but stoically decided to bear it. But then suddenly, he pulled my legs apart and I felt the excruciating pain when he forced his penis into my body. It felt as if somebody inserted an iron knobkerrie. Blind with pain, I started to cry while the consequences of my loud weeping crossed my mind. How to stop this? He knew me. He knew I was just a little person.

Beg. Let me beg. I began begging in my smallest, most innocent voice, not at all realizing that I was speaking quite loudly: ‘Please, don’t push it hard, Brauni!’

I used the name by which we called him. I pleaded louder and louder as the pains caused by his harsh penetration were simply unbearable. Then, suddenly, a burst of laughter erupted from outside... He was shocked by the laughter and jumped up. It was the children that I was playing with.

‘Voetsek, get dressed and leave!’ he shouted at me, fuming with anger. ‘If you breathe a word about this, you will see what I am made of; I will kill you too and cut off that mouth of yours.’

I promised not to say a word, just so relieved and happy that whatever we did was over and done with. He stormed out of the empty house as though he was being pushed by strong winds.

I delayed leaving the scene. I had to dress first but found myself unsteady and sluggish. I was in a deep fog. Then suddenly it penetrated me: the sound of children taunting. Outside I heard my friends mimicking, ‘Don’t push it hard, Brauni’, followed by bursts of laughter. They were competing with each other in repeating my words and imitating my voice, as if it was a big joke. I felt another kind of pain, of being ridiculed.

Yet my biggest fear was that the grownups would find out and I would be forced to tell the truth and break the promise I made to Brauni.

I closed the door behind me and looked around, not sure which side to go because of the mockery around me. This turned out to be my new identity.

All the my six and seven year-old friends were jovial, jumping, impersonating and enjoying themselves making jokes about what they had just witnessed. It was clear: play time for me was over. Forever. It was time for me to go to the home I tried to protect – there was no space for me in my circle of friends.

I slowly walked home and finally left them behind. Once out of sight I ran as fast as I could down the slope. Even though I was running I could still feel that something huge was forced into my vagina. My grandmother was not home when I got there but I knew she was at Tutu's place, the shebeen she loved so much. I realized that it was safe for me to cry. I was in deep bewildered sorrow and sobbed hoping the crying would make me feel better, but I kept on smelling his odour – it was as if ingrained in me. It was the clothes I was wearing. They smelled of him. I pulled them off but the odour was all over my body. I felt I was emptying out.

As my home was close to the river, I went there, took off all my clothes and soaked my body in that running water. I laid as flat as I could and let it wash over me. I had all the time in the world as there was no one at home. It was strange to realize at the age of six that the river was the only place where I could find tranquility. But despite the soaking, I could still smell that man, and couldn't stop feeling contaminated. I even picked up an old cabbage bag to scrub and scrub my body trying to remove that smell.

Ever since that day, bathing in the river became my habit. The other children went for a swim, I went for bathing.

On the Monday I had to go back to school and was looking much forward knowing that the school would make me forget about the incident. Not so. What happened was known to everyone. The younger school kids were bringing their friends and some older kids to show them this young girl who had sexual intercourse with an old man, and then, just for fun and laughs repeatedly imitate my utterance: 'Don't push it hard, Bauni!'

What apparently entertained them the most was the tone of my voice. Wherever I walked, they would follow me in groups throwing my words back at me. My friends told me straight that they won't play with me again because the mockery made them uncomfortable. I became very alone.

But I was even mocked by the girls older than me. They would daily leave their grade seven class in groups to come and taunt me in my class. I just had to sit there, wishing I had a place to hide. The question that constantly occupied my mind was: What could I have done to save myself from that? How should I have responded to avoid the torture of this tragic experience? How should my voice have sounded? What were the right words to use? The worst part of it was that I was their friend, their playmate, and nobody thought I needed a softhearted word or a kind gesture. Who could I talk to? But foremost in my mind was that I should, at all costs, keep the promise I had made to Brauni.

School became the worst place to be. I dreaded the moments the teacher left the class. If I was walking from school, I would have flashbacks about what Brauni did to me and the voices ridiculing me made the hurting unbearable. I wished I could close my ears. I wanted to drop out of school.

After many months, I made a new friend but it was not really a positive change. We would leave school before dismissal time but couldn't go home because we knew that we would be beaten for slipping away from school. We would go to the river and swim while waiting for the last bell of the day. The following day, I would be too scared to go to school because of the previous day, but my grandmother would have no mercy. Taking a whipping stick she would beat me until I entered the school premises. There the teacher would wait for me to punish me with a duster for leaving school before the dismissal time.

My mind was reeling with many issues: still being left alone by my grandmother; my taunting friends at home and school; my fears for my life and livelihood with my grandmother. I was really considering dropping out of school, but that thought left me after another girl became a rape victim, and Brauni left the village. I kept that secret for years. I was unable to share it even after my grandmother had died. I got married and had kids with a man who asked permission from my parents and promised me the world. But his abuse brought back the bad memories of my rape. My husband regularly beat me up for refusing to have sexual intercourse with him, and forced himself on me.

One day I could not contain myself any longer. I decided to talk about my first rape, and received some help enabling me to find inner peace. As I was getting healed, I received news that Brauni had been killed by a mob. He died without apologizing for what he did to me.

But ... I had already forgiven him so that I would be able to live my life in peace.

Then I left my husband and went back to school. I am currently studying at a University.

(translated from isiXhosa)