

Archivist

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With trembling legs, I descended the stairs. Hoping to hide a sudden weakness I navigated by clinging to the banister for stability. But my legs betrayed me. I collapsed onto the cement stairs. Something was terribly wrong—my heart raced, and fear mingled with a sense of emptiness and confusion. At 13:05 on September 24, 2021, a creepy silence settled over Zisukhanyo High in Samora Machel township.

In the days leading up to the incident, I had noticed occasional crunching sensations and a growing weakness in my knees, but couldn't pinpoint the exact cause. Was it due to my continued participation in soccer at the age of 53? I recalled a specific moment after a soccer match when my knees suddenly weakened, making it impossible for me to stand up. Was being a vegetarian contributing to this? A lack of certain nutrients? My genetics?

Pulling myself up on the banister, I stumbled and leaned against the wall, then made my way down the quiet corridor toward the administration block swaying my body in an effort to propel my legs forward. Upon reaching the hall where the Grade 12 learners were engrossed in their September trial examination, I mustered a smile and clung to the edge of the nearest desk. Nomtha, a cheerful learner, giggled at my exaggerated movements, while the other learners shook their heads, assuming my Creative Arts subject had taken its toll.

But then Ntlantla, a learner in the front row, stood up, her gaze fixed on my rubbery legs. She and another boy extended their hands, supporting me with compassion until I reached the bench in front of the secretary's office.

I heard her saying, 'What? Tell him to come in.' Filled with embarrassment, I took tentative steps forward, leaning against the walls, and entered the principal's office. 'What happened?' My voice faltered. I simply didn't know. 'Please go see a doctor.'

Exiting the school gate like a wounded man, drenched in sweat, I anxiously waited for a taxi to take me to my general practitioner. Across the street, I saw my Hyundai Accent in the school parking bay, a sight that filled me with overwhelming sadness. A sudden cacophony of excitement came from the learners of the neighbouring primary school as they spilled through their gate with energy, screams, and laughter—I became over-aware of legs running, legs walking, legs jumping. A minibus parked beside the school gate blasted Amapiano music, and the learners joined in, adding vibrant sounds and colours to the afternoon.

'*Khawuleza!*' (Hurry up!) shouted the grumpy old driver. Nervously, I slid inside the minibus, silently wishing to confront him for his rudeness, but a crumbling body had no clout. The taxi swerved to avoid potholes. Outside, the sunny day unfolded, and street vendors created a symphony of sounds, peddling their wares. Spijojo, the barber, whistled in salute to the taxi driver, who stopped to exchange greetings.

'*Ek se ku blind-shiy' itiger joe* (I am telling you it is tough, leave behind R10 my friend),' Spijojo chuckled.

'No problem, *njayam* (my friend),' said the driver, pulling a R20 note from his back pocket. Impatient car hooters blared behind us as the driver pressed the hazard button, apologising for momentarily blocking the traffic.

'Appreciated *mfowethu*. This Covid-19 has taken away our livelihoods. Now I worry about what my children will have when they return from school.'

'*Sharp khazi, umntu ngumntu ngabantu* (Okay my brother, I am because you are),' the driver responded as he accelerated toward Jakes Gerwel Drive, heading to Wynberg. At that

moment, the state I had fallen into overwhelmed me. How had I lost control over my mobility? A tingling sensation shot through my feet, and like a bat, I closed my eyes, embracing every sensation in my body. Calm down, I said to myself. I breathed using the yoga techniques I had learned during our 'Healing through Nature' programme on Table Mountain. Suddenly, I floated into a meditative state, allowing a sense of calmness to envelop my brokenness.

As we rolled down the road, I breathed in and out, struggling to calm the voices with questions and fireballs of pain that left me feeling empty and trembling.

With a jolt, the taxi stopped. The driver hastily exited, headed towards the hedge, unzipped his pants, and a stream of urine shot out, sprinkling the ground like orange juice. I couldn't help but imagine ants and cone-shaped snails suffering in this storm. Quickly, he zipped up, returning to his seat with wet, sticky hands. He reached out to the back seat, asking, 'Pass the change.' The young lady beside him handed him the sanitiser.

'Forgive me, I'm diabetic,' he explained as he rubbed the sanitiser into his hands.

My phone buzzed in the right pocket of my jacket, signalling a call from Ms Dube, my colleague. I realised she must have heard about my peculiar behaviour and was grateful she hadn't witnessed my weak-knees firsthand. In front of her, I always projected an image of strength and masculinity. From a young age, we were ingrained with the belief that men don't cry—*ndoda ayikhali*.

'Hello, are you there?' Ms Dube's voice broke through the silence.

'Yes, Dube, I'm here. I apologise, my battery is about to die. What's going on?'

'How are you holding up?'

'I'm doing alright, just tired. I could use a break.'

'But the secretary mentioned you seemed serious.'

'I assure you, I'm fine.'

'Why didn't you ask one of our colleagues to take you to the hospital?'

'Dear Dube, I appreciate your concern. I'm fine. I didn't want to inconvenience anyone, especially during the busy exam period.'

'Where are you right now?'

As I struggled to maintain my grip on the phone, it slipped from my hand and fell onto the floor of the moving minibus. I felt it brush against my shoe. Reacting swiftly, I dropped down and managed to catch it before it could slide away. However, my body didn't cooperate as I tried to regain my composure, making it difficult to sit properly.

'Are you alright?' the driver asked, offering a helping hand to lift me.

'No, I can't move my legs,' I replied, letting out a heavy sigh. The taxi driver's openness permitted me to share my struggles.

I had to disembark at Wetton Family Clinic. With care and consideration, he and a young man lifted me like a fallen log and carried me across the bustling road. I raised my mask, feeling embarrassed as drivers and passengers peered through their windows. But suddenly I realised, I see only compassion: a young lady waved her hand, expressing concern, waiting patiently for the door to open for me; two women in the waiting room greeted me, and at that moment, my story began to unfold within their hearts. Their smiles illuminated the room, so why was shame lingering so strongly in the depths of my mind?

'*Qina*,' said the taxi driver, encouraging me to stay strong as he hurried back to his vehicle.

'*Namaste* (I bow to you),' I whispered, still clinging to threads of yoga. The taxi driver strolled back to his seat, shaking his head. I see how laughter erupted from the car.

'We're fully booked,' the secretary informed me.

I called my son to pick me up.

'If traffic is kind, I'll be there in thirty minutes,' Lwando, my son, replied from his job in Westlake.

As I awaited Lwando's arrival, I spotted my doctor. I informed her of my immobility. Concerned, she immediately summoned me into her office.

'Sorry, we don't have a wheelchair,' she apologised.

I moved like a tortoise, leaning against the wall, inching toward the doctor's office. When I reached the entrance, she gently guided me by the arm to a chair. 'What happened?' The shock in her eyes amplified my sense of fear. Her small, white office had an orange

painting of a mosque, a mahogany desk, and a white glass shield against COVID-19 which reminded me of my mask so I pulled it out of my jacket pocket

She examined me meticulously and fired a series of questions at me. In her compassionate demeanour, I found relief, appreciating the rare occurrence of a doctor devoting more than an hour to my concerns. A flicker of faith in divine presence emerged, yet I couldn't help but question why I felt that way. Wasn't God there when my limbs failed me? If so, why would such a dreadful experience be allowed?

'You must see a neurologist. But first, you need to go to the nearest PathCare for tests,' she advised.

'Kingsbury PathCare is the closest,' I replied, assuring her that I would go as soon as possible. I shared that I had already undergone a SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19) test, which had come back negative.

'That's great. They have excellent radiologists there. You'll need to undergo several tests, including X-rays and an MRI, to diagnose your condition.'

As she continued writing in my folder, I mustered courage, concealing the fear gnawing at my gut.

'I hate hospitals,' I confessed.

'Why?' she inquired.

'My sister died in one.'

'We all meet our end somewhere.'

'My sister died due to hospital negligence. Thandie was HIV positive, and someone improperly inserted her IV catheter. When I visited her the next morning, her tissue had been damaged by the leaked medication.'

'I'm so sorry,' she expressed, her tone filled with genuine empathy.

A knock on the door interrupted our conversation, and I wished it could have concluded on a lighter note.

'Your son has arrived,' the secretary said, apologising for the interruption. I sensed her unspoken message, urging me to leave and go home.

Looking bewildered, my son Lwando stared at me, horror evident in his eyes, as I struggled to stand.

'Do you need assistance?'

'Yes, please.'

He gently held my left arm, supporting me as we moved forward. I toddled ahead, leaving behind a void of emptiness.

I could not help but feel the way bystanders stared at me as I struggled to lift my legs while getting into Lwando's car. The street vendors and pedestrians seemed to feed off my struggle, attaching themselves to me like leeches. I kept my resentment bottled up, swallowing a sudden bitterness. The merciless, intrusive emotions that people with disabilities endure spun in my head. I wondered how Father Michael Lapsley, who lost both his arms, dealt with the prying eyes and questioning expressions. How did he find the strength to embrace and transcend this hurtful reality? Will I ever be able to deal with these stares? Then I thought of Lungelo, a young man coaching basketball in his wheelchair in Khayelitsha. How did he come to terms with his reality? And what about Nick Vujicic, who lived his life without limbs? I had always admired his inspirational outlook, oblivious to how he felt when people stared at him with pity.

'Are you okay?' My son's voice brought me back to the present moment. I responded calmly, confessing my state of shock and frustration.

'You'll be fine. Maybe it's just fatigue,' Lwando said, picking up his cellphone.

'Hey, Tony!'

'Hey, bro, are you ready for the match?'

'Something came up, I'm not sure. I'll let you know soon.'

'Is your dad coming?'

'I'm driving, I'll keep you posted.'

Lwando placed his cell phone on his lap, looking straight ahead. He pressed a button, and the soft acoustic guitar of Vusi Mahlasela began to play the graceful SeSotho melody of 'Silang Mabele', touching the fabric of my pain. I glanced at Lwando's face, reading the cuts in his soul. He smiled with genuine joy, tapping on the steering wheel and humming, sewing

a smile on my face where he knew it would stretch and bring warmth. I tapped the rhythm on my lap, trying to shake off the weight of misery that hung over me.

'You can go to the soccer match.'

'But Dad...'

'I'll be fine.'

'Are you sure?'

'Maybe you're right. It's nothing more than fatigue.'

'Sure, sure, sure.'

'Sure,' I said, bursting into laughter. I could see Lwando believing me. As we drove to my house, I felt my feet growing icy cold. We arrived in the calmness of the Claremont community, grateful that not many people here knew me. My friend Amos, an Uber driver from Malawi, waiting under a tree, rushed to assist my son getting me into the house.

Like a penguin, I moved slowly into the lounge, dragging my weary body as if I had been in a battle. Lwando held my left arm, I could hear him breathing, his eyes fixed on my path, following me closely. He waited, ready to catch me if I stumbled sitting down on the couch.

'I've got you,' he whispered.

'You don't have to worry about anything. Go and have fun,' I assured Lwando as I watched him grab his soccer boots and head towards the door. It was a Friday evening – usually I played soccer with my son and colleagues. It was the first time he would be playing at the Milnerton sports complex without his father by his side. For a moment, I couldn't help but imagine how he would cope with the reality if I passed on.

In solitude, I confronted my new reality, hearing I was breathing like a frog. There was a chill in my feet. Beneath the thin veil of silence, the undeniable presence of death loomed. Like a staggering train, I began to tremble, listening to the wind as it hissed outside.

'Not all storms come to disrupt your life. Some come to clear your path.' A message from Ms Dube flashed across my screen. In silence, I expressed gratitude for her kindness.

But what if this storm came to disrupt my life? Was I prepared for such a disruption? What legacy would I leave behind if this storm led me to eternal rest? Would I find peace in that rest? What is peace, exactly? And what would happen to my books? Good Lord, I had no wealth to pass on. What provisions would I leave for my children? Surely, creativity alone couldn't put food on the table. Foolishly, my mind raced, recalling the struggles of many South African artists who died in poverty.

'Be still,' I rebuked my wandering mind, longing for a bottle of brandy to calm the raging storm within me.

When my wife entered the room, I was fast asleep. I couldn't recall how I had managed to find my way into bed. Anxiety gripped me as I realised I needed to use the bathroom. Hastily, I leaned against the walls as I made my way, desperate to hide my struggle. For some inexplicable reason, my legs momentarily cooperated, allowing me to return to my place beside her. I didn't want her to feel burdened by my difficulties.

'Are you okay?' she asked, planting a kiss on my cheek.

'Yep,' I replied.

'I need to go to my mother's village. Someone broke the burglar bars while she was asleep. I have to go and ensure she is safe,' Likhanye explained.

'Please take an early morning bus. I can book it online if you want to,' I suggested. Gender-based violence, particularly against the elderly, was plaguing our country. Suddenly I remembered my mother in law's scepticism when the Covid injections became available for everybody.

'What made the white doctor suddenly show up here? I've never seen doctors around, especially not white ones. Why are they so eager to inject us with this vaccine?' She refused to be vaccinated, expressing her frustration over the phone.

'That's okay, babe. You can make the booking,' Likhanye replied, grinning affectionately. A sense of mild relief washed over me after booking her five a.m. bus trip.

The next day a porter hurriedly brought a wheelchair to me at Kingsbury Hospital, and the gravity of the situation became apparent. The porter swiftly transported me to the reception desk while I watched Lwando lock the car. A sinking feeling settled in my gut. Over the course of several days, doctors and nurses came and went, drawing blood as if they were vampires.

‘No, no, no. You're not taking my blood again. Use the blood you've already taken over the past three weeks for your tests,’ I protested.

‘We're just doing our duties. The doctors require the pathology reports,’ the nurse from PathCare explained.

Dr Thomas, the neurologist, delivered the news: I had Guillain-Barré Syndrome (GBS). That left me completely bewildered.

‘Please help me understand,’ I pleaded nervously.

‘It's a rare neurological disorder,’ the doctor explained.

My knowledge was limited to conditions like high blood pressure, stroke, and diabetes. GBS was entirely new to me, and I implored the doctor to write down the name. At the same time there was a sense of relief that they had identified what was happening within my body.

‘We're uncertain about the treatment,’ the doctor revealed, and at that moment hope slipped away. I immediately delved into research, desperately trying to comprehend the cause of this mysterious intruder. This led me to the unsettling conclusion that the Covid Johnson & Johnson vaccine may have played a role in my current hospitalisation. I had received the Johnson & Johnson vaccine in July 2021, and now, in September 2021, my body seemed to be crumbling. It saddened me to think that if I had only read reports from trusted sources like the FDA, I might have been aware of the potential connection between the vaccine and Guillain-Barré syndrome. Doubts and questions swirled in my mind. Were Bill Gates and the FDA responsible? What if I am not one of those who regain mobility within a year?

The WhatsApp messages poured in. My uncle promised to pray all night, casting away the demons within my body. My aunt suggested making *umqombothi*, the traditional African beer, to appease *izinyanya*, our ancestors. My pastor urged me to repent and seek forgiveness.

I read all the messages, witnessing the waves of compassion rolling in. To be honest, my phone became a realm of calming enchantment. The gathering darkness resembled a convergence of spiritualities, each seeking clarity. I observed how my dark thoughts were sealed with a kind of mischievousness—a deep pleasure that seemed oddly archived within my body.