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1988

Buntu Makhedama

An army of once-human insurgence had taken over the town, and its death-threatening growl was a call to action for other *Mkhovu*. Maria clung to her baby like a purse as warm blood spattered her kaftan when the *Mkhovu* caught the man next to her. The *Mkhovu* startled her and her bundle to the ground and now she was using her one free arm to crawl backwards, watching this feral *Mkhovu* feast on its paralysed victim. "Help me," he cried in vain. The *Mkhovu* sunk its teeth deep into the neck of its prey and ripped out a chunk of flesh. Blood splashed out, coating the *Mkhovu*. Maria watched, motionless.

Next, something dragging her up to her knees. A hand. "Come on, get up!" It was Ruth's. "We'll make it to Tsolo tower. Come on." Ruth held Maria's hand tightly as they ran, ducking and hiding from the *Mkhovu.*

These creatures may drag their feet walking but they are quick on the attack. Their bodies lanky and rugged, with mottled skin from years of battling the *Limu* disease—a term derived from their resemblance to *Limu* spirits. In their faces some still recognised lost friends, family and co-workers. Some felt they could talk sense into them: they would call out their names; next thing, they were gasping and mingling with the grotesque.

Maria and Ruth managed to get a few steps closer to the only place

that repelled these creatures. They climbed the enormous stairs up the tower, behind them a nightmarish mise-en-scene of pain and death, as the *Mkhovu* feasted with single-minded determination.

Like a musical cantata that is reaching a resounding end, the victim's struggles grew weaker, fading into a chilling silence that left only the sound of slurping and tearing as the feasting of the *Mkhovu* echoed in the darkness.

Climbing up the stairs of this 190-metre long monument—rivalling the Egyptian pyramids—Maria felt her baby move erratically on her back. Elated that it was unharmed, she took it off. Looked at it. Despite its innocence, it exuded an aura of danger. She had hoped to give it a name when she could prove that it was alive—this was the opportunity. "Lethabo" would be its name. Lethabo's eyes were still tightly shut. He had developed feral teeth about the size of a wild cat, and he hissed like wild cats do. Then, he sunk them into Maria's breast, freeing itself. "Lethabo!" Maria cried, as her baby rolled down the stairs to join the *Mkhovu*.

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Maria never felt like she belonged in the world. This was not a mere habit of feeling like a pariah, but it was an implicit knowledge that had been shaped by life events. At the age of two she lost both her parents who were anti-apartheid activists during a protest against the Dompas. She has no memory of her parents but she knows from Nomha, her grandmother, that she physically resembled them both. "Those hands, yes, they remind me of your father's," she would say. "And your face is as pretty as your mother's." What she knew certainly of them was their final resting place behind their two-roomed house.

At the age of thirteen, when Maria was in the ninth grade, Nomha was severely ill with *Limu*. She was bed ridden. Her body ached with puss-oozing blisters. Early every morning, after completing most of her school prep, Maria would wash her ungracefully thin body with lukewarm water, feed her mashed banana with yoghurt and dress her with a clean diaper. Nomha and Maria lived a particularly

private life. They were easily forgotten by the community, that is until there was an uproar about a suspected witch apparently making everyone but their accusers sick. Only then would they suddenly become popular.

Over time Nomha's illness became so severe that she could hardly speak and her breathing was shallow. Maria continued with her routine every morning: washing her withering body with lukewarm water, feeding her mashed banana with yoghurt and dressing her with a clean diaper.

One particularly hot summer day she realised that Nomha's hygiene was becoming worse along with her illness. She invited flies, which were expected because it was summer—but *maggots*? She could not understand why maggots festered inside Makhulu's vagina. The smell of rotting meat choked the two-roomed house, or it might have been a dead rat behind the wardrobe. She checked but there was none to be found. The smell persisted and the maggots were relentless. Strangely, the stench invited neighbours who more readily observed that Nomha was rotting and that she had long been dead. Nomha was buried beside Maria's parents.

A month after Nomha's funeral, when Maria had lost every sense for living, she married a man she hardly knew. You see, life for Maria was nothing from birth; her social life had been constant death—either of her parents or her grandmother. But she clung to the possibility of living, and so when Phuthuma asked her to marry him, she did not put much thought into it; but if it meant leaving the place that reminded her how alone in the world she was, she would take it, and so she took it. She did not know much about Phuthuma besides his being with the Nightwatchers, a militant organisation established to fight against the apartheid regime. Their original purpose changed drastically when they had to gun down the *Mkhovu*, many of whom had once been the very people they had sought to liberate.

Phuthuma kept to himself, so much that Maria would see him once in two years. Maria was the typical obedient wife who carried out her household duties and pleased her man when he was home without question. When Maria felt another heartbeat alongside her

own she told Phuthuma. He was pleased to learn that he would have a child. He started showing his wife affection. He would come home at least twice a year.

A month following the baby's birth, the Health Science Body of South Africa (HSBSA) issued a statement regarding a new strain of *Limu* that, instead of killing, transformed its victims into half-dead, flesh-eating monsters. Every broadcaster in the country read the message four times a day. She read the paper with Phuthuma. There was an article in the *Daily Dispatch* about an incident a few streets away from Maria's new home: a neighbour and friend of the deceased who reported that she had frequently called at her friend's [Zethu] home. She shared that her friend [Zethu] took care of her husband who was terminally ill from *Limu*, and how sometimes she would assist her [Zethu] with bathing him and changing his diapers as he could no longer walk. They started noticing that as they bathed him, his skin was decaying and peeling off.

When he finally died, Zethu planned for her husband's funeral. But, arriving from church one day, Zethu found his body no longer where it used to lay. "I think Zethu's husband turned into a *Mkhovu* and bit off her neck because you can see that chunks of flesh were removed from her neck and thigh," said the neighbour.

The New Holmes community also told the *Dispatch* that they did not feel safe at night as the *Mkhovu* walked the streets and sometimes broke into people's houses and someone always died when that happened.

On the ninety-sixth day after the announcement of the new *Limu* variant, the country was placed on strict lockdown. Newspaper reports followed the same script: 16 February 1988 headlines all read "The country is on lockdown after the finance minister's wife was discovered dead on the bed where her missing *Limu*-positive husband formerly lay. Evidence suggests *Mkhovu* transformation."

Soon news media stopped reporting. Fear reached every crevice of public life. No one knew who was alive and where, who needed help and of what kind. Emergency services were paralysed.

Maria's baby was lanky—a hallmark of *Limu*. Phuthuma refused to hold or call it his child.

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Maria had passed out for hours after being bitten by her baby. She rested in a tent, snoozing away. And for a while now, the Professor had been attempting to make sense of erratic fossil bones that most scientists found difficult to understand. He meandered the belly of this 190-meter-tall dolomite stone which sharpened at its tip, within which a network of caverns was keeping the surviving population, Ruth, the Professor and now Maria, from the half dead.

As an expert on hominins, especially *Homo Naledi*, he had observed how the half-dead, who sought refuge in cold, dark places at night, were somehow repelled by this gigantic rock. He was intrigued by peculiar drawings on the wall. By the light of a lantern, he gently removed some of the cavities on the stone with a small brush. He studied the drawings. He could decipher the message.

"This bitch is *alive*," he muttered.

"I'm over here, Professor!" shouted Ruth, who had been working in this chilly, dark cave without a light.

"There are drawings on the wall," shouted the Professor. "I think it could be a message from the past. From the primates, I think."

"Could you shine the light my way then? I'd like to see. I can hear you, but it would be better if I could see you too."

"Humans think life as we know it now on Earth will cease to exist when Uranium runs out—look at this drawing," the passionate Professor shone the lantern closer to the wall.

He continued, "I'm telling you, this bitch is alive. She changes form and confuses any species that inhabits her. We think she is some 4.4 billion fucking years old, but this bitch is way older—she sheds parts of self like any other bitch on her period. Excuse my language. But tell you what, she is sentimental, all these *Mkhovu*, zombies running around at night, they are her subjects—they can't help it. If you look at this, it seems to be a trajectory. She will drive some of them to the cave where they will be fossilised."

Always in awe of the Professor's excitement, Ruth listened attentively. To her, this was the man to follow. Yet, he was mysterious.

She did not know if the Professor had a family or not. Perhaps he reminded her of her father.

"This is not a new phenomenon like we thought," the Professor said. "The bitch did it with *Homo Naledi*—she was too sentimental to eradicate everything, so she kept fossils as memories. Who knows what else she has kept before our knowledge of human history? The religious fanatics think this is the wrath of God, not knowing it is this crazy bitch of an Earth. If He's still there, waiting, watching, listening, may God forgive me."

"Uhm Professor, are recesses from stones always slimy?" Ruth enquired, as she felt something out of place. They were in a cave with a single lantern after all; the Professor had it to himself. He turned to observe the slimy object and realised it was a *Mkhovu*. It growled, yet it was otherwise non-responsive. It was not driven by the hunger instinct. Could it mean that this *Mkhovu* was in the process of being fossilised?

The Professor wandered as he observed this *Mkhovu*. He studied the drawings on the wall once more, seeing primitive illustrations of men fighting monsters with nothing but assegais. He sharpened the dolomite recess and pierced the *Mkhovu* and his hypothesis was proven. The dolomite rock was a potent weapon against the *Mkhovu*, achieving what ordinary ammunition could not.

"We have to find who else is still alive out there. This could be the breakthrough we've been waiting for."

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The morning was warm. The jacaranda trees had blossomed. A confetti of purple flowers delicately covered the land mass. The growling creature marched aimlessly in search of the next meal. Maria had woken up from her slumber. She realised that she needed her baby regardless of the form it had taken. She also understood that she, too, could turn into a *Mkhovu* any minute now.

After learning of Maria's husband's position in the Nightwatchers, the relentless Professor knew that *they* were best suited to forge

potent armament out of the dolomite stones. They were to use their primitive assegais to survive the day until they reached the Nightwatcher base which is located in the Queenrose Superspar cellar in the town centre. Ruth? Well, she was following the Professor wherever he went. They began!

The Professor was in the vanguard, aiming for the throat, slaying one, two, three, four of these once-human creatures. Ruth was well behind, supporting him. Maria timidly followed the duo.

Something was amiss though. These once-human creatures seemed to shift in well-orchestrated movements. They organised themselves. Then stopped! The Professor, Ruth and Maria were startled by this behaviour. The air felt thick with suspense, like a knowing that something sinister was about to happen. Then came a growl that pierced their eardrums, emerging from the *Mkhovu*.

The low rumbling developing from the depths of these creatures chilled Maria's bones, and even Ruth had to step back a few centimetres from her knight in rimmed lenses. It raised the fine hairs on the back of the Professor's neck. Death was in the air.

They started to make a run for it towards the town centre, evading each of the *Mkhovu*. In the midst of the commotion, a *Mkhovu* that had been lurking in an alleyway caught Ruth by the leg; badly hurting her. Blood gushed out of her like an exposed punctured pipeline.

"Make a run for it! I'll keep them busy for a while," Ruth commanded.

"Ridiculous!" the Professor objected. "I can't leave you behind!"

The once-human creatures were closing in. Their numbers appearing to have doubled this time. The Professor attempted to lift Ruth to his shoulder. But he was not quick enough to make it to the town's centre with Ruth on his back. He tried, nonetheless. Realising that these creatures were closing in fast, Ruth pushed herself off the Professor's shoulder. She was caught once more. They feasted on her flesh, tearing her open. Her intestines dripped from each of the *Mkhovu* like spaghetti. They were preoccupied with their meal now.

Maria and the Professor watched—showing their last respect for Ruth.