

RHULANI'S DILEMMA



MUTHAL NAIDOO
AND
DANIELLE DAVIS

RHULANI'S DILEMMA



Muthal Naidoo and Danielle Davis

© Muthal Naidoo 2013
ISBN 978-0-9921816-8-0

Layout and cover design: Max Hartzenberg

MN Publishing
PO Box 14964, Lyttelton, 0140
Pretoria, South Africa
Tel. 012 664 4290
Email: mynah.bird@telkomsa.net

Books by Muthal Naidoo

A Little Book of Tamil Religious Rituals (2004)

Jailbirds and Others (2004)

Stories from the Asiatic Bazaar (Marabastad Asiatic Bazaar) (2007)

WIP Theatre Plays (2008)

Gansie in Kammaland (2011)

Emerging Heroes (2012)

The Keshwars from Dundee (2012)

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This novelette was written with the help of two very gracious and generous informants, Mr Magezi Stanley Khosa and his nephew, Mr Andrew Nghitsi-nghitsi Ndhambi, who provided me with insights into the humane aspects of a cultural tradition much misunderstood. They shared with me the meaning of initiation and some of the abuses to which it has been subjected.

Thank you, Stanley and Nghitsi. I hope that you will find that in this story initiation has been placed in a proper context and will add to an understanding of the infinite variety of our shared cultures. Initiation Schools are rites of passage such as confirmation, bar mitzvah and becoming a hafiz.

I also thank my very dear friends, Jan Makena, Oniks Manganyi and Solly Manganyi who are always there to help me out with all their knowledge and understanding.

Muthal Naidoo
September 2012

TSONGA VOCABULARY

Baba – Father

Kokwani – Grandfather

Malume – Uncle

Mhani – Mother (Also a respectful way to address all adult women)

Mayini – the sangoma who performs initiation

Ngoma – Initiation, Initiation School

Xibelani – a pleated skirt worn with a bustle over the hips

Xivijo – a meeting of the villagers called by the Chief



1



*E*ars flaring, trunk up high, the angry bull elephant lifted its huge foot, trampled down the Park fence and came crashing through the mielie field, its wild eyes fixed on Tiyani hiding in the Marula tree. Trumpeting loudly, it charged and knocked the tree over. But Tiyani was hurtling through the village, down the orange dirt road. Uttering a piercing scream, the enraged animal plunged after him. Tiyani was running as fast as he could but he wasn't moving. Suddenly, all he could see was the elephant on its hind legs towering above him and a huge foot coming down over his head.

Tiyani woke with a start, his hands clammy, his heart pounding. He lay dead still, listening. All was silent except for a distant cock's crow and the twitter of birds outside the window. He waited a minute before opening his eyes. The first rays of sunlight had crept into the hut and he looked around to make sure of where he was.

Phew! It was only a dream but what a dream! Kokwani's stories again! Last night, as they were sitting around the fire, his grandfather had told them about the time, some years ago, when a

herd of elephants had pushed down the game reserve fence and come to feed on the mielie field. Kokwani had hidden behind the trees and watched. Another time, a big bull elephant had broken out of the Park and gone on a rampage in the village.

Tiyani turned to look at his brother, Rhulani, three years older, who was sleeping next to him on the mattress on the floor of their hut. He wanted to tell him about his dream but Rhulani was snoring softly. After their father, Gezani, had deserted them to start a new life with a new family in Johannesburg, the boys had become very close.

Lying there, watching his brother sleep, Tiyani suddenly had an idea. Grinning mischievously, he slid out of bed carefully so as not to disturb Rhulani, crept out of the door silently and went in search of a feather. Under the tree, in which the hens roosted well out of reach of marauding jackals, he found a beautiful tail feather which he brushed clean on his shorts before creeping back inside.

Kneeling down next to his brother, who hadn't moved an inch, he began to tickle his nose with the soft end of the shiny black feather. Rhulani's nose twitched. Tiyani tickled again and this time Rhulani's hand shot out from under the blanket to wave away what he imagined to be an annoying fly.

Stifling his laughter, Tiyani watched as Rhulani tried to go back to sleep. Unlike Tiyani, Rhulani was having a good dream – probably about his girlfriend in school. Eyes twinkling with mischief, Tiyani tickled again. This time Rhulani's arm shot out, grabbed Tiyani around the neck and pulled him down. Laughing and yelling, the two boys wrestled until they rolled off the mattress. 'You win, you win,' Tiyani pleaded as Rhulani pinned his bare back to the cold hard mud floor.

Their mother, who had pushed open the door, stood there, hands on hips, looking down at them. Though she was shaking her head, they could see she was hiding a smile. 'What am I to do with you two? You are beyond hope!' she exclaimed. 'Breakfast's ready, hurry up, brush your teeth and wash before it all turns cold.' And she went back to the big hut, their kitchen and dining room. They lived in a small compound of three huts, the boys' hut, mother's hut and the kitchen. The bathroom and toilet were at the back of the yard.

While he was brushing his teeth, Tiyani pulled funny faces at his reflection in the mirror. He sometimes wished he looked more like his brother who got his good looks from their father's side of the family. Rhulani looked a lot like the handsome American film star, Denzel Washington, tall, toned and handsome. Tiyani's friend Lucky once said, 'If you want to find Rhulani at break, just look for a crowd of admiring girls and you'll find him in the middle.' Tiyani looked more like his mother's brother who had moved to Kimberley years before. But with his large brown eyes and warm friendly smile that lit up his face and revealed perfect white teeth, Tiyani knew he was quite attractive.

In the morning or after school, Rhulani and Tiyani usually helped their mother pick vegetables and seasonal fruit like paw-paws, mangoes, litchis and avocados from the village gardens. Mhani and other village women sold these fruits and vegetables at the small informal market at the northern gate of the game reserve. Mhani and her brother-in-law, Wilfred, had constructed a strong reed shelter with wooden shelves inside to display her goods for visitors who stopped to purchase fresh supplies for their stay at the Park.

It was the winter school vacation and during holidays, Tiyani often went with Mhani to help out at her little stall. Sometimes, he went to town with his best friend Lucky and Lucky's mother, Ma Agnes, to shop for groceries. Ma Agnes took orders for groceries from the village elderly and the women who ran a little orphanage for children whose parents had died of AIDS. The people in this village were like a big family; though they had little, they shared whatever they had and made sure that no one suffered.

While Tiyani and Rhulani were still dressing, Uncle Wilfred popped his head round the door. 'Good morning, boys.'

'Good morning, Malume,' the boys were always glad to see their uncle who was like a father to them. Malume Wilfred and Kokwani lived in the house next to their compound. Malume was a game ranger at the Park and he gave Mhani a lift to the little market every morning. He loaded her baskets on the back of his bakkie and then dropped her off at her stall.

'You ready, Tiyani?' Malume knew Tiyani would be going with them this morning. 'Come and help me load the bakkie.' Malume turned to Rhulani. 'So, my lad, you're off to work this morning.'

'Yes, Malume, this is my first day.' Rhulani had found a holiday job in town and was going to work at a supermarket, packing and doing odd jobs. Malume was proud of Rhulani for wanting to earn and help his mother.

'Go well, Rhulani.'

'Stay well, Malume.'

Riding at the back of the bakkie, Tiyani waved and called out greetings as they drove past Lucky's house. Lucky's mother, Ma Agnes, was feeding the chickens and Lucky's sister, Charity, was

sweeping the yard. Tiyani shouted greetings to all the mothers and grannies working in their yards, stamping mielies, washing clothes and chatting. Then they passed the Chief's huge residence with the big open courtyard for Xivijo, village meetings, at which the Chief made important announcements. Before he built this new modern complex a few years ago, the Chief, with all his wives and children, had lived in a big compound of huts. Opposite the Chief's residence was the Tribal Office where people applied for business licences or permits for collecting wood. Next to it was the taxi rank.

As they rode out of the village, Tiyani waved to the girls on the road, some with plastic containers going to fetch water and others going to collect wood. In the distance, he could see the koppie where Grandfather took his goats. Tiyani admired Kokwani; though his grandfather was old, he was strong and active. And he could tell the most wonderful stories, like the story of the elephants that had given him the nightmare. On this side of the koppie was the river, and on the other side, the green, mysterious forest. Whenever Tiyani went to help Kokwani with the goats, he always looked down the other side. He and Lucky had often talked of climbing down to the road leading into the forest, but they had never done it. It would be a difficult and dangerous climb, but Tiyani knew it was something he had to do one day.

2



When the supermarket closed on Saturday afternoon and Rhulani received his first week's pay, he was glowing with pride. He would keep part of his wages for transport and lunch money; he would give Tiyani R20, and the rest would go to Mhani. He knew she was thinking of getting a new TV now that a powerful transmitter was going up that would give better reception to the villages near the Park.

After buying a chocolate for Nyeleti, his girlfriend, Rhulani walked to the taxi rank. He grimaced when he saw that the driver of the next taxi out was Nyeleti's cousin, Loskop, who had a reputation for reckless driving. He had once overturned his taxi on the main road and a number of passengers had been injured. Rhulani greeted Loskop, who simply scowled, revved the engine and kept his hand glued to the horn. Loskop, who had had his eye on Nyeleti for a long time, resented Rhulani for having "stolen" her from him. The moment the last passenger squeezed into the taxi, Loskop took off and soon had the vehicle flying down the pot-holed road towards the village.

Tossed about like twigs on a raging river, his passengers, clutching their belongings, clung to backrests for dear life. A

frail, old woman, struggling to hold onto her seat, was shouting for Loskop to slow down. Others were yelling warnings, insults and threats – all of which Loskop simply ignored. It was the end of his shift and he wanted to be back in town to catch the start of the soccer match on TV. Half an hour later, Loskop screeched to a halt outside the Tribal Office in a cloud of dust. The passengers sighed with relief. Rhulani quickly slid open the taxi door, jumped off and turned to help the old granny out. He then made his way to Nyeleti's house. Two girls from his class, Tintswalo and Grace, saw him and came running up. They walked along with him, teasing him, trying to get at the chocolate in his hand and pretending to pout because they couldn't. When he stopped at Nyeleti's house, they ran away giggling.

Rhulani went to the door and called out a greeting. There was no answer. He called again. This time there was a sound of shuffling and Themba, Nyeleti's brother, appeared at the door. He scowled at Rhulani. 'Yes? What do you want?' Rhulani looked at him in surprise at this rudeness.

Themba and Musa had been his best friends in primary school. But in high school, they had begun to draw away from him. At first they had teased him about always being top in class. When the teasing changed to sneering, Rhulani tried to talk to them but they had brushed him off. Then they began to exclude him from their activities. One hot summer's day, when he had suggested that they go for a swim, they had jeered at him and said no. But when he and Tiyani went down to the river, they saw Themba and Musa with other boys, taking turns, dive-bombing from the river bank to see who could create the biggest splash.

Now standing at the door, Rhulani ignored Themba's rudeness and asked politely, 'Is Nyeleti in? I have something for her.'

'She doesn't want anything from you. Leave my sister alone. She doesn't like you and she doesn't want you worrying her any more. Neither do I!'

'What's wrong, Themba? We've been friends all our lives, why don't you like me anymore?' No answer. 'You think I'm not good enough for Nyeleti? Why? What have I done?' Themba just stood there, frowning and unfriendly. 'I know Nyeleti doesn't feel the same. Where is she? Let me talk to her.'

Themba suddenly lunged forward and gave Rhulani a shove that sent him stumbling backwards and he fell. Themba was about to go back in, when Nyeleti came running round the side of the house. She helped Rhulani up and began to dust off his clothes. Stunned, Themba stared, and then raised his hand to slap his sister but her hard look stopped him. 'Leave this alone, Themba. It has nothing to do with you.'

Themba snarled, 'You want him as your friend. This boy! He doesn't have the guts to become a man.' He walked back in and slammed the door.

Rhulani, who had watched Nyeleti in astonishment, suddenly laughed. 'Here I was getting ready to protect you, but you didn't need me.'

'Themba is just jealous of you; you are a top student and you can have any girl you want.'

Rhulani smiled. 'But you're the one I want.' He put the chocolate in her hand. 'See, I bought something for you with my first wages.'

Nyeleti fidgeted with the chocolate. Rhulani felt a little disappointed; he had wanted her to be really pleased. Regarding him very earnestly, she suddenly asked, 'Rhulani, do you know that Themba and Musa will be going for ngoma this holiday? Will you be going too?'

Rhulani was surprised. 'Ngoma? Initiation School? No, my grandfather wants me to go to the hospital ...' Nyeleti's burst of scornful laughter startled him.

'Hospital!' she scoffed. 'Men don't go to the hospital; only boys do that.'

'That's not true. But that's where boys end up after ngoma these days.'

'At least, they aren't afraid to go.'

'Nyeleti, you know my grandfather is against it.'

'So you will go to the hospital.'

Rhulani nodded. 'Tiyani and I will go to the hospital.' At that, her eyes flashing with distaste, Nyeleti turned away from him. Rhulani suddenly felt his heart drop. 'Do you think I won't be a man?'

Nyeleti shrugged. 'That is what people say.'

'You actually want me to go? I don't believe this. You want me to go against my family?'

Nyeleti shrugged again. 'And you want me to go against mine!' As he walked home, Rhulani felt troubled. Nyeleti wanted him to go for ngoma, but his grandfather and uncle were strongly against it. Kokwani had been warning the villagers against it for several years. He had gone around to all the parents to make them aware that Sikheto, the man running initiation schools,

was an imposter – not a qualified mayini; he would damage their sons. But no one had listened and many boys who had been to him for initiation had been mutilated. Some had even died. Determined to put a stop to Sikheto’s activities, Kokwani had brought the matter to a village meeting. Once the Chief heard his shocking report of botched circumcisions, mutilation and death, the lack of training in the responsibilities of being men, and the astronomical fees, he banished Sikheto from the village.

But it had made little difference to people for whom ngoma was an essential rite of passage. That included Nyeleti’s family. Now Themba and Musa were going for ngoma and they were busy recruiting boys in the village as well. They were very proud and strutted about like big shots, making fun of boys who weren’t going. They were especially scornful of Rhulani. This would not have bothered Rhulani, but for Nyeleti. In the midst of a family getting ready to celebrate their son’s transition to manhood, Nyeleti was excited and proud. Rhulani was like a splash of cold water on her enthusiasm. He had believed that if he explained why ngoma wasn’t safe, she would understand. But he had not been able to change her mind.

When Rhulani got home, there was a lovely surprise awaiting him and he forgot his troubles for a while. Malume Wilfred had bought a kilo of chops to celebrate his first job and had set up a braai in the yard. So there was excitement in his home too – of a very different kind. Here he was a man because he was working and helping to support the family.

After supper, they sat around a fire in the yard – Kokwani and Uncle Wilfred with traditional beer and Mhani and the boys with coffee. As usual, Kokwani was ready with a tale from his younger days. “When I was a boy,” he said, taking a sip of beer, ‘my brother and I went exploring in those hills.’ He pointed

towards a row of high peaks on the horizon. 'One afternoon, we entered a dark cave and when I lit a match, we saw two skeletons on the ground. I dropped the match in fright and grabbed hold of my brother. We stood there unable to move. As we got used to the darkness, we made out two assegais standing upright over the bones. When our eyes travelled down the shafts, we saw that the blades were planted in the soil right through the ribcages, where the hearts would have been.

As we stood there clutching each other, our gaze was suddenly drawn to the bony hands. They were creeping over the ground, the fingers reaching out for the spears while the skulls were grinning at us with wicked intent. When the bony digits closed around the shafts and plucked the blades out of the ground, we knew that the skeletons were going to leap up and plunge those assegais into our hearts. Suddenly, a fiendish howl filled the cave. We jumped two feet into the air and ran out so fast we beat all records getting home. Even Caster Simenya would not have been able to catch up with us!

His eyes twinkling, Uncle Wilfred exclaimed, 'Baba! Baba! You should have waited and asked them to tell you their stories?'

'Heh, heh, heh,' Kokwani spluttered, laughing so hard, that the boys and Mhani had to join in.

3



The next day being Sunday, everyone was getting ready for church. Rhulani and Tiyani, in their Sunday best, were waiting in the yard for Mhani. She had a beautiful voice and sang in the church choir. She stepped out of her hut, looking very smart in a dark floral dress, black hat and black shoes; the boys felt very proud of her. Then Kokwani and Malume Wilfred came striding down from their house, ready to escort Mhani and the boys to church. Malume didn't often go with them, but he had this Sunday off from work.

Though Kokwani was looking really dapper in his Sunday suit, he seemed a little off-colour. Mhani was concerned, 'Are you all right, Kokwani?'

'Fine, fine, fine! I have a little cold, that's all.'

Mhani looked at Wilfred who just raised his eyebrows and shrugged; Kokwani was stubborn and hated the idea of being sick. Kokwani moved ahead quickly and shook his head at the others. 'What's wrong with you youngsters, can't keep up with an old man, eh?' Everyone laughed and set off right behind him.

After church and lunch, Kokwani went in for a nap, Mhani was off to Ma Agnes's house to help with the birthday party for Lucky's little sister, Charity, and Malume and the boys went for a walk. As they strolled through the village towards the koppie, they saw two pretty girls walking to Lucky's house with gifts in their hands. Tiyani called out to them. 'You're late, if you don't hurry, you won't get any cake.' They stuck their tongues out at him and giggled.

As Malume and the boys headed up the koppie, Tiyani asked eagerly, 'Are there any caves on the other side of the koppie, Malume?'

'I don't think so, Tiyani. Why do you ask?'

Rhulani laughed. 'Tiyani wants to find a cave with skeletons, like Kokwani.'

Tiyani's eyes were shining. 'That would be so exciting. I wouldn't be scared like Kokwani.'

Uncle smiled. 'It's too bad Kokwani and his brother ran off in fright. They could have collected the skeletons, the assegais and whatever else there was and taken them to the museum. Such items tell us about our history and we really need to know what happened to our people in the past.'

As they got to the top, Tiyani ran ahead to the edge and looked down. He turned and shouted to Wilfred, 'Malume, have you ever climbed down this side of the koppie?'

'I have, Tiyani, several times. It's not as bad as it looks. Come, let me show you.' They walked over to a boulder that marked the beginning of a rough trail. 'There are some steep patches, but you can walk most of the way.'

‘I’m going to do it one of these days.’ Then looking out into the distance, Tiyani asked if they could go to the mountains where Kokwani had found skeletons. ‘We can plan a trip for the December holidays. What do you say, Malume?’

Malume smiled, ‘We’ll see, my boy.’

‘Hey, Rhulani,’ Tiyani was pointing into the distance, ‘see those mountains there. We are going to climb them in December.’

But Rhulani wasn’t listening; he was gazing down intently into the back of the village where he could clearly see Loskop talking to someone who was waving an arm in the direction of the road that skirted the koppie before it forked – one road leading to the next village, the other to the vast forest on the far side of the koppie.

Uncle and Tiyani turned to see what Rhulani was looking at. As they watched, Loskop and the man moved off together and they could now see the other person. Uncle gasped, ‘Sikheto! What is he doing here? The Chief banished him from the village last year.’ Malume shook his head. ‘He knows he shouldn’t be here.’

Rhulani muttered, ‘He’s organising ngoma. Themba and ...’

Wilfred was shocked. ‘Come on boys, let’s get back. I have to inform the Chief.’

Uncle started quickly down the hill making for the Chief’s residence while the boys turned towards home. Rhulani wanted to talk to his Grandfather and Tiyani followed him into their Uncle’s house.

Sitting in his big chair with a blanket around him and a coffee mug in his hand, Kokwani looked up with a smile. ‘Ah, boys come in, come in. There’s coffee in the kitchen and your mother brought

some biscuits.' Rhulani shook his head. 'What's the matter, boy? You look worried.'

'Kokwani, I understand why you don't want anyone to go for ngoma. I know it's not safe anymore because the mayini is not an expert as in the old days and boys come to ngoma with infections and even AIDS ...'

'And what about the water?' Tiyani chipped in. 'The rivers are polluted and when the boys wash in them their wounds get infected and don't heal.'

Kokwani nodded. 'I'm glad you understand why I want you two to go to the hospital to be circumcised.' But Rhulani was frowning. 'So what's the matter, Rhulani?'

'Well, they say that if you don't go for ngoma, you can never be a man.'

'Your Malume Wilfred didn't go. Isn't he a man?'

'Malume is strong and brave. In the game reserve he manages all kinds of wild animals,' Tiyani exclaimed proudly. 'No one can say he is not a man.'

'What do you think, Rhulani?' Rhulani said nothing. 'You have to understand about the old days, Rhulani. We used to live with wild animals all around us. But now wild animals are kept in game reserves ...'

'To protect them from us,' Tiyani burst out. 'Look at all the rhinos that are being killed.'

Kokwani laughed, 'You are right Tiyani, to protect them from us and also to protect us from them. In the old days, we lived in danger of being attacked by wild animals and we had to learn to defend ourselves. To be brave, we had to learn how to deal with

lions, leopards, elephants, snakes and so on. To be strong, we had to learn to survive in all kinds of difficult conditions. That's why we went for ngoma in the cold winter months. Boys were put through all kinds of hardships, so that they could become hardened and tough – strong, brave men. And that's when they were circumcised. After circumcision, they could have girlfriends and get married.'

'They didn't have girlfriends before that?'

'No Rhulani, that's why circumcision was safe; there were no STDs and AIDS.'

'But Kokwani, my friends say I will never be a man.'

'Look, Rhulani, how many lions do you see every day?'

Tiyani laughed, 'The only lions I have seen are in the game reserve.'

'Times have changed, Rhulani. Today, we live in houses and we wear clothes, not skins. We don't walk; we travel in cars, taxis, trains, buses. We cook on stoves and we have fridges in which to put our food. In the old days, we had to hunt to provide for our families. Today we do other kinds of work to provide for them.'

Tiyani shouted. 'Hey Rhulani, you are working and providing for me. I still have the twenty rand you gave me.'

Kokwani smiled. 'We don't need training for the hard life in the veld anymore.'

Rhulani was not convinced. 'So how can I prove that I am a man?'

'Ah! People forget that ngoma was more than just making you tough and fearless. It also taught respect: respect for the ancestors, respect for our elders, our parents, and all the members of our community. In fact, that was the most important part of ngoma.'

We show respect by caring for others and not abusing them in any way. Without respect we are not men. Being a man does not only mean having big muscles; it also means having a big heart.'

Suddenly Tiyani burst into tears. Startled, Kokwani called Tiyani to him, pulled him onto his lap and held him close. 'What's wrong, Tiyani? Why are you crying?'

'My father, he ... he left us and went away. He ... he ... isn't...

'I hope you are not crying for yourself Tiyani; I hope you are crying for him.'

Lying in bed that night, Rhulani couldn't sleep; his head was filled with confused thoughts of Nyeleti, ngoma, Kokwani's warnings and his father, Gezani, who had disobeyed Kokwani and run off to ngoma. If only his father were here; he would understand what he was feeling.

4



Tiyani was in the taxi with Ma Agnes and Lucky. They were going to town to do some shopping for the orphanage.

‘Are we going to the supermarket where Rhulani works? I want to see him in action!’ Tiyani had this picture in his mind of Rhulani managing the whole place. ‘I’m sure he will give you a discount.’

Ma Agnes laughed. ‘Well, they do have some specials on mielie meal, tinned goods and biscuits.’

When they got to town, Tiyani was anxious to get to the supermarket but he knew the routine. Ma Agnes always went first to the shops where the prices were lower and where you could bargain with the shopkeepers, and then to the shops where goods were on sale. It was only after they had done their round of the smaller shops that they went to the supermarket. When they arrived there, Lucky pulled out a shopping trolley and Tiyani put in their parcels from the other shops. Then they trooped in and Tiyani looked all over for Rhulani but couldn’t see him.

When they got to the aisle with the tinned food specials, he saw someone kneeling and packing the lowest shelf. Tiyani burst out

laughing as he recognised Rhulani. He pushed the trolley up to where Rhulani was and called out, 'Hey boy, put those cans in here.' Rhulani was startled; he thought for a moment that it was Themba or Musa. Relieved to see Tiyani, Lucky and his mother, he greeted them, then showed Ma Agnes where the specials were and helped load her trolley. Then he walked with them to the check out tills and packed their goods into plastic bags.

As they were making their way to the taxi rank, Ma Agnes said, 'Rhulani is such a respectful and helpful young man.'

'Not like his brother,' Lucky laughed and ducked as Tiyani tried to grab hold of him.

Back at the village, they delivered their goods to the orphanage and went to Ma Agnes's home for lunch. Then the boys were on the road to the koppie where grandpa sat with his goats. Tiyani was concerned about Kokwani who had been coughing quite a bit and didn't look too well. Walking along, the boys saw some of their classmates in a cluster with Themba and Musa. Tiyani frowned.

As they passed the group, Musa turned, and seeing Tiyani, just stared and didn't say a word. But Themba called out to Lucky, 'Hey you, come here.' Lucky pulled Tiyani to go with him but Themba shouted, 'Not him, just you.' Lucky looked uncertain.

Tiyani held on to Lucky. 'Ignore them.' But Themba crossed over to them, pushed Tiyani aside and pulled Lucky away. Themba turned his back on Tiyani, said something to Lucky shoved him towards Tiyani and went back to Musa and the other boys.

'What did he want?'

'He says he wants to see me when I come back.'

Tiyani shook his head. ‘You mustn’t go.’

When the boys got to the koppie, they found Kokwani shivering in the sun. Tiyani ran up to him. ‘Kokwani, you are not well. I’m taking you home.’ Kokwani protested, but he was too weak to stop his grandson. Tiyani turned to Lucky. ‘Will you bring the goats back to the pen?’ Lucky nodded and ran off to round up the goats while Tiyani helped his grandfather who was leaning heavily on him. As they were making their way down the hill, Tiyani saw Themba and Musa with another group of boys at the riverbank. He shook his head; Malume Wilfred must be told. But his main concern right now was grandpa.

When he got Kokwani home, he helped him undress and get into bed. He brought him a glass of warm milk to help him sleep, then found a book and sat down at the bedside. Kokwani was asleep by the time Lucky returned with the goats. Tiyani went out to help him bring them into the pen.

‘Themba and Musa want to see me.’ Lucky said. Tiyani shook his head but Lucky was curious. ‘I’ll just find out what’s going on and let you know.’

As Lucky moved off, Tiyani shouted after him, ‘You’ll find them with a group of boys down by the river.’

Before breakfast the next day, Wilfred came in to tell Mother that Kokwani was ill. He’d spent the night tossing and turning with a burning hot fever; he was coughing and had a very sore throat this morning. ‘I’m taking Papa to the clinic before I go to work. Could you go with us and stay with him?’

Mother nodded, ‘I’ll get dressed right away.’

Malume went to the boys’ hut to find Tiyani. ‘Kokwani is ill.

Your mother is going with him to the clinic. Will you look after the goats today?’

‘Sure, Malume.’

‘Tiyani, there’s a caracal loose in the area, so be very careful. Kokwani is afraid it may attack his goats.’

Tiyani looked a little worried. ‘What’s a caracal?’

‘A big wild cat. It has long pointed ears with tufts of hair at the ends.’

‘Is it dangerous?’

‘Only when cornered. It hunts mainly at dusk and at night, so it probably won’t appear. But if it’s hungry, it could come out in the early morning or late afternoon so take my knobkierie. Oh, and take a large empty tin and a metal spoon too.’

Tiyani wrinkled his nose. ‘A tin and a spoon? Why?’

‘Well, if you see the caracal, bang on the tin with the spoon. The noise will frighten it off. I think you should herd the goats up onto the slopes where you’ll have a clear view.’

Though he was a little scared, Tiyani felt this could be an exciting adventure. And as he thought about it, he began to see in his mind a cat with pointy ears creeping up to a goat. He jumped up, banged on an imaginary tin and watched it run.

Taken aback, Malume asked, ‘Why did you jump up like that? Are you all right?’

‘Sorry, Malume.’ Embarrassed, Tiyani sped off into the yard calling out behind him, ‘I’m going to look for a tin.’

5



It was Rhulani's lunch break. He strolled through the parking lot and down the pavement to the corner where Ma Zodwa sold vetkoek and mince just opposite the taxi rank. He had found Ma Zodwa's little stand a few days after he started working at the supermarket. She sold the most delicious vetkoek and mince. And she was very jolly; she laughed and joked with all her customers.

As there were no other customers around today, she peered at Rhulani through eyes full of amusement. He was sitting next to her little stand under the tree, eating his lunch. 'I am a very lucky person,' she said. Rhulani looked up enquiringly. 'My friends are very jealous of me. They all want to know what muti I put in my vetkoek. I tell them, Hawu, what you mean muti? You think I need muti?' Rhulani smiled; he was wondering what fanciful nonsense she was going to make up today. 'Rhulani, you think I need muti?' Before Rhulani could reply, she stood up and shaking her hips began to dance, making her skirt whip up in little waves around her. 'You think I need muti?'

'No Mhani, you dance like the wind on the river.'

Other vendors nearby began giggling and clapping. 'Hey Sis

Zodwa, why are you showing off like that? Are you trying to impress someone?’

Zodwa pointed to Rhulani, whose eyes were fixed on her in fascination, and shouted back, ‘You see, I don’t need muti. You are just jealous. All the young, handsome boys come to me to buy vetkoek.’ Zodwa’s eyes were dancing too and everyone burst out laughing, including Rhulani, who was blushing.

Then he stood up, threw his cool drink can and vetkoek wrapping in the nearby trash can and turned to Zodwa. ‘Thank you for the lunch and for the entertainment. I’ll be back, tomorrow. Stay well, Mhani.’ But Zodwa wasn’t listening; she was standing still, frowning and staring behind him. Then he felt the arm that was slipping around his neck, and heard Loskop’s voice. ‘What you think you doing – fooling with all these ladies?’ Out of the corner of his eye, Rhulani could see Themba on his left.

Zodwa shouted, ‘Let go of him. Why do you come here looking for trouble? Leave the boy alone!’

Loskop sneered. ‘Hey, Sis Zodwa, what’s wrong with you? Why you go after boys? Can’t you get a man? This one will never be a man. He’s afraid to go for ngoma.’

Zodwa was furious. ‘Let go of him! Right now! You call yourself a man. What kind of man picks on boys?’

The other women began shouting. ‘You tell him, Zodwa! That fool drives his taxi like a madman! Hey, Loskop, you making your taxi a hearse?’

But Loskop tightened his hold on Rhulani, ‘Keep away from Nyeleti; she’s my wife. She belongs to me. Leave her alone. She doesn’t want you. She wants a man. Not a boy who hides behind ladies’ skirts.’ Then as Zodwa came at Loskop with a

big spoon, he shoved Rhulani right at her. ‘You can have this boy,’ he jeered and walked off with Themba.

Rhulani stumbled forward, right into Zodwa who helped him regain his balance. ‘Thank you, Mhani.’ Looking at her spoon, he laughed. ‘You are right. You are powerful, you don’t need muti.’

Zodwa laughed too, then warned, ‘You be careful of that Loskop. He has a cruel nature.’

‘Don’t worry, Mhani, I’m not afraid of him.’ With that he raced off to the supermarket; his lunch break was almost over. As he went about his work that afternoon, the word ‘boy’ kept buzzing in his head.

After work, he waited for Loskop’s taxi, looked Loskop straight in the eye as he boarded and paid his fare. When he arrived in the village, he made a point of going to greet Nyeleti. He wanted to see what Themba would do about it. But Themba wasn’t home; he was out somewhere with Musa. Nyeleti had come out somewhat reluctantly when she heard Rhulani calling. Rhulani teased her about Loskop and she didn’t find it funny. While they were talking, her father came to the doorway and stood there watching them. When Rhulani called out a greeting, he ignored him. ‘Is your father angry with me?’

‘I think you should go now, Rhulani.’ Nyeleti turned and left him standing there. All the way home, that word was buzzing in his head again.

Mhani and Kokwani had spent a whole tiring day waiting at the clinic. It had taken hours before it was Kokwani's turn to be called. When he was examined, he was told he was developing the 'flu. He was given an injection and pills, and told to go home and stay in bed for two weeks. 'Two weeks, they must be mad. I'll be back on the koppie with my goats, tomorrow,' Grandpa croaked. Wilfred, who was bringing them home from the clinic, stopped on the way back to pick up a bucket of fried chicken for supper.

When they got home, Mhani put Kokwani to bed and tried to get him to sleep but he insisted on sending for Tiyani.

'My goats,' his voice was hoarse, "are they safe?"

'Yes, Kokwani. All safe and in the pen. No big cats came to visit us while we were on the koppie.' He looked a little disappointed. 'I didn't get a chance to make a noise with my spoon and tin.' He looked eagerly at his grandfather. 'Maybe it will come tomorrow, and then ...'

Mhani interrupted, 'Thank you, Tiyani. Kokwani needs to sleep now. You can tell him all about your adventures when he is better. Go and have supper.'

Tiyani joined Malume and Rhulani who were eating their supper around a fire in the yard. 'What's the matter, Rhulani? You are very thoughtful this evening.'

'I'm just tired, Malume.'

Tiyani sang out, 'I think I know what's wrong.'

'Oh shut up, Tiyani.' Rhulani got up and took his plate into the kitchen.

'It's his girlfriend, Malume.' Tiyani nodded knowingly.

6



Armed with tin and spoon, Tiyani, prowling about on the koppie, was looking for the caracal. ‘I hope you like music, cat. I am working on a special tune for you.’ He looked down at the goats grazing peacefully along the slope. If the caracal were around, the goats would know it before he did. They would smell danger and wouldn’t be so calm. They’d probably stop grazing and begin to herd together. So Tiyani thought he should watch the goats and if he saw any skittish behaviour, should be ready with his tin and spoon. Uncle had said that caracals usually came out to feed in the dark, so he wasn’t very hopeful about seeing it.

Then he saw a goat suddenly rear, turn and trot off quickly. His heart beating fast, he jumped up. ‘So it’s here.’ Big drops of sweat fell from his forehead. He wanted to see the cat, but he was scared too. He moved cautiously, making his way to the rock where the goat had been grazing and stopped a few feet away, holding his tin and spoon ready. He saw a small movement and stood still waiting for the cat to jump out. There was a slithering in the grass. And then he saw – a snake! He couldn’t move; the tin dropped out of his hand and the snake scuttled back under the rock.

'I'll get the knobkierie and kill it.' But he remembered: Malume had told them never to kill any wild creature unless their lives were in danger. Tiyani didn't know what to do. Just then he saw Lucky coming up the hill. Keeping his eye on the rock, he stood up and called out. 'Lucky, Lucky! Go and find my uncle. Tell him there's a snake here on the koppie. It's under a rock but I'm afraid it might come out and attack the goats. I'm keeping watch, but he must come and take it away.' With his eyes on the rock, he backed up to where the knobkierie lay, grabbed it and sat down to watch for the snake. Luckily, the goats hadn't panicked and were grazing quietly a little distance away.

This was going to be a long wait. His uncle would want to know what kind of snake it was so he tried to remember what he had seen. It wasn't a very big snake, a little longer than his arm, and it had white stripes like a shield on its head. It was brownish with a gold box pattern down its back. It was quite beautiful actually. Thank goodness it wasn't a mamba or a Mozambican cobra. Those little brown cobras were very dangerous. They spat venom into your eyes when they were cornered and afraid.

They had found one at his school one morning, on the steps leading to the office. He was standing with boys and girls from his class, watching it, ready to run if it came their way. One of the teachers broke off a thin branch from a nearby bush, pulled off the leaves and went for the snake. As soon as the cobra saw him, it raised its head, spread its hood and spat. Luckily, the teacher was wearing glasses or he would have been blinded. The teacher was very brave but I could see he wasn't good at dealing with snakes. If Malume had been there, he would have trapped it very quickly. This teacher was struggling to pin the snake's head down with the forked end of the branch, and the snake was spitting so fiercely that the teacher's face and shirt were soon

covered with venom – but he didn't give up. When the snake slithered away, the pupils screamed and moved back but the teacher went after it. And this time, as the snake was moving and not spitting, he was able to get the stick over its head. Then he picked the snake up, its jaws firmly clamped between his fingers, and held it up high. All the pupils cheered. The cobra was then put in a box and sent off to the game reserve.

Just as Tiyani stood up to stretch his legs, he saw Lucky running toward him; his uncle and two other game rangers were coming up the slope. He stood and waved to show them where he was. One of the game rangers was carrying a forked stick. 'Ha, just like my teacher.'

Lucky ran up to Tiyani, 'I didn't have to go all the way to the game reserve. I saw the rangers coming up the road. They were driving back from the river where they had caught that cat that escaped from the Park the other day. They've got it in a cage on their bakkie.'

Tiyani's eyes were wide with excitement. 'I want to see it. I want to see it.'

But Malume had come up and was asking Tiyani to show him where the snake was hiding. The men went after the snake and, within a few minutes, had caught it and were examining it. Malume's eyes narrowed and he and the other rangers were shaking their heads.

Tiyani ran up and saw the snake's body coiled around Malume's arm, its head firmly trapped between Malume's fingers. 'What's wrong Malume? Why do you look so worried?'

'Tiyani and Lucky get the goats together and take them back to

the pen, right away.'

'Why Malume, what's wrong? Aren't you glad you caught the snake?'

'Very glad Tiyani, but now we must catch the rest of the family and I don't want you boys here because it's going to be dangerous.'

'The rest of the family? What do you mean, Malume?'

'This is just a baby snake, a baby rock python. Its mother, brothers and sisters are somewhere around and we have to find them all. The mother is a very big snake, about as big as a mamba. Because she is looking after her babies she will be very dangerous so I don't want you around. Now get the goats and go home.' Tiyani looked reluctant. 'Go on now, go!' Uncle ordered as he put the baby snake into a bag.

Tiyani and Lucky rounded up the goats and drove them down the slope. As they passed the bakkie at the foot of the hill, Tiyani stopped to look at the caracal which was lying flat; it had been darted and was asleep. 'Lucky, isn't it beautiful. And look at the pointy ears with tufts sticking out like feathers!'

Making his way home through the village after work, Rhulani could see Nyeleti, Tintswalo and Grace walking along with bundles of wood on their heads. Nyeleti turned in to her yard and the other girls walked on to their homes. As he approached, Rhulani saw Themba and Musa coming out of the front door.

When they saw him, they walked right up to him and Themba confronted him. ‘Listen here, boy, go on your way and stop pestering Nyeleti. What’s that in your hand? Another chocolate?’ He snatched it from Rhulani and when Rhulani tried to retrieve it, he tossed it to Musa who squashed it underfoot.’ With mock concern, Themba turned to Musa, ‘Ooh Musa, why you do that to the poor boy’s chocolate?’ Then the two of them walked away cackling.

Completely deflated, Rhulani stood there staring at the chocolate. Perhaps, he should forget about seeing Nyeleti today. But he pulled himself together and turned to the door. He was startled to see her father standing there. He hadn’t seen him open the door. Rhulani greeted him and asked to see Nyeleti. Her father smiled apologetically, ‘She’s not here, my boy. She went to town with her mother.’ Although Rhulani knew he was lying, he thanked him and walked away.

Rhulani had been struggling with himself all day about Nyeleti, so he really wanted to talk to her. But she hadn’t come out to see him. I wish I could have spoken to her. He felt really frustrated and kicked viciously at a few stones in the road. Perhaps he should forget about her. But he couldn’t. He desperately wanted her to know... *Never mind, she’ll find out anyway.*

Rhulani wasn't happy. He knew he was heading for trouble.

That night, around the fire, Malume told the boys that they had found the mother python coiled around the babies to protect them. The rangers had darted her, collected the whole family and taken them to the reserve. 'It's a good thing you sent for me Tiyani. Kokwani's goats had no chance against that mother. She was almost two meters long.'

'But are the goats safe from the father?'

'I think so, Tiyani. The fathers don't stick around and the mothers only stay with the babies about two weeks. Then everyone is on his own.' Tiyani put his hand in Malume's. 'Well, I'm glad it's not like that with us.'

Rhulani felt terrible; he was going to spoil that. He sat there staring miserably into the fire.

7



When Tiyani got to the koppie with the goats the next morning, he went to look under the rock where the baby python had hidden. He wanted to make sure there weren't any more snakes around. Then he went to the boulder that Malume had shown him. That's where the trail down to the forest began. Looking down the little gully, he felt quite confident he could manage that. But he couldn't see where it led.

Then he heard Lucky calling. 'Lucky, I'm glad you came. Come here, I want to show you something.' Lucky ran up to him and he pointed out the beginning of the trail to the road down below. 'When Kokwani is better, we can climb down together. Malume says it's not too difficult.'

Lucky's eyes bulged. 'It looks pretty scary to me.'

'Well, we won't know until we try.'

They went back to the ridge to look down and assess the risk, and were surprised to see a big group of boys far below walking along the road. 'I wonder what's happening. Hey Lucky, look – I think I see Kulani, Jonas and Nyiko. Weren't they talking to

Themba and Musa the other day?’

Lucky suddenly clapped his hand over his open mouth. ‘That’s what I came to tell you yesterday, but with all that excitement about the snake, I forgot. Themba and Musa...’

But Tiyani wasn’t listening. He was staring in shock as the rest of the group below came into view. He couldn’t believe his eyes. There was Rhulani! Rhulani! With Themba and Musa! They must have kidnapped him!

‘What’s your brother doing with them? He didn’t go to work?’

Tiyani was staring at Rhulani. Right behind him was Loskop with a ferocious dog on a lead. When he saw the man bringing up the rear, he fell to his knees, his hands on his head and screamed. ‘Sikheto!’ He grabbed hold of Lucky. ‘Sikheto! That’s Sikheto! He hates my grandfather. He’s going to do something terrible to my brother. I think he’s going to kill him. I have to save him!’ He ran to the boulder, where the trail down to the forest road began.

‘Wait! Wait, Tiyani ...,’ Lucky yelled.

‘There’s no time! Run, Lucky, run! Tell my uncle! I must stop them!’ And he was gone. Lucky ran up to the boulder to see Tiyani slipping and sliding down past the big rock. He stood shaking with fear and frustration, then turned and ran off down the hill to get the rangers.

Driven by the thought that his brother’s life was in danger, Tiyani had shot down the hollow and landed on a ledge, completely unaware of how he had got there. He jumped off it onto the trail and ran down. When he came to a rocky outcrop that blocked his way, he didn’t think but simply began to scramble over it. His feet seemed to be working on their own, finding footholds and leading him on. Suddenly, he felt himself falling. He grabbed at

stones, scrub and tufts of grass, until he caught something that looked like a root. That broke his fall. He held on to it, realized it could bear his weight and lowered himself cautiously onto a jutting rock he could see just below. He crept along it till he found a way down and then was back on the trail again. Falling and stumbling over stones, he hurtled down the rough path and when he saw the road below, he scrambled down over its rocky bank. The moment his feet touched level ground, he was off like lightning and in among the trees.

He was following a grassy path but didn't know where he was going. When he heard a dog barking, he left the road and plunged into the trees on his left; he had seen that dog from the top of the koppie. He could hear it behind him as he ran so he knew it was following him. When he saw the river ahead, he flew to the edge, plunged into the water, swam to a clump of reeds and hid among them. Peering through the reeds, he could see the dog, pulling Loskop along, charging to the river's edge. Loskop led it up and down the bank but it had lost the scent. Looking across to the opposite bank, Loskop scanned it and then scanned the water. Tiyani kept absolutely still, didn't even blink, as Loskop's eyes roved over the reeds and along the river. Only when Loskop and the dog turned to go back, did Tiyani begin to breathe again. As soon as they were out of sight, he swam back to the bank. He was going to follow them; he had to find Rhulani.

Searching for the man and the dog, he hurried along under cover of trees and shrubs. He caught sight of them just as they turned off onto a rough path that led to a clearing. Tiyani didn't follow. If they came back, the dog would pick up his scent again so he moved on, hoping he was circling the glade. When he heard the sound of voices, he gasped with relief. They were

coming from over on his right so he ducked in among bushes and crawled on his stomach. The voices grew louder and he knew he was very close.

Someone was shouting. Tiyani didn't recognise the voice and guessed it was Sikheto. 'You lost him!'

'He swam across the river and ran away.'

'You fool. What if he's gone to fetch the police! Did you see who it was?'

'No, I don't know who it was.'

Sikheto turned to Themba and Musa. 'Who knew that we were coming here? Did you tell anyone? I told you to keep this quiet.' Eyes downcast, Themba and Musa stood sullen and resentful. 'Who did you tell? ... Are these the only boys you recruited?' Themba nodded.

Sikheto turned to the boys who were sitting one behind the other in a straight line, their legs straight out in front of them. Rhulani was the last in line. Tiyani was hiding in the bushes directly behind him. 'Did any of you tell anyone?' They shook their heads in fear. Sikheto roared, 'Don't lie to me! You must have told someone.' He grabbed a stick and began shaking it. 'Speak up now!' One of the boys – Tiyani's classmate, Nyiko, – yelled out in terror. 'It must be Lucky. They,' he pointed to Themba and Musa, 'they told him to come, but he refused.'

Sikheto turned to Themba and Musa. 'Is this true?'

Terrified, Themba quickly pointed to Rhulani, 'It's his grandfather's fault! He was telling boys not to come!'

'His grandfather?'

Loskop snarled, ‘This is Rhulani Mavusa. He is Risimati Mavusa’s grandson.’

Sikheto walked up to Rhulani. ‘So, you are old man Mavusa’s grandson, eh? Your grandfather had me chased out of the village. So what are you doing here?’ He stared at Rhulani a moment, then turned in alarm to Loskop. ‘This must be a trap. That’s why this boy is here. They are trying to catch me. That other boy was following us. Now he’s gone for the police.’ Sikheto shouted in panic, ‘We’ve got to get out of here. Quickly, collect the money and let’s be on our way. Musa, Themba, hurry up!’

Musa and Themba jumped up to help Loskop. When Musa brought the money, Sikheto demanded, ‘How much?’

‘R200.’

‘What!’ Sikheto aimed a blow at Musa’s head and sent him sprawling on the grass. ‘R200! R200. Are you mad?’

Musa cowered, anticipating the next shot, ‘That’s ... that’s ... what they brought.’

‘Didn’t you tell them the price? Didn’t you tell them the price?’ Sikheto turned on Loskop and Themba. ‘Didn’t they know how much to bring?’

‘We told them. They knew!’ Loskop burst out.

Themba pointed to Rhulani again, ‘It was his grandfather. He told them not to bring money.’

As Sikheto came rushing at Rhulani, his stick raised ready to bring it down on the boy’s head, a big stone suddenly shot through the air like a bullet, struck him in the middle of his forehead and knocked him down. Rhulani stared in amazement. He turned to look into the bush behind him and saw Tiyani standing there with stones in his hands. When he saw Themba

and Musa rushing toward Tiyani, Rhulani jumped up in front of them, brought them down and the three got into a scuffle. Loskop let the dog loose and sent it straight at Tiyani, who flung another large stone. It caught the hound in the side of the head; the dog leapt up in pain, fell to the ground, and got up to charge again. But Tiyani, ready with his barrage of stones, let fly at the dog and it ran away whimpering. Tiyani shouted to the other boys, 'Get out of here! Run away. These are bad men. They will hurt you. Don't sit there! Go! Go! Kulani, Jonas, go! Run away!'

The boys jumped up and began running in every direction. Suddenly Loskop, Themba and Musa were running too. Tense and alert, Tiyani waited for the attack but they were running away from him – out of the clearing. He didn't know what they were up to. He ran to Rhulani and they stood back to back, expecting to be attacked from any direction. Then he heard horses' hooves and shouted with relief. 'The rangers! Lucky sent the rangers!' He and Rhulani rounded up the other boys, who were confused and frightened, and tried to calm them down.

A minute later, Malume rode into the clearing, jumped off his horse, ran to Sikheto who was sitting on the ground rubbing his head, handcuffed him, put him on a lead and tied it to his saddle. Then Malume turned to his nephews and held them both very close. They knew he was thankful to find they had not been hurt. Rhulani told him not to worry about them. He and Tiyani would take the boys back to the village. Malume nodded, got back on his mount and left with Sikheto in tow.

8



After taking all the boys back to their families and explaining what had happened, Rhulani and Tiyani trudged home. Mother took one look at Tiyani, and didn't know whether to be angry or to cry.

'Look at you, Tiyani, what are all these cuts and bruises on your arms and legs. And look at your clothes. Dirty and torn! Where have you been? What have you been doing? Your grandfather trusted you with his goats, but you ran off somewhere and left them on the koppie. If it weren't for Lucky, they would still be up there! As for you Rhulani, you who are usually so responsible, why didn't you go to work today?' She waited but Rhulani hung his head; he couldn't look her in the eye. 'What devil got into you boys today? I am very disappointed in you. Now go and clean yourselves up and change your clothes.'

She bundled them off to the bathroom. After they had showered, Rhulani sat with Tiyani, ointment and band-aids in hand, dressing the cuts and bruises all over his body. Tiyani knew that Rhulani felt very ashamed so he didn't say anything.

When they eventually came out, they found the yard full of people, everyone shouting and trying to tell Mhani about the day's happenings. The mothers of the boys who had been rescued from Sikheto were shouting loudest. When they saw Rhulani and Tiyani, they ran to them, shook their hands and hugged and kissed them, while Mhani stared in surprise. Eventually, an Induna arrived on the scene and tried to calm everyone but they were all too wound up. He was trying to make an announcement but nobody was listening. So Tiyani fetched his tin and spoon and beat out a tattoo that got their attention. Then the Induna announced that the Chief had called a Xivijo and everyone was to assemble in the Chief's courtyard. The Chief had important announcements to make. When he left, all the people in the yard shook Mhani's hands, congratulated her on her wonderful sons and left.

Mhani was totally confused. Why were people praising boys who had behaved so badly today? Just then Wilfred came back and took them all to Grandfather's room. His father, who was feeling much better, was eagerly waiting to hear what happened. Kokwani, sitting up in bed, laughed when he saw Tiyani. 'With all that plaster on your body, you look like you're back from a war.' Tiyani looked at Rhulani who turned away in embarrassment.

Grandpa frowned, 'What's the matter, Rhulani? Aren't you and Tiyani, the heroes of the day?'

Rhulani burst out. 'Not me! Not me! I let you down, Kokwani. I know you will never forgive me.' He threw himself down beside the bed, his face hidden in his hands. Malume and Mhani looked at each other in surprise.

Kokwani reached over and stroked his head. 'You are my

grandchild. I love you. There is nothing you can do that I cannot forgive.'

'But you didn't forgive my father.' Kokwani was puzzled. 'And I disobeyed you, just as he did.'

'Rhulani, I loved Gezani. I still do. But he doesn't believe that so he went away. Now tell me, what is it that you have done?'

There was a long silence, then Rhulani gasped in shame, 'I went ... I went ... to Sikheto for ngoma today.' He couldn't look at his grandfather. 'I know it was wrong. I know it. I know it. I know you can never forgive me.'

Tiyani looked around at the shocked faces and couldn't be quiet any longer, 'He did it for Nyeleti, Kokwani.'

Grandpa lifted Rhulani's head and looked into his eyes. 'I understand, my boy. You made a mistake and you are suffering for it. But we all make mistakes. That is how we learn. So you don't need my forgiveness; you have to forgive yourself. Your father couldn't forgive himself and I lost him. I don't want to lose you too.'

Mhani was in tears and Rhulani looked as though he would break down too. To give him a chance to pull himself together, Malume turned everyone's attention to Tiyani, 'And you, my lad, what were you doing in the forest?'

Not in his usual lively manner, Tiyani told them about seeing Rhulani and the other boys, about Lucky going off to bring the game rangers and his climb down the koppie.

Malume was amazed, 'You climbed down to the forest road! By yourself!'

'Yes, Malume, I followed the path you showed me. And Mhani, that's how I got scratched and bruised and tore my clothes.' Then he told of how he had crawled on his stomach to the edge of the clearing, and heard Sikheto demanding money and threatening the boys.

Rhulani, much calmer now, added in a shaky voice, 'When Sikheto came to beat me, Kokwani, I thought it was all over for me. But suddenly, I saw this missile flying through the air and knocking Sikheto out.'

'That was me, Mhani,' shouted Tiyani full of confidence again. 'I took the biggest stone I could find and aimed it right at Sikheto.' Mhani's eyes were full of tears. Kokwani took her hand, squeezed it and held it while the boys finished telling their tale. Then Mhani reached out and held both her boys in her arms.

That night at the Xivijo, the Chief and the villagers talked about what had happened that day. The Chief was quite stern. He had banished Sikheto from the village the year before for running an illegal ngoma, but his people had still sent their boys to him.

'People like Sikheto are only interested in making money. They are not qualified for circumcisions. They only hurt and maim the boys. My people, I want you all to understand that it is illegal to send boys to someone who is not licensed for ngoma. Do you understand me? It is illegal! That means it is against the law. So as your Chief, I forbid anyone from going to an unlicensed person and to an illegal ngoma. Chief Risinga of our neighbouring village and I are setting up ngoma for our two villages. Doctors will perform the circumcisions and look after the boys.'

In today's world because of diseases and pollution it is better that way. But, my people, you must understand that ngoma is not only about circumcision.'

He called for Themba and Musa who were brought in by two Indunas. Sikheto and Loskop had been arrested and were in jail, but Malume had handed Themba and Musa over to the Chief and they had been held in one of his outbuildings.

The Chief looked at the villagers. 'Do you see these boys? They were helping Sikheto because they don't understand what ngoma is about. They think it is all about money. Sikheto promised to pay them a lot of money for bringing your children to him.' He paused and looked around. 'These boys learned that it was all right to cheat and hurt other people. That is all wrong; that is not ngoma. Turning boys into men is all about respect, about caring for and protecting all members of the community. Chief Risinga and I have found a mayini who will give our boys the proper instruction and training. So Themba and Musa will go to our official ngoma. They will be circumcised by doctors, but more importantly, they will learn what it means to be responsible men.'

Malume turned to Rhulani sitting next to him, 'You can go too and nobody will call you a boy again.'

Rhulani gave a rueful smile. 'No, Malume. I learned something today. Kokwani is right. We learn from our mistakes. And I know now that nobody can make you a man, if you don't already know it inside yourself.'

Uncle put his arm around him and hugged him.

The Chief then called Tiyani and Lucky to his side. 'These boys

have shown us that they are real men. Even though they have not been to ngoma, they acted like men today and took responsibility for the children of this village. I am very proud of them. And to show my appreciation and yours, I am awarding them the highest honour given to our warriors.'

Two Indunas came forward and presented royal shields to Tiyani and Lucky. The crowd cheered, the women ululated, stood up, formed a colourful circle and danced, making waves with their xibelanis as they shook their hips and shuffled their feet. Mhani and Lucky's mother, whose hearts were bursting with pride, were the best dancers in the circle and people ran to put coins on their heads to show their appreciation.

This is the story of the brothers, Rhulani and Tiyani, who live with their mother, uncle and grandfather in a village that borders on the Kruger National Park.

It is a story about the tradition of circumcision and initiation – ngoma. Rhulani’s grandfather does not want his grandsons to go to unqualified men who set up initiation schools.

Rhulani’s friends, however, are going for ngoma. They regard him as cowardly because his grandfather wants him to go to a hospital for circumcision. They believe he will never be a man.

So Rhulani has a problem.

