



Out on the Lake by Mizan Somani

A Changed Love Thandeka Gumedde

It had been exactly three days since Refilwe had told Thabani that she did not ever want to have his kids. In a burst of frustration, she had told the man she had been with for eight years that she never wanted to have his kids. She had expected him to retort back, as had been occurring back and forth for two minutes prior, when their month-long passive aggressiveness had finally erupted into a match of screaming insults at each other; but Thabani said nothing. He simply stirred two teaspoons of sugar into his coffee and left the kitchen. Refilwe heard the slam of the door as Thabani retreated to his home office; where she was sure he would return to constructing his next model of an upcoming duplex for a contract he was part of a team for. It had been three days and they still had not spoken of what she had said. Instead, every morning she would wake up to Thabani having already left for work, and in the evenings they would sit at each end of their dining room table and quietly eat their dinner. Today it had been his day to cook dinner. As Refilwe mumbled a thank you, with a mouth filled with the chicken curry and rice, Thabani placed his spoon on the plate and glugged the remainder of the glass of wine he had filled nearly to the brim almost five minutes ago.

“So you don’t want to have my children?” He slurred slightly.

“Thabani, please can we agree to speak when you’re sober.”

“No, I want us to talk now. You don’t want us to have kids?”

“Thabani, please.”

“How long have you been thinking about this?” He shouted exasperatedly as he stood up from his chair. “How long, Fifi?!”

“I don’t know, Thabani. Let’s just talk when you’re sober, please. It can even be – ”

“How long, dammit?!”

He banged his fists on the table and began to walk towards Refilwe. He shouted the question at her, with a proximity at which she could smell the stench of the alcohol that clung to his tongue. As she shook her head, he grabbed both her arms beneath the shoulder and began to shake her. Suddenly there was no sound. He continued to shake her and though she knew from his face scrunched in what looked like a mixture of pain and fury that he was still shouting; everything was silent except for the ringing in her head. This was the same ringing that she had heard exactly four months and three days ago, the moment that the doctor placed her tiny baby into her hands. She remembered how it had been just able to fit in her two hands cupped together; its little body curled into itself. She mourned her baby and refused the hospital staff from coming nearer, as Thabani watched her from across the room. Her cries

revealed the heart wrenching pain that she felt at the loss of life in her womb. A child that she believed would make them a family and return to them the joy that slowly began to dissipate from their relationship. A week later, Thabani had thrown out the few new-born outfits that they had impulsively bought upon discovering her pregnancy. That week, she had spent most of her time in bed, on leave from work.

Refilwe returned from her thoughts and released herself from Thabani’s grip.

“I’m sorry, baby, can we just – ”

“No, Thabani!” She shouted.

She quickly stood up from her chair and slapped him. He recoiled and held the palm of his hand to his cheek, speedily as if he were trying to keep the side of his face intact. As they stared at each other with eyes filled with pain, she thought about how she had lied to him. How could she forget the moment that she knew she did not want to have children with him; the swiftness with which he moved on with his life and erased any memory that they once had created life. This began to eat at her, and at him, and at them.

The next day, Refilwe woke up and began to prepare herself for her day. As usual, she awoke to an emptiness beside her where the sheets smelt of

the lightly musk scented body lotion that Thabani would rub on his body after his morning and nightly showers. She slowly went through the motions of readying herself for her eight-hour day in her small office cubicle at work, applying a little extra makeup to pick herself up. In addition to her makeup base, she lined her oval shaped eyes with a black eyeliner, coated her eyelashes in mascara, and applied a chocolate brown lipstick two shades darker than her skin. Impressed with her makeup, she looked into the mirror and reminded herself not to dwell on the matters of home.

When she arrived at her desk, she began to plan out when she would have time to go visit her mother in hospital and what she would be cooking for dinner that night. Before her lunch break began her closest colleague at work, Rori, came to tell her that she was being summoned into the office of the manager. As she sat down, the information was given to her in quick succession. They were sorry, but unfortunately, they had to release Refilwe from her duties at the bank. They were in need of money to expand upon the bank and so had to remedy that by letting go of a number of people. The decision would be effective from the end of the week, and they were more than willing to offer stellar recommendation letters on her behalf. The manager then

said thank you and motioned for Refilwe to leave. As she did, she thought about how her manager had said thank you at the end; as if she had been done a favour by Refilwe's stoic expression throughout the conversation, grateful that she could continue her day having steered clear of the inconvenience of tears, a breakdown at having been rendered unemployed in the blink of an eye. Refilwe returned to her desk, took her keys out of the drawer beneath her computer screen and left.

Thabani arrived home and walked through the door. As he took off his shoes and placed them in the doorway, he saw Refilwe's shoes and her handbag sitting beneath their coat hanger. He wondered why she would be home so early and sighed as he readied himself to face her after what had happened the night before.

"Uh, hi." He said timidly, as he walked into the bedroom that they shared.

"Thabani..." She said between sniffing, silent sobs.

"What's the matter?" He quickly said, as he ran to sit next to her on the bed and hold her in his embrace.

"I lost my job today." She sobbed, louder, as the reality fully began to hit her now that she was no longer the only one affected by this that knew.

Thabani said nothing. He just

squeezed her tight as he did whenever he felt he could not find words worthy enough to console her. It was the same squeeze that he gave her as she sat in her hospital gown at 2AM, having bled through her clothes, awaiting the doctor's arrival to confirm what they already feared they knew. He held her like that for what felt like eternity as she cried into the space between his shoulder and his neck. He had only seen her cry that way once before, when her mother was admitted to the hospital following complaints of a growth in her breast that turned out to be cancerous. Nonetheless, he had heard her cry that way a few other times, having neither the strength nor the composure to watch or try to comfort her. One of those times being after their tiny baby was placed into her hands that morning at the hospital. He could not bear to watch her mourn, and yet he felt she assumed she had more right to feel the pain of the loss than he had.

After they had returned from visiting Refilwe's mother at the hospital, they sat down at their dining room table once again and ate their dinner quietly as if their embrace earlier had not happened.

"I'm glad your mother is recovering well."

"Yes, it's a relief. I need all my strength to find a new job."

"You know, I could be of some

help if you'd let me."

"Mh." She mumbled dismissively.

"You don't have to do everything by yourself, Fi."

She began to chuckle under her breath. She drank her half a glass of wine in one fluid motion as she threw her head back. As she wiped her upper lip with the sleeve of the light autumn coat that she wore, she began to chuckle again.

"Would you like to share the joke?" Thabani asked her.

"No, it's nothing. You wouldn't find it funny."

"You'll never know unless you try."

"Fine. I just find it funny how you're suddenly trying to become my knight in shining armour when you were never there for me to begin with."

"I've always been there for you."

"Liar." She said sharply as she poured herself another glass of wine.

Thabani began to stand up and clear the dinner plates from the table. As he walked toward the kitchen, she stopped him by yanking his arm and causing him to lose grip of the plates. They shattered upon contact with the floor and the shards flew across the room. Thabani turned around slowly, placed his hands on Refilwe's arms and pulled her up to her feet.

"You're hurting me, Thabani!"

She screamed shrilly.

“I’m going to ask you one time, and one time only. What is your problem?” He said as he stared her down.

“You are. You know what, I’ve actually decided that I’m leaving you.”

Thabani felt the air get knocked out of him as he heard those words. He wished that she had not said that, as the anger began to take control over him.

“Say something, Thabani.” She said mockingly.

As his breaths became louder and deeper, his nostrils flaring, he closed his eyes and clenched his fists tightly.

“First you don’t want to have children with me, and now you’re leaving me?” He shouted at her.

“Yes!” She shouted back. “I can’t do this with you, Thabani. I just can’t! I can’t go through it all again. Do you know what I went through, losing the baby?!”

“I lost a child too, Refilwe!”

“You weren’t there for me, Thabani! I lost my baby, my child, and you just moved on with your life. You threw away any memory we had of our baby, Thabani!”

“You’re acting like you were the only one who lost a child. I just... I didn’t want you to feel pain when you saw the clothes that we had gotten; the little pyjamas for coming home from the

hospital... I lost a child too! Please, let’s work on this. Come on, Fifi.”

“No!” She said as she shook her head. “I can’t go through it again. I can’t bear all that weight alone again if we lose another one. You don’t know how it feels to have life growing inside of you one minute, and then the next thing it’s gone. Just like that, it’s gone. And the person that you love the most, going on with his life. It’s too much.”

Thabani reached out to hold Refilwe and she backed away and left the dining room. He sat down, slumped into the chair and placed his head into his hands.

The next morning, a defeated Thabani awoke to Refilwe packing her bags. She took off her ring, placed it on the bed, then told him she would be staying at her mother’s house and would be back for the rest of her belongings. Yet again, he stayed silent as he felt his heart break; convinced that there was nothing more he could do to salvage what was left of their marriage after losing a baby, and becoming distant, leading separate lives and yet retiring beside each other each night. They had become people that they no longer recognised and lost themselves along the way; becoming bitter and malicious in this love.

After a week, the divorce papers had arrived to Thabani in the home that

him and Refilwe had once shared. He resignedly decided that he would hand deliver them to Refilwe that evening, when he had filled in his share of the document.

A week in her mother's home had given Refilwe ample time to prepare for her mother's arrival to prepare for her mother's arrival from the hospital, begin editing her CV in the search for work, and also attend to the matter of beginning the process of her divorce from Thabani. Though all of this caused her considerable strain, she was glad at least that she would soon be able to be in the comfort of her mother's arms, as she often had been as a girl every time she felt that life had ripped the rug from beneath her and left her sorrowed. The ring of her cell phone quickly pried her from her thoughts and she slowly rose from the couch to go and answer it.

"Good day, am I speaking to a Mrs. Refilwe Ndlovu?" The voice on the other end said.

"Hi, it's Refilwe Motaung... now. But yes, this is she." She felt her heart skip a beat as she let those words escape her mouth.

"The daughter of Dorothy Motaung, yes?"

"Correct."

"Hi, I'm Dr. Mokoma,

and I'm calling with regards to your mother's discharge. Unfortunately, your mother has passed on."

Refilwe's heart began to beat faster as her chest tightened at those words. She felt as if there was no longer any oxygen present as she struggled to breathe. The phone fell from her hand as her mind raced, trying to make sense of the words she had just heard. She fell to her knees and began to cry unconsolably. As her chest heaved each time she tried to take a breath, she suddenly heard the doorbell ring. She stood up and ran to the door, flinging it open, and saw Thabani's face.

"Refilwe..." He said anxiously, gripping the documents in his right hand.

She threw herself into his arms. "Please don't leave me! I don't need this grief."