Critical But Stable

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| South Africa |

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The Car

Jabulani Khambule settled on the couch in his bachelor pad – a one-roomed cottage that had been built at the back of his mother's house in Thokoza, Soweto. He liked to call it a cottage because that's what people in the suburbs called back rooms, even if his friends laughed at him whenever he used the word.

'This is the hood, bro. A back room is a back room. There are no cottages here,' they'd mock him.

But he always hoped for better days ahead. Working in the suburbs every day did that to you. It made you long for things that maybe you had no business longing for. Seeing your fellow black folk driving around in fancy cars, ordering pizza every day, drinking nice drinks. Why them and not him? Just a few years ago they were living in the same type of four-roomed house as his. Was the struggle against apartheid only for the benefit of a few

chosen bastards?

He went to the mini-bar fridge by the main door of his cottage, opened it and grabbed a bottle of beer. He was through feeling guilty about drinking on a weekday and cared not that it was only ten in the morning. Not when he had to wake up in this dingy room every day. No girlfriend, lousy pay, and stuck at that job for God knows how long.

He'd worked the day shift yesterday at the townhouse complex he called his workplace and was bracing himself for the night shift that awaited him. It started at 6 p.m. so he reckoned he could enjoy his drink, watch TV, then sleep it off before waking in the afternoon to get ready. The night was only his companion when it involved drinking and tavern-hopping with his friends. That was what nights were for; not guarding the homes of the privileged.

He looked for the TV remote. The place was a mess. The two-seater couch took up most of the space he referred to as his living room. The bed was just a metre away from the couch. He had arrived home after his shift and strewn his clothes on the floor. His mother usually did his laundry on Friday, so he only needed to pack everything into the laundry basket on Thursday.

He finally located the remote wedged between the couch cushions and channel-surfed until he settled on the news. He was glad his mother had installed cable TV; he only enjoyed watching the news and sports.

He sipped his beer lazily but stopped and sat up straight when he saw a black Mercedes-Benz beaming out of the screen and what looked like might be a crime scene, sealed off with that yellow police tape, and a news reporter standing in front of it.

He turned up the volume.

'. . . on Rivonia Road in the early hours of this morning. The woman's body was found in the driver's seat. The name of the deceased, a police spokesperson said, has not been released pending investigation into the cause of death. They declined to say whether foul play was

suspected but are calling on anyone who has any information to come forward.'

He banna!

He knew that car – and that registration number!

Not only that, but he had seen it as recently as yesterday, an hour or so before he'd knocked off at 6 p.m. when his colleague Sam came on duty.

It belonged to that fancy woman who came to visit the Zimbabwean guy in his complex. Like all visitors had to do, she signed in at the gate. He had always been curious about her. She came at odd hours but didn't usually stay longer than an hour or two. She never stayed the night, which made him wonder if she might be married. She was quite a bit older than the Zimbabwean guy, although he could see why he would be attracted to her. She had a beautiful engaging face, and always a smile for him and a wave when she left again.

He hadn't looked to see whether she wore a wedding ring, but he harboured some resentment. He hated how foreigners felt they could sleep around with women in South Africa. Was it not enough that a South African like him was working security while foreigners like that Zim guy carried on as though they owned the land? Now he had to watch helplessly while they slept with married women too?

Ja-ne. Everything was wrong with this country these days.

He thought about what he'd just witnessed on the news. He hoped they'd repeat the story during the ten-thirty news slot. There had been a number to call on the bottom of the screen but it was gone before he could write it down. That foreigner probably had something to do with her death.

But first he should phone Sam. He dialled his colleague's number but the call went unanswered. Damn!
He gulped down his beer and went to the fridge to get another. He could feel the adrenalin

kicking in. What he wouldn't give for that *kwerekwer*e to have something to do with this woman's death! He-he! Payback time. The underdog also deserved some triumphs in life.

And this was a big one. He could already imagine himself regaling his friends with the story at the tavern on Saturday.

After the second bottle of beer, he tried Sam again. He picked up the call but within seconds, he heard the dreaded voice of the white woman from the phone company.

'You have insufficient airtime to make a call.'

Voetsek!

Insufficient airtime. Insufficient airtime. *Nywe nywe nywe.*

Now he had to go to the *spaza* shop to buy airtime. *Eish!* He was feeling so lazy today. Was it worth it?

To put a smug *kwerekwere* behind bars? Of course, it was worth it!

He checked his wallet to see if he had any money left. Payday was two days away.

He'd learned to ask his mother to keep his transport money for the month because he knew he could end up spending it all on beer. He had thirty-five rand left.

His mother also made him lunch and takeaway dinner and his transport for the next two days was sorted.

Okay. He would buy twelve rands of airtime, but would it be enough to call Sam *and* the number on the bottom of the screen? *Eish*. Knowing the police, they'd probably put him on hold forever. *Yho!*

No. He had to use his mother's phone.

He brushed his teeth so she wouldn't be able to tell he'd been drinking and went to the main house to talk to her.

Immediately when he walked into the house, she glared at him with an unnecessarily cross expression on her face.

'*Ufunani*? What do you want, *wena*?'

'*Hawu*, Ma. Since when do mothers greet their sons like that?'

'You're a handful, *wena*. I don't have money to lend you. Just know that,' she said irritably.

'I'm not here to ask for money, Ma. A woman has been killed at my complex . . . where I work, Ma. I want to call Sam. Because I think they killed her at the complex.'

'*Yho!* Are you serious? Do these rich people do such barbaric things?'

Jabulani shook his head solemnly. 'My work is tough, Ma. Don't be fooled by their fancy cars and clothes. Those people are savages. Give me your phone. It's urgent. I need to make sure there are no more deaths at the complex.'

'Oh, shame, *mntwanam*. Your job is so dangerous!'

He shrugged. 'I'm just a simple man saving lives. What can I do?'

'*Thatha*. Take the phone. Do your job, my son, but please be careful,' she said as she grabbed her bag from the chair on the table and handed her phone to Jabulani. She slumped on the dining chair, made the sign of the cross and watched him with pride.

Jabulani dialled Sam's number and waited for the voice on the other end.

'Sam. *Unjani?*'

'Hey, I'm trying to sleep, *Jabu*. Why do you keep calling me?'

'No, man, listen. This is important. You know that woman with the black Merc? The one who visits that Zimbabwean in unit number 89?'

'Hey, bro. I know her. Why?'

'Sam, they found that woman's dead body this morning, *bafo*. On Rivonia Road. What time did she leave yesterday? She came in before I knocked off, but I didn't see her leave.'

'*Bafo*, hey, hey, hey. You know, a strange thing happened last night. In fact, it was early this morning.'

'Around one a.m., I saw that Merc driving out, but it was two guys. I didn't see a woman in the car.'