
The Magic Number

A short Story

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The Magic Number

“Hello Thabo. Thabo *wa bantwana*.” she exclaimed with a smug on her face. “Do you remember me?”, she continued. “Let me guess, you don't know who I am, right?” Then she laughed loudly, attracting even more stares in their direction. “Players like you don't remember who they have slept with in the past.” This last statement made him alert, slowly realising that there is more to this bashing than a mere excitement of a beautiful young woman. A little crowd was already gathered around them, all looking intently at this Thabo rumoured to be best player around. Everyone knows a young man by the name of Thabo, seemingly involved with all the beautiful girls of the location, as townships are called in the Free State province. But the majority of adults have never set eyes on him before, until this day.

All they know is the blue Citi Golf that continually picks up girls in the neighbourhood. Every family that has a young beautiful girl is worrying about this Thabo lad, who is renowned throughout the Free State province. Girls from Bloemfontein, Welkom, Thaba-Nchu, Bethlehem and Qwaqwa all know Thabo. He is the single most girl-friended guy around. So much that he goes out with girls who are friends, that is how desirable he is among the young maidens.

Thabo is a young man who comes from a poor family in Botshabelo Block M. What his family lack in social standing, he has in good looks. He is a rainbow child born of a mother working as a maid for a white family in Wesselsbron. He is the product of the illicit habits of farmers in those regions, who find pleasure in the domestic workers when their misses are out. So Thabo, like many other children in the region, is light complexion with fluffy hair; a trait girls in the Free State seem to love very much. How else do you explain the string of girls Thabo dates across the entire province?

Locals call him *lebusmane*, because of his looks. His looks put him in good standing whenever he goes in the Free State with the female species. Women fall over themselves for him.

Thabo has been a player since his years in high school. By the time he completed matric, he had long achieved the magic number, 100. This made him a legend among young boys who admired his tact and ruthlessness with women. In the laid back Free State, 100 is the biggest achievement amongst boys. To sleep with 100 girls.

A 100 girls makes you a legend among the young boys. This is the ultimate status symbol for young boys who lack anything better to do.

“My name is Disebo. I live in Jerusalema Park, does it ring a bell Mr?” the lady continued to lambast at him in full force. “Thabo Radieta wa Mme Mamohlophehi, *o sebeti moshemane*. To come pick up girls from this side of the world. *Kajeno lena badimo ba heno ba o furalletse. O lahluwe ke sepoko*. After all you have done to me?” Disebo continued her rapture. By now a sizeable group of spectators was building up, for this was a public place to begin with. People had gathered her to celebrate a party as parties are usually where young people gather these days. Nthabiseng was celebrating her 21st birthday in style. Almost all the young people of Thabong had gathered here today to have fun. As fate would have it, here is Disebo running into Thabo, after not seeing him in about five years. Long eventful five years for both of them.

Disebo had been one of Thabo's many girlfriends five years ago while she was in high school. When she fell pregnant, Thabo had simply vanished from the face of the earth and never to be seen again. Until today that is.

The Magic Number

Thabo has travelled a lot around the Free State. His mother's side of the family is scattered all over the province, a fact that has allowed him this free movement between different towns. In every town he has visited, he had always had a string of girls to his name. The last time he sat foot in Qwaqwa, he had narrowly escaped fate. A mother of one of his many girlfriends had decided to put to end this pandemic called Thabo. He had one day miraculously escaped being poured with boiling water over the face. He has never dared going back to Qwaqwa ever since.

His behaviour had guaranteed that Thabo had seven children by the time he completed matric. Things moved from bad to worse when he got a job a clerk at the Mangaung municipality. All young girls coming to the municipality for service ended up receiving a different kind of service, Thabo himself. By the end of his first year of service he had managed to buy himself a car. His car had personalised number plates, **PLAYA FS**. The blue citi golf became a trade mark amongst young girls. The car has seen more girls inside than the many parts that make up a car. After three years of working for the municipality, Thabo had lost count of the number of girls he had taken to bed. All he knows is that they are over five hundred in total, the majority of whom he can't even remember their faces, let alone their names.

Thabo was now in a self imposed exile from many towns and cities as a result of his loving ways. He didn't even know how many kids he had, all he knows are all the girls whose pregnancies he had blatantly refused. Life was becoming increasingly difficult for Thabo in the Free State. He found it hard to travel, even on duty. Bloemfontein itself was no longer a nice place for him. Too many families were unhappy with him for the bad treatment he has given their daughters. A few cases had in fact already been reported at work about him. He had many maintenance cases pending also. Life indeed was becoming unbearable for him. He was already considering requesting a transfer to another province, just to get away from all these problems.

While he honestly does not remember most of his girlfriends, he certainly remembered who Disebo was, especially the fact that he left her when she fell pregnant. It would be difficult to forget the beautiful Disebo. She was a perfect doll in every way. Drop-dead gorgeous, well mannered and intelligent. Very few girls stuck in his mind like Disebo did.

Thabo, for the most part, was dumbfounded. He had absolutely no idea what to say or how to react. He had never anticipated running into someone like Disebo. So he just stood there looking stupid. When it was clear no answer was forthcoming from him, Disebo gave him a big slap that sent him falling on his behind. This brought giggles and laughs from the group gathered to witness this scene. At that very moment, it is like all the bad things that Thabo had ever done to Disebo came back in a flash to her. Instantly, she was mad as hell. She pounced on him and gave him the beating of his life. All this happened so fast for him to make sense of it. By the time he came to his senses, he was a real mess from the handiwork of his beautiful Disebo. Realising what was happening to him, he stood up and gave Disebo a big slap. He was obviously going on the offensive and was about to unleash his anger on Disebo when a group of guys who knew Disebo stepped in and gave him a beating of his life. He was badly beaten and no one in the whole of Welkom had the slightest sympathy for him. In this way, Welkom became another exile for him.

Modiehi grew up at her parents' home in Block J in Botshabelo. A decent girl who was just like any other girl you can find in Botshabelo. As a young girl Modiehi was just an ordinary girl in the way

The Magic Number

of looks. Not pretty but decent and presentable. When Modiehi was in Grade 9, she was really flattered that a boy like Thabo would even take notice her. Thabo had taken to chasing after Modiehi too. While she had no interest whatsoever in him, his interest in her had boosted her profile at school. She was suddenly a popular girl, a fact that quickly went to her head and she ended up sleeping with Thabo. She immediately fell pregnant.

Modiehi was the first girl to be impregnated by Thabo, and the very first to be dumped the minute he learnt she was pregnant. She came from a modest family, by Botshabelo standards of course. Which would be poor by any other standard. The result of this unplanned pregnancy was that Modiehi was expelled from school. Her parents threw her out of their home. Her refuge was her uncle, her mother's brother, who lived in Thaba-Nchu. She relocated to Selosesha in Thaba-Nchu where she gave birth to a healthy boy, whom she named *Tshotleho*, a Sesotho name for suffering. Life was generally difficult for her, she could not come back home to Botshabelo, not even during the holidays or over weekends. Her father just did not want to see her any more. Only her mother would come by to visits a few later.

Two years after giving birth, Modiehi went back to school to finish her studies. Up to that point when she had met Thabo, she had not bothered thinking about the future. The idea of what it was she wanted to become in life had never crossed her mind. But the two years she spent raising her young baby gave her a lot of time to think and assess her life. She had resolved to work hard to complete her schooling with the hope that she could secure a scholarship as no one in her family was willing to send her to university. Her resolve to study had nothing to do with wanting a future. It had everything to do with Thabo Radieta. She took a vow, swearing by her late grandmother, that one day she would make Thabo pay for what he did to her.

Ethel worked as a social worker for the Department of Social Development in Bloemfontein. She had graduated four years ago from the Free State University with a BA Hons in Social Work. Throughout her life, she had closely monitored Thabo and his progress in life. Though she had completed matric first and started work before him, she had never forgotten to keep a close eye on him. Ethel was the happiest person when Thabo had finally gotten the job, even more so when he bought a car. She had quickly moved to put her long resting plan into action.

Ethel had gone all out to locate all the women she could find in Bloemfontein who had fallen victim to Thabo. These women were divided into two groups, those with children and those without. She busy preparing a class-like case against Thabo. Firstly she would help those with children sue for maintenance. Then she would file a suit for emotional abuse for those who had been Thabo's girlfriends. Like many young women in Bloemfontein, she had been one of Thabo's toys. She intended to prove a case that Thabo was a serial heart breaker.

Gugu came from a very conservative family. Her father was the archbishop of the Pentacostal church in Maokeng Kroonstad. His was a well respected member of the community who was strict with his children. Gugu met Thabo at a church wedding in Virginia and they instantly took liking to each other. So much that Thabo was able to bed her that same evening in a cheap hotel, and later in the back of his citi golf. Up to this point, Gugu had been a virgin and she had been proud of that fact. Following the wedding, they had discretely kept in touch and Thabo would often drive to Kroonstad to see her. A few months later she was heavily pregnant. As usual, Thabo disowned her and disappeared when he learned about the pregnancy. Her strict archbishop father could not live

The Magic Number

with the disgrace and he ended up divorcing Gugu's mother. Her family was forever broken as a result. She grew up to be an active member of the movement, a fact that saw her progress to the provincial executive committee of the movement.

Modiehi had worked hard to qualify for a scholarship to the University of the Free State to study for her BJuris degree, followed by an LLB specialising in criminal law. She was an admitted attorney in the Free State Bar Council. Up to this point of her life, she had been a successful attorney. In time, she filed a suit against Thabo for child maintenance. Her second suit was for damages for the hurt and hardships Thabo had caused her. It was the child maintenance suit that had caught Ethel's attention. She had filed a suit for child maintenance on behalf of seven women, including herself. At this point, Ethel had been struggling to secure a legal firm to represent them on the serial heart breaker case, and Modiehi's profile had impressed her a lot.

With three very influential women now finding themselves in the same city of Bloemfontein, discussions had begun to strategise on the plan to bring Thabo down and humiliate him. Ethel had successfully lobbied Gugu, who was by now part of the provincial government, to join her class suit. Gugu, on her part, would work on lobbying all organs of state to be sympathetic to Ethel's case. While Modiehi would continue with her suits independent of the rest of the women in Ethel's fold, she had agreed nonetheless to represent the group as their attorney.

Thabo was now restless, with eight women suing him for child support in Bloemfontein alone. He wondered what would happen should all the women with whom he had children decided to follow suit. He estimated that he had impregnated no less than twenty two women, or that was what he could remember. So he potentially was a father to twenty two children at the age of only twenty five. With what he was earning, there was absolutely no way in which he could afford maintaining all these children. His only hope of being transferred to another province had recently hit a wall when things didn't go as planned. Unknown to him, his transfer was expertly blocked by non other than Gugu herself.

Modiehi's child support case was the first nightmare for Thabo. As soon the trial began, it was clear that she would win the case. Three months later, the court ordered him to pay R1200 a month child support to Modiehi. Next case facing him was a civil suit by Modiehi for damages and suffering he had caused her. While this was highly uncommon in South Africa, everyone close to the case agreed Modiehi had put together a winnable case. Thabo's legal counsel had acceded to this and had advised him to settle out of court, but Modiehi would hear none of it.

The class suit led by Ethel began while Thabo was facing a civil suit from Modiehi. This particular case brought by Ethel attracted a lot of attention, mainly because comrade Gugu had worked her magic with the politicians for them to take a stand behind Ethel. Out of the blue Thabo found himself faced with a suit whose main purpose was to teach men like him a lesson. The politicians were in full support of the case. The media were fed full details of the case by unknown sources. Before long, Thabo was in all the major newspapers across the Free State province. Several radio stations held interviews with Ethel to explain to the public what the case was about and why it was important. As a result, more women were coming up to join the class suit against him. So a case that had started with only eight women was now sitting with twenty nine complainants.

Modiehi won her civil suit against him, but judgement was still pending. The class suit with twenty

The Magic Number

nine women suing him for child support was fast nearing completion, with a lot of media coverage. Indications were that Thabo would lose the case. The second phase of the class suit, suing for mental and physical suffering of the women, got started. Thabo's legal council recused themselves from the case citing other commitments. In truth, the firm knew they were fast loosing the case and this had potential negative implications on their reputation and business.

The day Thabo learnt that he no longer had legal representation, he was shocked beyond belief. This had cemented the prevailing view that he had lost the case. That evening he sat in his flat alone reflecting on his life. He had recounted every encounter he could remember with women. How he had approached them, charmed their skirts off their bodies, then dumped them like dirt. For a brief moment, he felt sorry for his actions. He wondered what had prompted him to act the way he did. Of course that question he could not answer. With a heavy heart he lifted his pistol to his head and ended his life.

PART TWO

Matswedintsweke

The Magic Number

Ntebaleng has always had a crush on Thabo, since she can remember. While it was Thabo's *modus operandi* to hit on any skirt that wills, he had taken no interest whatsoever in Ntebaleng. She knew Thabo had no interest in her, but somehow kept hoping that one day he will sleep with her too. That was all she wanted, that he sleeps with her.

Ntebaleng also works for the Free State government as a Paramedic. She lives opposite Thabo's flat and she always checks up on him whenever she hears sounds she thinks come from his flat. Today she was off from work and she was bored stiff. She had been contemplating going to work even though it was her day off but she couldn't get anyone to agree to swap shifts with her. It was early in the evening, just after the seven o'clock news had started, when she heard the sound of a firing gun too close to comfort. Guns just don't go off in the complex, she knew instinctively that something was horribly wrong.

People who live in the Free State are a true reflection of the principles of *ubuntu*. They are communal and everyone knows everyone. The many people of colour who live at Seer flats know each other very well, probably because many are young and therefore don't have hang-ups from South Africa's past. By the time Ntebaleng got out of her flat to investigate what was wrong, her morbid suspicions were confirmed by the number of already gathered in Thabo's flat. She feared for the worst. All she could think about was how can her Thabo die without tasting what she had for him? She prayed silently and asked for the highest favours from the spirits not to let Thabo die. That she couldn't handle, she told herself.

She was horrified by the sight of what she saw when she walked in. Thabo's body was sitting akimbo on the couch sliding to the left. Blood was flowing all over and the gun was sitting just below the couch. As a paramedic, she acted quickly to inspect the body for any signs of life and to see if she could do anything to save him. The bullet had pierced through his right temple but did not come out the other side. She felt a faint pulse in his veins and instinctively moved to position the body on the floor in a right posture. She asked someone to bring her emergency kit from her flat while she did what she could. Somebody had already called the emergency services and the ambulance was on its way. All she could do was try her best to stop the loss of blood until the ambulance arrived.

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Since Thabo's woes were something of provincial importance, as far as the media was concerned, the late evening radio news read: "Serial heart breaker takes his own life." Lesedi Fm, BBT Radio, even Qwaqwa Radio carried the story. His life, the court cases and the suicide were all brought back live in the radio. The following day all the newspapers picked up where the radios left off the previous night. It was field day in Bloemfontein. The media had camped at the provincial government's offices early in the morning, hoping to catch a glimpse of the political heavy weight Gugu when she got to the office. They all wanted to interview her. Everyone knew by now that she too had a baby by Thabo.

Modiehi on the other hand was fielding non ending phone calls from radio stations and newspapers wanting to know how she feels that Thabo had committed suicide. Some even went as far as to say she was the cause of it in the first place. If she hadn't sued him for maintenance and emotional suffering, he might not have taken his life. While she hated Thabo passionately as a result of the treatment she got from him, she didn't hate him to the extent of wishing him dead. In any case, she still needed him as a father that one day her child will get to know. No matter how bad they are,

The Magic Number

mothers always need their babies' fathers.

Life is one complicated mess that leaves us shocked at things we discover about ourselves, just when we think we know who we are or what we stand for. Just when we think that we have matured, then something happens that we realise we know nothing about ourselves as a people. Ethel felt like shit. For the life of her, she could not understand why. Why God? She had worked so hard, educated herself and really had a good life without anyone's help. She was a happy single mother, or was she?

When the news about Thabo reached Ethel, she was in her office doing some paper work. She sat there for a long time like a spooked person. All she could think of was why? Thabo's suicide had brought to her the reality she had thought she was long past. She had mixed feelings about him, all of a sudden. Those long buried feelings, probably buried by anger of the way he treated her, simply resurfaced! She honestly hadn't known that she still loved the bastard. These feelings simply showed up at a time like this. She cried long and loud. It was like she was a grieving wife crying for a dead husband.

The media waited to no avail as Gugu never made it to work that day. A doctor friend had called her last night to inform her that Thabo had committed suicide. She had been enjoying supper with her family when the news came. All her family saw was her falling down and collapsing, only to wake up in hospital hours later. The doctors confirmed she had suffered a mild stroke! All because of Thabo. She herself could not believe what was happening to her. She had moved on with her life, gotten married to a loving husband, with whom she had two beautiful boys. And now she had suffered a stroke n the news of Thabo?

Life is indeed a bitch. Modiehi was mopping for the father of her child, a father the child has never seen. Ethel was practically falling apart with grief for a man she had not had contact with for many many years. Gugu, poor Gugu, had suffered a stroke on news of a man she thought she couldn't care less what happened to him. Life is a bitch, ask Modiehi, Ethel and Gugu. Poor Ethel and Gugu, they didn't know it, but they were still madly in love with the bastard.

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The day was filled with mystery. A number of incredible news were hanging in the air. Everyone has been reporting on Thabo since last night, but no one really knows if he is really dead for sure. The doctors were tight lipped on his condition and told no one but his family of his condition. His family too, somehow, was not telling anyone what was happening with him. This is why by noon, many people were beginning to wonder if he was really dead. A dead person, once certified dead, goes to mortuary; something that has not happened to Thabo.

Then news broke that Gugu had suffered a mild stroke. When the calculating heads of news people figured the time of her stroke, they added and two and came to one. Lunch news on radio were almost exclusively about Thabo and Gugu. While no direct link was mentioned between the two accidents, the news were so tempting that anyone concluded the accidents were related. People concluded Gugu suffered the stroke when she learned the father of her baby had committed suicide. And her husband too figured this out. Which led him to conclude one thing, that his wife was still in love with the father of her baby. He silently wondered where did that leave him.

BBT radio decided to track down the three women who had sued Thabo and interview them live on

The Magic Number

air. Gugu was in hospital and therefore unreachable. Ethel was literally suffering from emotional breakdown. She had left work and gone home to be in the comfort of her bedroom where she was crying all liquids from her body. News reached the radio station that she left in a state, and her phone was switched off. Only Modiehi was reachable, but had turned down any invitation for an interview. The afternoon talk show had the highest number of calls in its history. People were putting two and two together and arriving at a million explanations.

For some strange reason, the evening news focused on the three women who were now rumoured the cause of Thabo's suicide. Their private lives were laid bare for the public. How they had known Thabo in the long forgotten past. The children they all had with Thabo. What they did for a living and where they were now married. Insinuations were made that their suits were really spite because Thabo had not married any of them. It is amazing the things the Mzansi media can report, without ever being held responsible for the mess they cause. It was out of this media frenzy that Modiehi's, Ethel's and Gugu's children knew who their father was. It was also through this frenzy that many other kids elsewhere got to know who Thabo, their father, was.

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Ntebaleng was the most disturbed person in the week following Thabo's suicide. She was the most up to date person about his condition. While he did not die from the gun shot, he had lost a lot of blood and was kept in ICU under close supervision. Some had doubted whether he would make it. But Thabo did not die, he held by the slightest thread of life that was left in him.

After a week of suspense, everyone got to know that Thabo was critical but okay. Okay because he didn't die, but not okay as in the old Thabo. The doctors told the bad news that Thabo will probably never walk again. The bullet had impacted on his sensitive nerves and as a result some parts of his right side are not functioning properly. He could probably walk again with physiotherapy, but they asked everybody not to be too optimistic.

Several forces were now playing themselves out. Clearly there was nothing to be gained by continuing with the class suit against Thabo. The women had to decide what the next cause of action was. Drop the case. Modiehi was guilt ridden, thinking that she had started all this suing business when in fact she did not need Thabo in her life. The social worker in Ethel had left her and she was a wreck. The love she had for Thabo was especially strong these days. While she was mad a hell to Thabo, she just couldn't help but feel emotionally attached to him. Perhaps she need closure with him. After all, she had never really had a proper relationship with him, she was just a sex toy to him. She was somehow searching for some affection from him, one she thought she should have had all those years he used her. Women's feelings are deep and complex indeed.

Gugu's life had a taken a sudden yet bad turn. As soon as she was released from hospital, her husband wanted to know if she still loved Thabo. What he failed to grasp, he said, was why she would she feel even the slighted sympathy for Thabo after all that has happened. She asked her if she knew how embarrassing it was for him that his wife, whom he loves very much, had a stroke on news of another man. How is he supposed to answer queries about the cause of her stroke? He asked her.

Politicians are a strange bunch of people. At the core of their existence are insecurities and the worry about public perception of their lives. Despite the fact that Gugu and her husband already had two beautiful children, her husband found it necessary to pack out of the house and seek separation

The Magic Number

from her. Just like that, Gugu found her life in shattered, again, from the irresponsible ways of Thabo. And now that the imbecile had not died, she vowed she needed to teach him a lesson he will never forget in his life.

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The legend goes that Thabo had once gambled with his buddies about a lady who was known to be a “no nonsense” woman when it came to men. She had minded her own business and had no man in her life, and she wasn’t looking. Thabo had promised his buddies that he could take her to bed within one week of meeting her. While everyone knew Thabo was good with women, no one believed a week was all it could take to break down Mbali.

Mbali worked as a paralegal for a private firm of attorneys and knew first-hand how men are dogs. Every single male member of that firm wants to sleep with her. So much that she has even received threats of losing her job if she does not comply. But she is quite content losing her job, if it means saving herself from these ungrateful women hungry hyenas. She had not been particularly receptive of men since she was a young girl. She had seen how her mother had suffered from men, all who had claimed great love for her and her daughter. Instead, she had witnessed one abuse after another of her mother by these men, and had vowed never to live through similar experiences in her life.

She had wanted to become a lawyer, only if to sue every single bastard that had given her and her mother a tough time. But her mother could not afford university fees, so she started working straight out of matric to try to save money for varsity. She was already in her second year of BA Law through Unisa when the Thabo incident happened.

The two had never met before, so Thabo did not even know what she looked like. But the mere fact that everyone was saying how impossible it was to get her, he decided it was up to him to break the myth. So everyone put down hundred bucks to see if Thabo can indeed do as he claimed. The gamble really was a drunkard’s blurb since this happened in a bar when everyone was slouched. The rest of the guys didn’t expect anything to come out of it really. But Thabo felt the urge to see for himself this girl who turned down every single man who had come her way.

So he made a lame excuse to visit his buddy at work, who happened to be Mbali’s colleague. He was totally amazed at the beauty of the lady he met in the reception areas speaking on the phone. She was so beautiful he even forgot what he had come to do in this office. So he just stood there in from of her admiring her beauty. When one of the ladies at reception asked him if they could help him, he simply dismissed them and said he is here to see this beauty. Noticing that she is been so keenly watched, the lady cut her phone conversation short as she was now too conscious of herself from the stares of the stranger. “Can I help you? Why are you looking at me like that?” The beautiful lady asked him as soon as she put the phone down. “Don’t you know it is rude to look at people that way?”

Thabo smile self consciously at the woman and said, “I know it is rude to look at people that way. But you can’t blame me for finding you utterly gorgeous. Your beauty has made me forget all the manners my mother taught me about looking at people.” He continued, “I came here to mind my own business but my conscious wouldn’t let me pass I didn’t take notice of you. So I took a look at you just to satisfy my eyes and curiosity. Is that such a bad thing beautiful one?” “About your other question of whether you can help me, I sure hope so. I have been told there is a very difficult person here, so I thought I’d come and see for myself.” “And who might that be?”, the lady asks not paying

The Magic Number

much attention to him. “Hhmmm, let’s see.” He begins. “I am told her name is one Mbali Ntuli, the troublesome Mbali. Do you know her?”

The lady is irritated at this arrogant and untactful man, yet finds his bluntness amusing. At least he is honest, she thinks. She looks at him briefly while deciding what to do with him. “So do you know her?”, the arrogant man asks. “Please go into the second office on your left, I will tell her you are waiting”, she says. He thanks her and again and tells her beautiful she is and how he wish he could know her better. He sits as directed in the office waiting for Mbali, whom he has no idea what she looks like. Minutes later the beautiful lady he was speaking to walks in, closes the door and takes a seat. She sits quietly looking at him inquisitively. He looks at her and shrugs. The asks her if there is a problem. “Do you even know who this Mbali person is?”, she asks him. “What is your name anyway?” Thabo really sees the stupidity of his actions now that the questions have been asked. Shamefaced, he shakes his head.

Right at that moment Mandla walks into the office without even knocking. When he sees Thabo seating in the same room with Mbali, he immediately withdraws and runs back to his office. Mbali sees this and puts two and two together. She looks him in the eye and says: “well mister, I don’t know exactly what it is you are trying to do but the troublesome Mbali Ntuli happens to be my name. Now that you have seen me, what do you have to say?” Thabo could not believe his ears, how careless he had been. He looks down for a while Mbali is looking for a reaction from him. After a while he sighs and looks at her. “I have erred, and I need to redeem myself. My sin cannot be left unpunished.” Mbali gives him a surprised look. “Grevious errors are mended in only one way *ka Sesotho*. A cow.” He says matter of fact. Mbali couldn’t hold herself at this, she burst out laughing. Meanwhile Thabo is looking at her sheepishly. “*Abuti towe, o ngwana mang?*” she queries. “Well *ke ngwana Mme Mamohlophehi Radieta nna*, and where shall we deliver the cow?”

Their chat is interrupted by a call which she has to take. She must go into a meeting immediately and cannot stay to continue talking, but he begs her for a follow up. She refuses to see him again, but he tells himself that he cannot give up so easily. He bids her goodbye and leaves.

Later that day, at quarter past four in the afternoon, Thabo walks in at Mbali's work place and takes a seat in the reception area. He asks the reception lady to tell Mbali that he is here to pick her up. To her utter shock, Mbali meets Thabo in the reception area. “Are you ready to go?” Thabo asks with smile on his face. Fearing to be embarrassed, Mbali asks him to wait for her to get her bag. As soon as they were out of the door Mbali asks him angrily, “what do you think you are doing? Showing up at my work not invited like that.” Thabo apologises and tells her that he had no choice. “I just couldn’t stop thinking about you. So I had to do something to avoid going mad.” “What do you want?” Mbali asks. “I don't want anything Mbali. I already have everything that I want.” he shoots back with smirk on his face. With eyebrows raised, Mbali continues, “so what are you doing here with if you don't want anything?” I am here with you, so why would I want anything else?

Mbali knew very well the character of Thabo, yet she couldn't help admitting to herself that Thabo is a great guy. He represents everything she dislike about men, but still he has this thing about him that she can't resist. She has caught herself thinking deeply about him many times since he came to introduce himself to her. She has even prayed to god that the temptation must go away but it won't. Instead, every day her attraction to him grows and she wishes he would call her, just to hear his voice. He had taken to bombarding her with phone calls, just to complement and charm her. She

The Magic Number

loved it. On the Friday following their “meeting”, Thabo did not call her at all. She was going crazy missing him. What if something was wrong with him. What if he was losing interest in her. What if she had sent him away. She wondered all day why Thabo did not call her. She noticed that Thabo even though Thabo and her were merely people who knew each other, he was having a big impact in her life, more than she would have liked things to be. Missing a man so much who is not even your boyfriend was not acceptable in her mind. But she missed anyway, and it hurt her a lot. For the first time in her life, for as long as she can remember, she did miss having a man in her life. When she got home that afternoon, she was feeling very horny, and she had no one to take away that horrible feeling. And so she simply broke down and cried.

Thabo arrived at her flat unannounced. She was busy crying when she heard a soft knock on the door. Quickly, she dried her tears and went to see who it could be. An involuntary smile planted itself on her face she stood face to face with Thabo. Before long she had grabbed him and kissed him hard on the lips. What happened next left her uncertain and doubting herself for many weeks to follow. It resembled nothing in her view of the perfect world. She had played scenarios in her head of what it would like the first time she met a man. Yet what happened blew her mind. She had slept with a man who was a known womaniser. She had slept with a man who had never proposed love to her. She had slept with a man she had known for only five days.

This achievement, Thabo never disclosed to his friends. For reasons only known to himself.

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Three weeks later Thabo was discharged from hospital. His discharged caused an even bigger debacle than his heart breaking ways. Since he lived alone, he clearly could not be continue that path under the circumstances. He had refused plainly when his mother pointed out that he must come live with her in their *mokhukhu* in Botshabelo Block M until he had recovered. In his eyes, this would be the worst kind of admission to the people of Botshabelo that life has dealt him a lesson on their behalf. He could picture all the girls he had gone out with in Botshabelo, those he impregnated. Living in Botshabelo was just out of the question.

Ntebaleng had learned about Thabo’s refusal to go live with this mother from his mother, and she had offered to live with Thabo during his recovery. As far as she was concerned, this might just be the opportunity she has been praying for ever since she knew Thabo. The possibilities of living with him in her flat were fascinating. She could already see herself giving herself to him wholeheartedly. She could even imagine the jealousy other girls would feel for her when they learn Thabo lives with her. So she agreed without any doubt whatsoever that she would live with him and look after him. While Thabo totally against the idea of living with Ntebaleng, it was the best option he had under the circumstances, and he had to agree.

Ntebaleng was besides herself with joy for having Thabo live with her. She let anyone who cared to listen that she is the one Thabo had chosen to live with. The news travelled fast that Thabo was indeed out of hospital and was living with a girlfriend in town, the rumours claimed. These news stung like a sting when they reached three women, Modiehi, Ethel and Gugu. Modiehi felt sorry that the father of her child was living in a “vat 'n sit” relationship. Ethel couldn't get past the fact that she still loved Thabo very much. Gugu had a score to settle with the bastard.

Ntebaleng had the joy of nursing Thabo only for two days, on the third day, Ethel showed up at her flat demanding that Thabo must come stay with her. She had a greater claim over him because he

The Magic Number

was the father of her child, unlike Ntebaleng who was a mere girlfriend. She was fuming with anger that day when she showed up at the flat. She was disgusted at herself that she could stoop so low as to fight over a man, a useless one like Thabo at that. What would people say about her. What would her colleagues think of her. Stuff the people. Stuff her profession. She loves Thabo and there is nothing anyone can do about that fact. She had suffered enough to let this opportunity pass her. She will have Thabo, whatever it takes.

Gugu. Gugu had no plan on how to make Thabo pay for everything he had ever done to her. All she knew were her feelings of hatred and resentment towards him. Her husband was suing her for custody of their children. The movement was no longer in favour of her as they deemed the Thabo matter scandalous. In fact, the local branch of the movement was campaigning for her removal from official duty. She was under heavy emotional stress. On the verge of insanity. How can the movement she had served so well with loyalty all her life abandon her like that. It is not like she had done anything bad. All she ever did was fall in love naively when she was still young with a snake like Thabo. And now she is paying for it the rest of her life.

The Mangaung branch of the movement had voted her out of office and banned her from any activities relating to the movement. Her official car and residence were taken away from her, and out of the blue she was homeless. She had dedicated her entire life, since high school, to serving the movement. She had worked hard to ensure the movement won the municipality in the elections. She had campaigned hard across the province for the success of the movement. Today, in her darkest hour, when she needs help the most; the movement turned its back on her and kicked her out. Like a dog. They will one day regret ever crossing her. She resignedly packed the little she had left and moved back to Maokeng in Kroonstad.

A mini war was raging in Ntebaleng's flat when Thabo's mother arrived. The two women looked like were about to tear each other apart. The poor woman didn't know what to do. Although she instinctively knew that Ethel had a valid point, and Thabo would be better off living with Ethel than with Ntebaleng. She also believed that Thabo needed to take responsibility for his irresponsible ways with women. And living with Ethel might just be a step in the right direction. She had taken as much abuse, tension and heartaches as she could about Thabo. Frankly, she was tired of having to deal with the nonsense that Thabo does with women. But Thabo was her son, and only a motherly heart knows how to put up with this nonsense.

Ethel won the argument and had Thabo living with them. This left Ntebaleng with a broken heart and a hatred for Thabo's mother for having agreed to the decision. And she hated Thabo too for not having slept with her. Maybe if he had slept with her, like the many other women, she too would be pregnant with his child and she would have a leg to stand on in this argument. Damn him. Damn all the women who had his children. Damn everything, she wants nothing to do with Thabo.

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Life was a strife for poor Gugu. After all these years, her father had not come to terms with her pregnancy, he refused for her to come live in their family home. So much hatred and anger from a man of the cloth on his own child. The best compromise her mother could broker was for him to allow Gugu's child, the one she had with Thabo, to live with them. Gugu's husband had dumped the child with Gugu and took his own only. Gugu was secretly grateful that her child would at least have a roof over her head. She, on the other hand, had no where to go. Even people she had done so much for in the past could not bring themselves to helping her out. One past acquaintance had

The Magic Number

wispered to her that the movement had warned them to stay away from her. They had been threatened with tough action if anyone dared to intervene in her dire situation. All she could do was cry, if only in disbelief to what she was hearing.

She had to start life from scratch. She had no ready marketable skills other than running a public office, a skill she cannot rely on since she has now been blacklisted by the movement she served. She had to look elsewhere for a livelihood. Her pension payout is due soon for the years she had spend in public office. That should tie her up for a while while she decides what to do next.

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Things were particularly difficult between Ethel and Thabo in the beginning. The two had only known each other briefly during courting days, which was a very short period of time. And now they meet again as grown ups with only a child bonding them, but with nothing else in common between them. She had tried hard to establish a relationship between him and her daughter. But in time they seemed to get along, sometimes seemingly happy. At last, she was beginning to believe that things can work between herself and Thabo, and maybe, just maybe they could build a family.

Seven months following his release from hospital, Thabo had recovered almost completely. Doctors, they who think they know it all, were amazed at his recovery. They had written him off as someone who would never walk again. But here he was, almost in perfect shape like nothing ever happened to him, except of course with the problem that he couldn't lift heavy objects. But even that was really not an issue, as long as he was okay. For this, Thabo was eternally thankful to Ethel for what she had done to nurse him and improve his condition. During his recovery period, he had thought long and hard about his previous life. And he had uttered a silent prayer to God vowing never to go back to his ways ever again, not after what he had gone through. He wondered how come he could leave someone like Ethel for no reason whatsoever. He secretly hoped that things would work out between them. He had warmed up to the idea of being a father, alas if only to one of his many children.

Following this state of affairs, Thabo had seriously began considering proposing marriage to Ethel. He figured after all that has happened, nothing could ever come between them. Plus she had proved her loyalty to him beyond any doubt. Mme Mamohlophehi was over herself with joy when she heard Thabo intended to marry Ethel. To her, her son needed to settle down in order to change his ways. She didn't care who he settled down with, as long as he became a responsible person. She approved of the marriage on the spot. They got married quietly, after all the traditional requirements have been met, and started life as husband and wife.

Life couldn't be better. Ethel had gotten the man she never knew she loved until recently. Her child now had father and together they were a normal family. Thabo had repented and was willing to be a responsible father and husband. It seemed his tragedy had paned out a different person in him.

The two had a good life as a family for exactly one year. After the first year passed, things started to change in their lives. For some reason, Ethel began resenting him. He had not done anything this time around. She just felt a strong feeling of resentment towards him. Initially she had tried to conceal her feelings, but she stopped the moment she realised these feelings were persistent. She thought it was a phase and like all phases it will come to pass. She would get irritated by him for no apparent reason. He had wondered where these mood swings were coming from, but he took it for granted they will pass. Things started getting out hand when Ethel had their second child. Very

The Magic Number

quickly there after, she understood that she did not love this man at all. The passion she had felt for him over a year ago was probable her wanting to live out her fantasy of a perfect life with the father of child. She had misunderstood that for love. She also began to understand that she had wanted to make Thabo pay for all the heartaches he had caused her and her baby. She did not love him, in fact she hated him bitterly.

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Life was horrible for Gugu in Maokeng. Not only had she been disowned by her father and the movement, but both had done their best to stop her from making a living in the area. It is like she was blacklisted from doing any form of business, or rather from anyone doing any business with her. She was compelled to leave Maokeng and relocate. The Free State province was out of the question, she had to go far away from people who know her to try to start life afresh. Four months after being divorced by her husband and effectively fired by the movement, she went to Gauteng to re-establish herself. Gauteng was attractive to her because of its anonymity. People in Gauteng went about their lives without giving second thought to anybody else. And since it was refuge for everyone, she could blend in easily and mind her business.

She fully understood that her success lied in her finding something other work to do. The word that had gotten around in Maokeng and Bloemfontein would inevitably reach people far away from those places. Especially because people in the province had direct contact with provincial leadership of the movement, and the movement controls government. She never bothered looking for a job. She started a small business pre-paid as well as business services such as internet access, faxing, binding and the like. Her business operated right in the heart of Jozi and it was doing not badly for a start-up. After about five months of operations, the business had grown so much that she needed to expand. She opened a branch in Hillbrow and another in Melville.

By the end of the year, her businesses were thriving and she was financially sound. She had bought herself a property in Mofolo, Soweto. She intended bringing her daughter up here to live with her.

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For the first time in his life, Thabo fully understand the meaning of the proverb “*pele e ya pele*”, which is an utterance by those whom you have done wrong, but instead of treating you bad they simply wish you the best. The implication is that they wish you into the hands of those who will teach you a lesson on their behalf. And Ethel did teach him a lesson he will live never to forget.

It all started when days would go by without Ethel saying a word to him, despite the fact that they lived in the same house, shared a bed in fact. She would just ignore him like he did not exist, and that hurt him a lot. Then the situation graduated to him not getting any food at home. Somehow she made sure that the would be no food when he got home from work. He had once tried to complain about this but she told him she was not his maid. Now he had to make a plan to eat before he got home, otherwise he would go to bed on empty stomach. Months after this behaviour had started, Ethel brought home a man when she knew Thabo would be home. She had placed her guest in the lounge where Thabo was seated. After a while she had asked him to join her in the bedroom, the same bedroom she shared with Thabo. The poor man didn't know what to do. He was mad as hell, but at the same time it seemed Ethel was daring him into something. How else can he explain what he was witnessing at that moment? Because he lacked any conviction on what to do, he simply left the house and went drinking.

No one had ever hurt him the way he felt pain with what he saw in his own house. Okay, maybe it is

The Magic Number

not exactly his house. After all, the house belonged to Ethel. But weren't they married in community of property? Did the fact that they were married mean that the house was his too? Anyway, he was deeply hurt and he began to wonder exactly what Ethel was capable of. Looking back at their lives together, he wondered what the real reason was for her to take him in when his was injured. She had done so much for him, yet here she was hurting him like he is not her husband. Why did she marry him if this is how she treats him? What about their children? Despite his background, he cared deeply for his children with Ethel. But more importantly, what was he going to do with the turn of events? At some point he will have to go home and face Ethel. Ethel, *mara* why hey!

Is this what they call love? This propensity to care for others. The need to know how the other is doing. The need to hear their voice for no apparent reason. The seemingly unjustifiable tolerance towards the other no matter what. Here he was, Thabo the player, deeply hurt by a woman. When he knows fully well he could get just about any woman he desires. Yet he was tolerant of behaviour he had no idea where it would lead them. Damn, he does love this woman. Damn you Ethel for throwing my love back at me. Damn love for making me feel this horrible.

But then again, who was he to complain about being played? Who was he to complain about being hurt? How many hearts has he broken in his life time? Perhaps he has come a full circle after all.

He finally had to swagger home, he couldn't stay at the bar forever, and of he went. His mind had finally caved and given up on him. He had no idea what he was going to do, he just knew he had to go home, if he could still call it that. When he got home, he did want to know if Ethel was there or what has happened to her lover, he simply cuddled himself on the couch and dozed off. He was too sloshed for anything else anyway. He woke up the next day too late to go to work, and he was alone in the house. With a banging head, yesterday's events came rushing to mind like a mob of angry people. He shed a tear or two in the privacy of his home. But he was in no condition to think straight, not with the splitting headache thumping his skull. He must take care of his *babalaz* first.

When he woke up, it was late in the afternoon. The pangs of hunger were ripping his stomach apart. He had not eaten for almost eighteen hours. He went to the kitchen to grab something to eat. A quick bite would do. Just as he was finishing his meal, Ethel walked in. Without any greeting of sort, she walked past him to the bedroom. He was in no mood to face her, so he didn't even bother looking at her. Moments later, she came out of the bedroom and went out. Still without a word to Thabo. When she finally came back, it was late at night. He was sitting in front of the television not knowing what to do. The night blanket was over the land and soon sleep would reckon. Where was he going to sleep tonight? Will he ever go back to sleeping in their bedroom after yesterday's incident? What of him and Ethel. Will things ever improve between them? Heck, why is he even considering all these questions after what she has done to him, was beyond him. Ethel decided for him when she stormed into the room to announce that henceforth he was no longer allowed in their main bedroom. She told him that he was to sleep in the guest room from there onwards. Further more, there were new rules she came up with, once which were not negotiable as she put it. He was to never expect being served any food by the madam of the house. He should make his own plans regarding his laundry. And, this one really hurt bad, she had the right to the family remote; meaning that she could chase him out of the tv room at will. And the last blow for him was when she told him to expect her male friends to visit her at home, in their bedroom. Or what used to be his and her bedroom.

The Magic Number

He was tired, angry, confused, hurt and ashamed. Tired from lack of rest and proper sleep, the one that is trouble free. Very angry at Ethel for the way she was behaving. This no way for a wife to behave. Ethel is an upstanding member of the community, and her behaviour did not go well with that. Confused because he had no clue what he had to do under the circumstances. So many things to consider. Surely anyone knew that this kind of treatment was hurtful. How can a wife treat her husband they way she was treating him. His manhood was under question, he felt. But above all, he was ashamed that he was Ethel's husband and that she was his wife. A husband takes pride in his wife. She is the centre of his universe. Everything a man does is for the pride of his family. But here he was, badly hurt and completely embarrassed by the actions of his wife. Didn't social workers have a code of conduct to abide by? Nxa.

Is this what love is about? Caring even when the other person seemingly does not. Being deeply hurt yet you are hopelessly in love with the same person who has hurt you. Worse still, you are willing to forgive them for hurting you. You live in hope that things will change for the better. That your lives together will be happy, ultimately. Love is the ultimate price.

Things deteriorated still, Thabo hardly ever saw Ethel at home. She mostly came home to change clothes. And then occasionally, she would be home with a male friend. In their bedroom of course. Sometimes nights were just impossible for him. The things he heard coming from the main bedroom when he was supposed to be sleeping. The disturbing sounds of his legally married wife in their bedroom with another man. He was going mad. How is a man expected to hear these sounds about his own wife?

What worried him the most was the welfare of their children. Has Ethel even thought about what this was doing to them?

The defining moment in their lives came one mid week when Thabo had an important presentation at work the following morning. Out of a sense of obligation, he had mentioned this to Ethel. So he had a busy evening facing him to try and finalise things for the meeting. Around six in the evening, he was seated in the dining room busying himself with work when Ethel arrived with a host of people. Not really surprised, he continued minding his own business. But soon enough, the whole house was full of people and exactly by seven o'clock, the house went blast with loud music. Food and drinks were beings served and this looked just like a party. It was impossible to work anywhere in the house under the conditions. He drove to work to finish work. Around midnight when he got home, he found Ethel enjoying canal pleasures right the middle of their lounge. The very place used by everyone in the house, including the children. While he was angry at what he saw, it was the feelings of shame that overcame him. In that act his wife was engaged in, he saw his past.

He knew things could not remain the same between him and his wife. He knew instantly that their marriage was over and there was nothing to salvage. His heart silently bled for their two children. Although he did not like Ethel's behaviour a bit, he knew the kids would be better off with her.

He tacked himself in the children's room for the night. He had already decided to leave first thing in morning, although he hadn't decided where he would go.

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Thabo quickly relocated to Cape Town, to get away from all the bad memories about Ethel. After thinking hard about it, he realised that the whole of the Free State province holds sore memories for

The Magic Number

him, because of his past. Getting away from it would be good for him. He wanted to make a clean break from his past, to where people didn't know him or his past. He wanted to be as further from everyone who knew him as possible. Free State people don't like Cape Town, it is too far. And it is this their refusal to go to Cape Town he found appealing. He could lead his life in Cape Town without risking bumping into anyone he knew from the Free State.

Life was instantly enjoyable for him in Cape Town. His coloured looks made him look like just another guy from around. Before long, he had found himself a woman. She was a recent widower who was set financially from her late husband's insurance payout. She loved him, he wanted to forget about his troubles back home. Both had one thing in common, the love for fun and vibe. She was breath takingly gorgeous. The goddess of beauty. An object of envy and lust for many a male species. Ncumisa Witbooi. Ncumisa had been married to her husband, Eric, for only two years when he died in an air crash while taking his flight lessons for light aircraft. Eric Witbooi was a well connected comrade who was in exile during apartheid. He lived a large life and was a BEE beneficiary. The two didn't have any children. Like many of his class, Eric didn't associate with his folks since his return from exile, he felt they were too low class for his image and achievements. He systematically cut himself off his entire line of family until they didn't bother him anymore. Ncumisa worked in the administrative side of Parliament. She had not bothered changing her name back after her husband's death. And she had inherited a handsome amount as a result.

The two pair were soon the subject of wagging tongues in the mother city. They were spotted one too many times at parties and social scenes. Soon enough, the tabloids were interested in them. This their high profile life proved to be their undoing.

Modiehi had was in Cape Town on business when she saw the front page headlines of one of the tabloids, “**Super Couple Living High**”, was embossed in bold across the page. She had no doubts that the man in the picture was Thabo Radieta, the father of her child. The last time she had heard anything about him was three years ago when he was supposedly paralysed after an attempted suicide that went bad. How on earth did he move from paralysis to this glamorous lifestyle? She couldn't help admitting to herself that she felt a little jealous. He looked so well groomed in those expensive clothes. And that woman he was with, she defines the face of beauty.

When she got back to Bloemfontein, Modiehi revisited her strategy on Thabo, the same one she had devised three years ago. The same one that had led him to commit suicide. That one that had worked so well to frighten him into wishing himself dead. It was time she completed what she had already started. She contacted Ethel and her group of women to appraise them on the latest developments. She had already revisited her case and was waiting for a date to appear in court. She felt that since Thabo was so well and accomplished, the court should uphold the previous ruling in her favour on the child support case. She argued it was also time for the court to render the sentence on the civil suit in which Thabo had already been found guilty. Harm was again at arms length for Thabo from bitter women seeking justice from heart breakers.

Within a week of been seen in the paper by Modiehi, Thabo was served with court papers as follows:

1. Maintenance case pertaining Modiehi Tlokwe.
2. Civil suit with Modiehi Tlokwe as the complainant
3. Maintenance cases of the seven women led by Ethel Smit

The Magic Number

4. Court date for the civil suit by the group of women led by Ethel Smit
5. Hearing for child support by Gugu Masango

His head was spinning with disbelief at this turn of events. He thought he had ran away from all this mess when he left Bloemfontein. He had also assumed that the women would leave him alone following his predicament after the failed suicide. But he was wrong, all the women were back in full force. Now even Gugu had joined the fight, and she was a bitter woman following the events in her life. Even though things had turned for the better for her in Gauteng, she had a score to settle with Thabo. And then there is the matter of the movement she must attend to as well. People were going to get hurt in the process, whoever had crossed her path and rubbed her badly. She had the money to take the fight to its owners. As the Sesotho proverb goes, *o e lata letailana*.

There is something peculiar about BEE women. They love, perhaps thrive is the right word, controversy. Their public profile matters more than anything else. It was the goddess Ncumisa who tipped the tabloids about the latest developments in Thabo's life. And these news were too juicy for local tabloid. It was headline material and that is how the story spread nationally. Again, Thabo found himself in the public eye through the media. The events of three years ago were retold with vigour, with the fascinating conclusion that he was now more than able to meet his obligations. His lifestyle with his mistress was told many times over. Her indiscretions about Thabo had paid her very well. Not that she was doing it for the money, it was a compulsion only the rich had. The urge to be in the media spotlight no matter the consequences.

This Thabo incident had propelled her to a personality of some sorts. Magazines, radio and television all wanted her on their programmes and pages. And because of her looks, she was an instant hit with the media. The public loved her, or at least every time she appeared on air she broke the record of listenership/viewership. She made lots of money. The media made lots of money. Those that didn't receive great publicity. Thabo was the loser in all this. As soon as Modiehi's child support ruling was enforced and the verdict was about to be read on her civil suit, Ncumisa dumped Thabo. What made the dumping worse was that she dumped him on air. On a television show no less. Poor Thabo was watching the show.

The problem with these modern young men is that they don't know what it means to be a man. Manhood to them is defined by material possessions and the number of women they take to bed. And perhaps the number of degrees attached to their names. They forget the basic tenets of manhood in African society. Responsibility, pride, accountability and humility. A responsible man does not live with a woman he has not married. A proud man has his own compound that bears his name, and by extension the basis for his wealth. An accountable man is one who answers to his actions. And humility means that a man knows that there will always be beautiful women around. That your chosen woman may look the worse choice in the face of temptation. But it is these choices that make us men in the first place.

Like many of his class, Thabo had finally moved in with Ncumisa in her luxury apartment. What they see these young men in this arrangement is not having to worry about own property. But they overlook the naked truth that this situation is the number one cause why many of them lose control over women. A man who lives in a woman's house is not much of a man. He has lost touch with the reality of being a man. This reality only hit Thabo at that moment when Ncumisa announced to the world on tv that she was leaving him. He was too much controversy she said. That hurt him more

The Magic Number

than what Ethel had done to him. *Na yena ke mmutla wa dintjeng?* To be humiliated like this on national television. There and then, he realised he had no place to go to. A place of his own. A place to call home. He must go back to renting a flat, if finds one so soon under the circumstances. He saw the foolishness of it all. That sometimes these boys confuse love for fantasy. Mistake infatuation for commitment.

He understood the wisdom of his Sesotho heritage. The saying goes, *maya ke maboya. Etswe le pele di na le baji!* How right they were, ancient Basotho ancestors.

Even though he knew he had to do something about his accommodation, he was too numb to act. He sat in front of the tv and watched the whole show, as humiliating for him as it was. Ncumisa found him glued in front of the television when she got home. “You have been watching the show?” she asked him. “So you saw me on tv? What are you still doing here?” Those words stabbed his heart like a dagger being swayed at him at full force. The media just couldn't resist the catchy headlines, “Booted.”, “Player Played.”

He checked himself into a bed and breakfast while he looked for a place to stay. He also wondered whether Cape Town would still be his sanctuary after all this media attention. But for now, he decided he would stay. He had many things to worry about and this Ncumisa situation was the last of his worries. He needed to decided on how to handle the matter of pending court cases against him. When he thought about this, he smiled a little to himself. How brilliant. Ncumisa's brutal and hushed actions to throw him out of her life were just the things he needed to win the court cases. All these cases were based on the fact that he was living a lavish lifestyle in Cape Town while he didn't attend to maintaining his children. Well, without Ncumisa and her money, there is no way these women could prove otherwise. He felt good that he finally had a strategy in place to deal with these cases. But he must find himself a lawyer first.

Late that evening he went through his address book. With a silent prayer, he hoped that she has not changed her number. How could he have this careless. To have forgotten completely about her. Not even once giving thought to her. Never once finding out how she was doing. Indeed he admitted he had been careless. The elegant Mbali. What would she do if he contacted her? Would she brush him off, like her usual self? He reached for his phone to call her number. He was bracing himself for another hard hitting chat with her. If he connects to her.

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He was over himself with joy at the prospect of seeing her. She had agreed to meet him over drinks. So he was on his way to Jozi for this important meeting meeting of his life. Maybe when they have finished talking business, he might as well plead his ignorance and beg her to take him back. He just couldn't believe that he had let her go, just like that. Such a beautiful and intelligent woman. Such a principled person. Indeed he had had a good share of great women, none of whom he ever appreciated.

They met for lunch and he couldn't believe his eyes. Mbali was god damn gorgeous. The was no question about that. His heart skipped a beat or two when he saw her. Memories of that day when he had Mbali all to himself flashed in his mind. Why on earth did he ever leave Mbali?

Lunch was fun and everything seemed okay in his mind, until the subject of the business at hand came up. “I am sorry Thabo, but I really can't take your case.” she explained. “But why Mbali?”, he

The Magic Number

wanted to know. “I mean you are a lawyer and all, why can't you represent me in court?” He seemed to take these news a bit hard, looking more depressed than usual. She wondered how he will feel when he heard the real reason why she can't represent him. She cleared her throat and looked him straight in the eye. She was quiet a bit longer than necessary, and this got his attention. “Thabo, the reason I can't represent you in this case is because I am already involved in the case. And taking your case would constitute a conflict of interest. Not only that, it would plainly be unprofessional. I could be disbarred for doing something like that. And you must understand that from here on I cannot even discuss this case with you. Anything about it. You see Thabo, I represent Gugu Masango in the suit.”

Life is a riddle. People always wonder why some things are not straight forward in life. From a young age, humans are taught the lesson of life through experience rather than logic and understanding. This is said to be the way individuals find their own personalities in life. From the word go, life is this mystery that people are supposed to figure out. Yet despite this big mystery, we do our best to enjoy life. Unfortunately for some people, it takes them a life time to figure out this riddle called life.

“You know, when I met you Thabo, I knew what kind of a person you were. But I so much wanted to believe that people can change, that I gave you that chance in my life. To me, you were rogue person going straight. And things would have been so good between us. But I guess some people will never change. Only you knows what you want in women, but I know for a fact that it is not love, not companionship, not friendship; not even sex because I know sex with me was great. So I have wondered to myself exactly what it is you were looking for in women, and I have come the conclusion that you are a menace. You don't know what you want yet you go around messing with people for the sheer fun of it. Perhaps to prove something to yourself. But let me tell you this much *buti*, that very thing that has made you mess with women, has proved to be very thing that has guaranteed your downfall. Seriously now Thabo, have you ever thought about your behaviour towards women? What have they done to deserve such treatment from you? While I have wanted to believe in you so much Thabo, you have left me with shame through your actions. And in you I see the actions of my father. And men like you must be taught a lesson they will never forget. That is the sole reason why I have taken this case. To teach you a lesson.”

Life riddles. His shame was like *ntja e kotlileng mohatla* when he left Jozi. And Mbali's demeanour told him she was determined to prove whatever point she meant to prove. Her calmness spoke of a woman tired, one who has reached the bounds of her tolerance. Her quiet nature meant that she thought things through before she acted. Her actions are not to be taken lightly.

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The trials began in earnest, almost all of them at the same time. Since Modiehi's child support case had already been ruled upon, it was the first under review. The question now was how to award the support grant considering that many more cases are pending for child support. The court had subpoenaed his financial records to try and determine his ability to pay maintenance. But without Ncumisa in the picture, it was clear Thabo could not afford to pay any of the many cases against him.

This fact, that he could not afford to pay maintenance to all pending cases, he had given much consideration. While he was aware he would lose most of the cases, he was relying on his inability to afford as a defence strategy. This is why he was really not bothered about the outcome of any of

The Magic Number

the cases against him. If he cannot afford to pay child support, there is nothing anyone can do make him pay. All the courts can do is try to come up with some form of settlement. So whichever way you look at it, the women are the losers, again. He was so proud of his strategy that he was dead sure the cases would be thrown out for his inability to pay. He will get away with just a stern warning from the Judge. He couldn't care less how angry the Judge may be at this turn of events, he will get away with it, and this all that matters.

What he clearly hadn't thought through, was who the Judge in his cases would be. Judge Nku Moremi is very familiar with the Thabo story. And, in her words when she delivered her judgement, she said:

“Looking at all circumstances, there is no basis in law on which to prosecute the defendant. While the plaintiffs are fully entitled to recourse from this court, his financial situation renders the legal recourse useless. In a case like this, the law has no way to punish the offenders, but simply lets down the hopes and aspirations of those whose desires rest on this court. As a result, this court cannot attach any financial value to the defendant that will have any material impact on the judgement of this court. That is a shame, that the courts cannot protect those whose interests it is supposed to serve.

However, as a Judge and a responsible citizen of this country, I cannot standby and watch social outcasts like the defendant go unpunished simply because there is no basis in law for such punishment. The basic tenets of justice are restitution and recourse. If this court cannot make people like the defendant account for their actions, our justice system would be in shambles.

I therefore find the defendant, Thabo Radieta, guilty of serial heart breaking and neglecting his responsibilities as a father to his children. Since he has indicated that he cannot be a responsible father and husband, his children are better off with him removed from society where he would continue his immoral ways.

Thabo Radieta, I sentence you to a jail term of five years. As an officer of the law, I am mindful of the fact that this sentence would probably not stand on appeal. But I assure you, I will do everything legally in my power to delay such an appeal by a higher court. Realistically, that means you will spend at least eighteen months in jail. Society can do without misfits like you lingering around. The court is adjourned.”

PART THREE

DARK HOLE

The Magic Number

The judgement by Judge Moremi made history in the South African judiciary. It became the headline topic in the Law Review Journal several times. Experts were called to express an opinion on the legality of the sentence. While everyone agreed the sentence was not exactly fair, the question of whether it was illegal could not be answered by any of the legal experts. They simply said a lesser sentence could have been imposed. But when asked what a lesser sentence meant, none could give an answer.

For the first time in his life Thabo saw life differently. He now saw the foolishness of his actions, what the judiciary call remorse. Now he was an object of a crusade by Judge Moremi to prove that fathers who don't take responsibility for their children must be incarcerated. He was now the subject of legal minds to debate whether his case justified the judgement, and if not, what alternative to suggest. The criminal law was now under review, with him the centre of the discussion. And sitting in jail does not get easier, especially if you are the focal point of discussion by the best criminal minds in the country.

True to her word, Judge Moremi had only filed Thabo's papers for appeal at the latest possible time, further delaying his chances for a review. To make matters worse, Judge Moremi had been nominated to serve on the bench of the Constitutional Court. This, in legal terms, meant that she was taking the fight all the way to the Constitutional Court. Thabo was at a great disadvantage.

As an awaiting trial prisoner, he was shipped to Kroonstad prison until the courts knew what to do with him. Life was instantly miserable for him in prison. Do not believe stories that prison is like a hotel. You get two showers a week, using cold water. Breakfast is two slices of white bread with scant margarine and a lousy weak tea. Lunch is an overcooked meal that has not taste whatsoever. Supper is, well let's rather not talk about it. Prison food is lousy and bad. Awaiting trial prisoners are allowed visits by family and friends, but in Kroonstad Thabo had no one visiting him. Not that he was amazed really.

Thabo may be many things, but a hardened criminal is not one of them. so prison life was really torture for him. He was what they called a sissy in prison, and fell prey to the hardened criminals he was spending a cell with. The common cells accommodate four inmates per cell, and Thabo was a pushover in his cell. His first real experience of prison came the evening he arrived in Kroonstad. He was beaten to a pulp by a cell mate for refusing to share his meals with him. Soon news broke in prison that he was a ladies man incarcerated for failing to look after his offspring. He was twice nearly gang raped while taking a shower.

Following these incidents of rape, Thabo was adamant he must be moved to a safer cell where his life will not be constantly at risk. *Ruri lehlohonolo ke lebelo*, not long after this he had caught the eye of the chief warder Sharon Motaung. Sharon. *Ba batle bana ba Basotho*. She was tall with a slender body, not skinny though. Milky chocolate in skin colour. *Hlooho e dula e luuwe*. With generous breasts. Her legs! No man could see those legs and claim to be indifferent. At age 29, she was really hot. Every man who has ever talked to her wish she could be his.

Sharon come from a wealthy family in Welkom. Her parents own an mansion in Oppenheimer location in Thabong. One of three children in the family and the only one who did not follow the dreams her parents had for her. Her siblings are well educated and rich. The eldest brother is a medical doctor with a private practice. The youngest is one of the few black CAs in the country, and

The Magic Number

she doing well for herself. Sharon had studied for a BA in Industrial Psychology, after which she refused to continue studying nor working professionally in that field. For some reason she liked working for Correctional Services, and being employed as a prison warder was very rewarding for her. Her family had tried numerous times to convince her to do something with her life that befits their status, to no avail. They have since accepted that she is the lesser success of the family.

Her perceived lack of success is a constant grudge to her whenever she meets her family. They use every opportunity they get to remind her that she could have done much better with her life. This has led to tension between her and the rest of her family, so much that she feels happy when she is away from them. Being constantly reminded about being failure, that's what her parents called her, made her resent her family. She couldn't be happier at the thought of news reaching her parents that she is romantically involved with a convict. A perfect scenario for her, one that might trigger a heart attack to her parents. She loved the idea.

She started by putting Thabo in a solitary cell, where he got more "privileges" than was customary in Kroonstad prison. In his cell, he had a colour television, a collection of books, food and money. He could have visitors at any time, at least that is what he was promised even though Sharon knew he had no visitors whatsoever. He had unlimited access to the sun on the prison grounds as he was now allowed to roam about at his leisure. Giving in to Sharon's affront gave him the hope he had been hoping for. Not that he needed any convincing seeing that Sharon is the best looking woman he has seen in a long time. And in time he came to understand that his privileges extended to conjugal matters too.

Although everyone was aware of the special treatment Thabo received in jail, no one really could complain as he was an awaiting trial prisoner. His case never made it to court, not even for a bail hearing. Some righteous democratic organisations and liberal individuals had tried to argue his case, citing unfair and unconstitutional treatment. The toothless Human Rights Commission, the racist Institute of Race Relations and the Wits Law Clinic. Even the Commission of Gender Equality entered the fray, though nobody really knows why since Thabo is neither a woman nor child. The logic explanation offered by township tabloid is that Thabo has had doings with several commissioners, hence their interest in his story. *Kasi Taal*, the tabloid, reckoned Judge Nku must be the best legal mind in South Africa. How else do you explain, they argued, the fact that Thabo was buried deep in prison while no one seemed capable of doing anything about it? Despite the best constitution in the world, Thabo stayed in jail.

There is something intrinsically strange, funny, best and stupid all at the same time about the South African constitution. While it is hailed as the best in the world, it facilitates some of the weirdest things in the world. The Mangaung municipality couldn't fire him for absenteeism, neither could they fire him for being in jail. You can't fire someone until their judicial case has been concluded. The best they can do is to suspend him until such time that he comes back from jail or he is found guilty. This is a great position for Thabo because he knows that he does not have to worry about work, unless he is found guilty. If they dare fire him, they will be compelled to compensate him for loss of income and unfair discrimination. No wonder the CCMA is such a busy institution.

Township people fully agreed with the tabloid that Judge Nku is the best mind in the country for orchestration of such an act. The Minister of Justice, when interviewed, said that he couldn't interfere with independence of the judiciary. eTv even did a programme about Thabo and his plight.

The Magic Number

Only the programme “exposed” his privileges more than anything else, and for this Thabo was condemned and forgotten in the justice system. Some commentators said there was nothing to worry about since Thabo was enjoying better treatment than most prisoners. And indeed he was forgotten in the system. For eighteen months he was a prisoner in Kroonstad prison. For eighteen months he enjoyed special privileges, courtesy of Sharon Motaung, chief warden. For eighteen months he enjoyed the chief warden. In eighteen months the chief warden was pregnant. Things have come a full circle. Some things just don't change, no matter the circumstances.

There was a mini riot taking place outside prison the longer Thabo remained incarcerated. The original instigators, a reference to the women who started Thabo's legal woes, were now being haunted by society where they lived. This started with the elder women asking where have you seen a man jailed for fathering children? That is a family matter they argued. Then the young women who had children with Thabo entered the fray. They claimed they never wanted the father of their children jailed. And this blame was placed squarely on the shoulders of those who started these legal cases. And then matters were made worse by the young hopeful girls who claimed their chance with Thabo was taken away by those responsible for jailing Thabo. Girls physically fought on this point. Modiehi the lawyer and Ethel the social worker were forced to relocate while running away from an angry mob. Gugu had some of the businesses burned down as a result. Even Ncumisa, the BEE benefactor, was once attacked in public by an angry girl in retaliation to her dumping Thabo.

What really added fuel to this riot were the accidental implications of his incarceration to other important people. And this is the reason people believe moved the levers of power to see him released from jail. His continued imprisonment was increasingly becoming a risk to many rich and influential people. Modiehi had grown to be a very influential legal mind in Bloemfontein. Gugu was running a successful business empire, now with friends in high places. Her being haunted as a result of Thabo made her go after her original enemies, people she had sworn to pay revenge to; the movement. She immediately organised a media campaign in which corruption was being “exposed”. Many comrades' dealings were reported in the media, and many were caught red handed. Gugu was providing the background information on comrades and directing where to look. Many high figures were publicly embarrassed. Many ended up being formally investigated and charged by the police. All because Gugu was now paying revenge and many did not know this.

But mostly because many politicians found themselves trapped in the scandal. Many of the girls Thabo had impregnated turned out to belong to political families. The media was especially interested in this fact. They even alleged that these politicians must be behind his unjustified imprisonment. No influential person wanted his/her name associated with Thabo in any way, and these stories were not doing them any favours. The news of Sharon's pregnancy by Thabo, while he was in jail, became the number story. Her rich and influential parents were shamed. They swore they would do everything in their power to have this Thabo released from prison. Only if that meant they could have their peace. The media investigations also revealed that Thabo had been sleeping with many women in the Mangaung municipality, most of whom are married women. When the media claimed to have a list of all women who had slept with him, everyone ran to plead that Thabo must be released from prison. Husbands urged the media to release the names of the women involved in the scandal, wives pulled every trick to ensure they never get published. Indeed Thabo was finally released, eighteen months after his woes began.

The Magic Number

Ka nnete o lehlohonolo la tshitshidi enwa motho!

The Magic Number

Being incarcerated makes a person realise how lucky we are to be alive and free. Simple things such as enjoying the fresh air, the sun, or plainly walking aimlessly are missed. You realise how precious these things are in life. Jail forces you to appreciate the simple things in life.

When released from jail, Thabo couldn't believe how radically different his views on life now were. He was seriously considering staying in Kroonstad with Sharon. Life in Bloemfontein had been a string of tiresome problems. Maybe Kroonstad could be a clean start for him; to be a man, for once, and take responsibility for his child and woman. Maybe even get married.

Despite the social benefits of staying away from Bloemfontein, Kroonstad promised something better for him: wealth and influence. Sharon's parents were wealthy and well known, and anyone who marries their daughter would by default be entering their circle of influence. All of these rang very well in his mind. Imagine not having to work yet still being able to enjoy the finest things in life. He knew her parents despised him, but they had no choice, he was their daughter's choice. And their daughter was madly in love with this ex-convict(less). No one could ever be so loving in her eyes. She loved him for love's sake, and nothing else. Her parents had realised that any effort in trying to separate them could result in them losing their lovely daughter. They grudgingly accepted having to tolerate his presence.

The first thing he had to do was go to Bloemfontein to sort out his work status. Since he was never fired or sentenced by the court, technically he still had a job, even after eighteen months of absence. That is the law. But the Bloemfontein municipality could not have possibly waited for eighteen months for him to come back, so they had employed someone else in his position. They agreed to pay him a fee in return for him not demanding his old job back. He was smiling when he left the Mangaung Municipality offices, he had gotten more than he had bargained for. Word had gotten around that Thabo was back, and a few women who had a thing for him were gathered outside waiting for him. Even after everything else that has happened, these women still wanted Thabo *a ilo kga moroho*, to bed them.

His next stop was not particularly appealing to him, Block M Botshabelo. His family home headed by his mother. He hadn't set foot home in many years following his scandal with Modiehi, and every other girl that had a child by him in Botshabelo. He dreaded going home, but he had to go home and see his mother. As a Mosotho child, he also knew that he had to perform the *ho tlosa senyama* ritual, in which a chicken would be slaughtered and he would bath with its gull. Secondly, he knew he had to make peace with his mother and ask for her forgiveness after all he had put her through. Off course this reason was selfish, he wanted his mother's blessings for his pending marriage to Sharon! He couldn't possibly get married without anyone from his family being present. *A ka furallwa ke badimo*(his ancestors would turn their backs on him). More so because Sharon had insisted that his family must be present during their wedding. He was shocked to learn that his mother now lived with three young children, two boys and a girl, all dumped there by their mothers whom Thabo had since forgotten about. His poor mother was suffering trying to make ends meet, and he had added tremendously to her burdens. All his mother did was cry when she saw her son. *Ruri bohloko ba pelo ya motswadi!*

On his way back from home in Botshabelo, Thabo made a quick turn in Bloemfontein to see his daughter with Ethel. He thought it prudent to start acting responsibly, and seeing how his child was doing is part of caring. He just showed up at Ethel's house unannounced. She was visibly shocked

The Magic Number

to see him, and even somewhat ashamed. Their horrid past flashed before her eyes the moment she set eyes on him. There was a deep felt feeling of remorse and regret in her. She couldn't believe how well he looked after all this time in jail. She had thought, she always thought about him, that he would come out in a bad shape. And she felt jealous that jail had not worn him down. She was wishing in secret that he loose his good looks, for then she would have absolutely no reason to be attracted to him. She had been suffering a terrible illness ever since she last saw him. Although she had believed she was over him, time over again he intruded her thoughts. This was so bad that twice she had uttered his name while she was enjoying herself with another man. Needless to say, the men had instantly left. She was beginning to believe that Thabo must be a curse. How else does a woman fall so hopelessly in love with a man who has never shown her any care or love? There is nothing compelling her to Thabo, yet this man is so ingrained in her mind and soul it hurts just to think about him.

And out of the blue, just like that, here he is standing right before her eyes. His smell, his eyes, his masculine arms. She missed being caressed by those arms and feeling this man. He was in jovial moods, smiling constantly. And he seemed, she thought, happy to see her. After the usual pleasantries about life, she wished he would give her a long hug. One heart wanted to kick him out and tell him never to return. Another one wanted to embrace him and never to let go.

He was really interested in the well being of his daughter, for that is about all he talked about. And he had asked for permission to come see her on a regular basis. Then he left. Although she herself is a born-again Christian, and a coloured person, she couldn't resist the urge to believe that perhaps she was bewitched. Maybe she was bewitched to love this man for the rest of her natural life. As he left he house, she realised she was crying involuntarily. *Lerato ke moleko*, for it comes and goes on its own will, and people are left at the whim of its will.

“Am I dreaming or what?. Is this really you? Thabo?” This made him to turn and look at the person speaking. He was seated in a restaurant enjoying a snack. He had run out of things to do in Bloemfontein, and was already contemplating going back home to his mother's house. There was no rush to go back to Kroonstad. In any case, his mother could do with his company for a while longer, especially after all these years. He would just have to make sure that he avoids running into any of the mothers of his abandoned children and their people. Perhaps spend this in the compound. He might as well get to know his children who live with his mother. He could not believe his eyes when he turned to look at the person who was speaking. Ntebaleng! Ntebaleng? For some unknown reason he was delighted to see her. Perhaps because some company would be nice at the moment. He was really happy to see her. The two screamed like teenagers excited about a play. They embraced and kissed on the lips, it just happened that way.

Ntebaleng looked different from what Thabo remembered. Something was different about her. He couldn't tell what, but he knew she looked different. Different in a very good way. Honestly, he was turned on by her right there in the restaurant! He was uneasy about all this, but how can a man ignore feelings of attraction? Especially those that are uninvited and about a person who used to hold similar feelings about him in the past? He was getting harder the more they spoke, and this was making him uncomfortable. Ntebaleng mentioned she could not stay long as she was on her way home to prepare for her next shift, which started in about four hours. She had wanted to ask him to come along, to continue their discussion. But she could not. She still remembered how she used to shame herself into wanting Thabo, to no avail. In all this time that has passed without Thabo, she

The Magic Number

had learnt never to subject herself to such humiliation ever again. And she was not about to break that vow.

As she made to go, he shifted uncomfortably and mumbled something. “Can I come with you?” She thought perhaps she must have not heard him properly. She looked him the eye, and he repeated the words she had thought she heard. Her eyes welled quickly with tears, and she merely nodded her response to him. He followed her in his car. He couldn't believe how well Ntebaleng was doing, by the look of her apartment. And for the first time since he knew her, he had to acknowledge to himself that she had a good taste in things. But it was something else that was eating away at him, silently. Every time he looked at her, he saw an attractive woman with a well cared for body. Ntebaleng was still without a baby at her age, by choice. Her breasts evoked an electrifying feeling in him. And she had caught him looking at them a few times. And every time this happened, he would look down in shame. It felt like the best four hours he has had in his life. He was used to being in charge in bed, but this time, Ntebaleng had turned the tables. For once in a long time, sex evoked emotions in him. And every time after the act, he wanted to be held. It was no wonder that he spend the night at her apartment and she skipped work!

Last night, while Ntebaleng slept and in between great fun, he had time to think and reflect. He was bothered mostly by a single question, to which he seemed to have no answer. In any case, it was the real first time he reflected on his life voluntarily. When he had asked himself honest questions. And when he had genuinely tried to provide answers to these questions, however elusive the answers may be. Ntebaleng had provided him with something, something he could not define yet it was so profound he felt it. So much that he spend the night thinking. How is it possible that he has never been able to see what he sees in her now all those years past?

By the first light of dawn, he was still up. He had not slept at all. He had sort of come to the conclusion that Ntebaleng he wants for himself, although he had no idea in what form given the fact that his wedding to Sharon Motaung is pending. “Thabo, I don't expect anything from you. So do not worry yourself about what to say to me or how to explain last night. I know you are getting married soon” It was the first thing Ntebaleng said when she woke up and the last she said about last night.

The Magic Number

Ntate Motaung couldn't be outdone for his daughter's wedding ceremony. He had always wanted to throw an extravaganza for her wedding, even though she was marrying a convict, it was still her daughter's wedding after all. He wanted everyone to know about the wedding, and all the high profile personalities were invited. He said it would be a wedding of the century, one that people will always remember, and talk about.

Preparations went ahead in earnest, and it was a highly anticipated wedding. Not only in Kroonstad, but across Welkom, Virginia, Bloemfontein and areas in between.

As the wedding became close, Thabo was increasingly being restless, for no apparent reason. It was like his soul was floating elsewhere, never seeming to allow him to fully enjoy the moment. His senses were becoming attuned to whatever he was feeling deep down. He had never cared much about feelings and internal harmony before, yet these feelings were so distinct he couldn't ignore them. It was like he was undergoing some form of changes. He had much time on his hands because he did not work, nor was he allowed to participate in the wedding preparations. Perhaps that why he was aware of his feelings, because he had nothing meaningful to do. He had become accustomed to the treatment Ntate Motaung and mme MaMotaung were giving him. They ignored him at all times, as if he did not exist. To them, he was something, not someone, to be tolerated for the sake of peace with their daughter. Nad he had quickly learned never to be bothered by it. The three of them tried very hard to stay out of each other's way.

Sharon was besides herself with joy for the upcoming wedding. And in a strange way, she seemed to truly love him. Ever since she got pregnant for him, it is as if she was being forced to love him. As if something was constantly working on increasing her attraction to him. Like *o jesitswe moratisa*, the love portion. *O ne a mo rata a re phothololo!!* And her beauty kept glowing like it was being defiant.

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Life was becoming increasingly difficult for Ethel Smith. She was doing very well in her job, her problems were emotional. Despite the fact that she was a practising social worker experienced in counselling, nothing could help her. She was falling into a deep episode of depression. And deep down in her, something hurt badly. She haven't quite had peace in a long time, despite her pretences. Things have been made worse by Thabo's visit to see his daughter. She now sleeps less and spends the the nights worrying about nothing in particular. She does not eat well either, and this was physically visible. She was one tormented soul.

Her knowledge of the impending marriage between Thabo and Sharon was a pain she could not bear. It was a constant reminder to her of her inability to get the man she loves. And it reminds her of the chance she has had of living with him, and how their union had ended. She had wondered a million times why she had done what she had done to him back then. And now he was getting married to a woman he does not have a child with, okay, with whom the child is still on the way.

She must find a way to get back into Thabo's life.

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Modiehi had vowed to give her child the best life she could afford. It was hard raising a child all by herself, especially a male child who needs the presence of a man to teach him manly things. But without one, what else can she do except do her best?

Life had become somewhat easier for her with the passage of time. Her parents had gradually come around to accepting her child. One day her mother had asked her to visit with the child, and the welcome she received was the path to a satisfying relationship with her parents and their grand son. For reasons known only to him, nstate Tlokwe, Modiehi's father had finally accepted what had happened to his daughter. And his was showing signs of adoration towards Tshotleho.

Her mother had insisted she must find herself a husband, if only to quench the thirst of companionship in her life. She had said that her daughter was leading too much of a lonely life, which was true. Modiehi had nothing happening in her life except her work and her son. And the two were very close as a result.

It is not that Modiehi had never considered a man in her life before, or that men did not approach her with proposals of love. Her heart had closed up after her experiences with Thabo and her pregnancy, and how she was thrown out of her family home as a result. In a way, she hated men and their lies. In her eyes, all men were the same. And she was not prepared to travel that road again, ever. So she had accepted that loneliness will forever be a companion.

Tshotleho grew up to be a model child, one that made his mother very proud. His uncle had a big impact on him regarding his interests in education. Like he did to his mother, he had greatly influenced him on educational matters, including what possible careers he should consider. Right through high school, he had always performed well, always coming in the top five of his class. He had been offered a scholarship to study medicine at Stellenbosch University following his excellent marks in matric.

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Disebo had worked as a primary school teacher for the past nineteen years. Her daughter, Lesedi, had just started working as a nurse at Oppenheimer Clinic in Welkom. She has never seen Thabo since that day in Welkom at a wedding. She has heard stories of him and his womanly ways over the years, but that was all there was to it. Neither was she inclined back then when there was a class suit against him to join. As far as she was concerned, Thabo might as well have been dead. She raised her daughter alone, without even so much an expectation from her irresponsible father. And now Lesedi was a grown woman, and soon she expected cows of her in-laws to grace her cattle kraal. What a proud mother she will be that day!

Lesedi had wanted to study Industrial Psychology, but her mother could afford sending her to university. So she settled for nursing when Anglo Gold offered sponsorships to a select few students, which she was lucky enough to be chosen. She had always yearned to become independent so that she could ease the burden on her mother. She had seen the sacrifices her mother had had to make in order to provide a comfortable life for her. And she had vowed that she will

The Magic Number

make a difference in the life of her beloved mother one day.

Lesedi, aged 21, was a beautiful girl. She was dark skinned, big eyes with faint dimples on the left cheek. Her body lingered on the slender side, although she was not slender in the true sense of the word. She was a rare breed in that at 21 she was still a virgin. Her experiences of family life had made her averse to men in general and she did not wish to find herself in the same predicament her mother found herself. She had also observed young girls of her age, how hurt they have been by men who had promised them the world, only to hurt and leave them in the worst possible conditions. She vowed no man would touch her until she was married.

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Gugu had done very well for herself in business, despite her setbacks from Thabo and the movement. Her business interests had expanded tremendously and she was now operating them from various locations across the country. Although she had remained in Gauteng herself, she travelled regularly to oversee her businesses. She now had business operations in Gauteng, Free State, Limpopo and Northern Cape.

Her son, Jabulani, was now a grown up man of 23. He had taken from his father on looks. He was a cute little man for whom women fall over themselves. They consistently threw themselves at him. Only if he was like his father. But Jabu was very different. In fact he took no interest whatsoever in women. He had focused all his energies on his mother's businesses and his own studies. After completing matric, he had gone to the UK to study at Lancaster University in Food Preparation. He was now working as an assistant chef at the Oppenheimer Clinic in Welkom. When not on duty, he was looking after his mother's businesses in Welkom, Kroonstad and Bloemfontein.

Jabu was rather shy for a boy of his looks. He had lost his virginity when he was nineteen, already at university. It had still not been his intention to partake in conjugal matters, but being black at a mostly white university made him a novel subject for the white girls. They had been too pre-occupied with him and his looks, a fact that had led to him being the preferred black candidates girls went for. Not that there were not any other black male students at university, it is just that most of them were of British citizenship, and it seemed these girls favoured those of non British origin. Of course going out with some of these girls has got benefits. Benefits such as connections and a good life. And he had ridden many of them in that short period of university life. But that was all there was about his women escapades, outside university he was a humble man. He had maintained a relationship with only one girl over these years. She was Ntsoaki Mabe of Kroonstad, right next to his grand parents' house. They had grown close to each other over the years. Poor Ntsoaki did not know about the white women of Lancaster.

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Ntate Motaung wanted a wedding of all weddings, one to rival anything people of Maokeng have ever seen. He had been planning his daughter's wedding in his head for the past twenty years. Despite the undesirable situation of Thabo being his son-in-law, whom he detest very much, this wedding will be great. The date was fixed, by him, for the summer period around October. He would have gone for December but too many people marry during that period, and he wanted his daughter's wedding to be an exclusive event. Any clashes with weddings of ordinary people is not

The Magic Number

acceptable to him. So October it was.

There was only one snag with this wedding. With so many prominent people coming to grace the wedding, how on earth does he account for who the groom is? He had opted to omit the groom's name from the invitation cards, but that would raise suspicion and curiosity from the guests. He had settled for the message: "*You are cordially invited to the wedding of Ntate Motaung's only daughter, Sharon Motaung.*" He was solely in charge of the wedding preparations, not even Sharon was once solicited for an opinion about her wedding. In any case, she was just happy that she was marrying the love of her life, Thabo Radieta.

Sharon was oblivious to everything happening around her. She was just too happy. And being pregnant did not make things any easier for her. She was not bothered even by Thabo's long trip home to Botshabelo. In her heart of hearts, she trusted him completely, and he could never do her any harm.

Thabo had taken longer than planned at home. In reality there was nothing holding him back, except for memories. Memories of Ntebaleng. Although Ntebaleng had simply moved on with her life following the encounter with Thabo, he had failed dismally to get her off his mind. All he did while home was think about Ntebaleng. The Ntebaleng he had failed to notice when he had all the chances, when time had permitted him to pursue her. When Ntebaleng just wanted to sleep with him. But now that he has finally tasted, he can't forget Ntebaleng. What in God's name was happening to him?

October was really not that far away, only four months to go. But the four months felt like a lifetime to Ethel. She could not get the wedding out of her mind no matter how hard she tried. She was counting the time remaining every day, literally. She was suffering emotionally. She wished she could trade her heart for someone else's. Just so she could escape the mental and emotional strain brought about by memories of Thabo, her soul mate. A man who was now getting married to another woman. And to think she had had her chance with him, and she blew it. Now that he was getting married, her chances with him seemed even further remote. And that remoteness she did not like, it made her scared, desperate even. Her pre-occupation with Thabo's wedding was something of an obsession in psychological terms. She should have known better as a social worker. At the rate she was going, she was a ticking time bomb.

And slowly time passed, like it was minding its own business, while to others it seemed to mock them. To Thabo it was fast-paced towards the wedding date. For Sharon it was fast-bring her closer to the love of her life. For Ethel time had come to screeching halt, a painful one. For the rest of the people it was optimism and pessimism. The ladies whose lives Thabo had touched, romantically that is, they were waiting with bated breaths. None of them wanted to express an opinion on the matter. But every single one of them had an opinion they preferred to keep to themselves. The hardest hit were those whose babies were now grown-ups. What are they supposed to tell their children about this Thabo wedding? Because the majority of the children did not know who their father was, they were never told, were they supposed to learn now their father was the groom of the highly publicised upcoming wedding? Indeed Thabo will always be part of their lives, no matter what.

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The Magic Number

Thabo ngwana ka, are you really sure you want to get married? Are you sure you are ready for marriage? Ngwana ka, if you have any doubts, then you should not get married hobane your marriage will not last. You are supposed to be getting married soon, empa you dissappeared from home for days without a word. This family cannot afford another scandal Thabo. For how long are you going to ridicule us, enough. Where were you Thabo?

Mphetlele sefuba sa hao Koena, botle ke ho bua.

Hei Mme, what can I say. Mme o nepile, I am a mess; I have been trying to think over something but so far no luck. Mme, I spend the past few days with Ntebaleng. I did mean to but it just happened. And Mme that is what is bothering me. I cannot forget about Ntebaleng. I am constantly thinking about her and I don't know why. Mme, I love Sharon with all my heart. After all she has done so much for me ngwana eo wa batho. But Ntebaleng Mme, something about her is making me loose sleep. Nnete feela Mme, I wish I was marrying Ntebaleng.