MEMORIES WE LOST

LIDUDUMALINGANI

There was never a forewarning that this thing was coming. It came out of nowhere, as ghosts do, and it would disappear as it had come. Every time it left, I stretched my arms out in all directions, mumbled two short prayers, one to God and another to the ancestors, and then waited on my terrified sister to embrace me. The embraces, I remember, were always tight and long, as if she hoped the moment would last forever.

Every time this thing took her, she returned altered, unrecognisable, as if two people were trapped inside her, both fighting to get out, but not before tearing each other into pieces. The first thing that this thing took from her, from us, was speech, and then it took our memories. She began speaking in a language that was unfamiliar, her words trembling as if trying to relay unthinkable revelations from the gods. The memories faded one after the other until our past was a blur.

Some of the memories that have remained with me are of her screaming and running away from home. I remember when she ran out to the fields in the middle of the night, screaming, first waking my mother and me and then abducting the entire village from their sleep. Men and boys emerged from their houses carrying their knobkerries as if out to hunt an animal. Women and children stayed behind, frightened children clutching their mother's nightgowns. The men and boys, disorientated and peeved, shuffled in the dark and split into small groups as instructed by a man who at the absence of a clear plan crowned himself a leader. Those with torches flicked them on and pushed back the darkness. Some took candles; they squeezed their bodies close and wrapped blankets around themselves in an attempt to block the wind, but all their matches extinguished before they could light a single candle.

Those without torches or candles walked on even though the next step in such darkness was possibly a plunge down a cliff. This was unlikely, it should be said, as most of them were born in the village, grew up there, got married there, had used that very same field as their toilet for all their lives, and had had in overlapping periods only left the village when they went to work for the white man in large cities. They had a blueprint of the village in their minds; its walking paths, its indentations, its rivers, its mountains, its holes where ghosts lived were imprinted in their blood.

Hours later, the first small group of men and boys, and then another

and another, emerged from the darkness. They did not find her. They had looked everywhere, at least they had claimed. They were worried about not finding my sister or annoyed at being woken in the middle of the night – I could not tell. Morphed into defeated men, their faces drooped to the floor, and their bodies slouched as if they had carried a heavy load. Each group was not aware of the other groups' whereabouts. They did not even know if the other groups still existed or if the night had swallowed them. They had last seen them when they wished them luck when they split up. They had heard them yell my sister's name, in the dark, before going silent.

She did not scream.
She did not cry.
She did not scream.
She did not cry.
She did not respond to the calls.

Each group chanted with great terror. With each group that emerged, I hoped that it would chant something else, but nothing changed; the chant was, as if it had been rehearsed for a long time, repeated the same each time, tearing my heart apart.

She did not scream.
She did not cry.
She did not scream.
She did not cry.
She did not respond to our screams.

The chant went on until all groups had returned.

Mother, a woman of tall build and wide hips, only returned home when the sun was way up in the sky the next day, carrying my sister on her back.

She would scream in intervals as if to taunt me, my mother said.

I remember another time my sister banged her head against the wall until she bled. She and I were racing around the rondavel to see who would return first to our starting point. I think we were twelve and fifteen then. She had begun to grow breasts, and she was telling me

how sensitive they were. She had brushed her fingers over them and a sensation she had never felt before had pulsed through her body. She did not know what was going on or what had caused her body to tingle apart from that touch. I remember trying to interject that she was becoming a woman, she was becoming sexual – not that I knew anything myself.

She dismissed me teasingly, in the gentle manner that she dismissed things, leaving one not convinced whether she was in agreement or not. You know nothing about breasts, she told me after examining my chest. I told her that I was a late bloomer. The lie came out of me as naturally as truth comes to others. I had made my mother, and anyone else who knew, promise that she must never know the truth about how my chest had no breasts. She teased me for a long time that day and days after. It was nothing malicious, it was in the manner that a sibling tells another sibling that they have a big head but get upset when someone else says the words.

Then it arrived. I did not see it approaching. I had always hoped that I would so that I could stop it. At the time I was convinced that if one observed more carefully one could see it coming, with horns, spikes and an oversized head – that's how I imagined it looked. I don't know if she ever saw it coming but I hope not. The horror of seeing a monster coming for you and not being able to run even though one is not in a dream would have been unbearable for her.

I was telling her how once I fooled the boys in my class that I had grown breasts. It was a Friday. I stuffed pantyhose into my shirt, to look like breasts, and wore my mother's bra. The stupid boys never stopped to wonder at the improbability of the situation. How is it possible that my breasts had grown in one day?

So the boys stared at me the whole day, convinced that I had suddenly bloomed in the night, I said to her.

I stared out into the landscape that began in my mother's garden and stretched far beyond sight. The sun was setting behind the forest and dust was floating everywhere. Where the dust was dense, one could see it sway this way and that way as if in the middle of a dance. A sophisticated dance, the kind that, I imagined, happened in other worlds, very far from the village. The village was settling into repose. The cold summer air had begun to torment the villager's bare legs and arms. Everything was in silhouette, including the horses that

trotted across the veld, the cattle that lowered their heads to graze, and the water that flowed down the cliff. The mountains, ancient but nevertheless still standing, were casting giant shadows over the landscape. The shadows stretched so far from the mountain that they began to exist as if they were solid entities on their own.

In the middle of a story I was telling her, she gently rocked back and forth then began hitting the back of her head against the wall. For a short time I thought she was providing rhythm for my anecdote. It was only when she began to scream, in an attempt to churn this thing out of her, that I became alarmed. By then she had smashed her head and left blood on the wall. She had transformed into someone else. She was not here. I tried to grab her or whatever was there. I tried to make her stop. I held her hands, bound them behind her back, laid my body against hers, but she pushed me away easily with a strength that came to her only when this thing tore her apart. Had it not been a mud wall, an old one at that, she would have cracked her skull open. Instead, she cracked the wall with her head.

The bloodstain remained visible on the wall long after my mother scraped it off; long after she had applied three layers of mud and new water paint. The stains stayed long after the sangoma came and cleansed the spot where my sister had bludgeoned her head. I began to smell the bloodstains in my dreams, in my clothes, in everything. The smell of blood lingered after many sunsets had come; even after the rain had come.

The other time that I remember this thing entering my sister was when she threw hot porridge on me. This thing arrived in her and abducted her while she hovered over a hot porridge pot. In the middle of a joke she never finished, she flung the pot across the room. It only just missed my face but my chest was not that fortunate. I don't remember opening the bottom half of the door of the rondavel but I found myself standing outside, naked, having pulled my dress off. The pain was unbearable. Hours later, when she gained consciousness, she was shocked and devastated about what had happened to me. I told her I had poured hot water on myself by mistake. She would never forgive herself.

Though it had been tough in other months, it was in November that things got worse. This thing, this thing that took over her followed her to school and she had to drop out. It arrived while she was in class.

She was so strong, so out of control, that she flung a desk across the room and smashed a window. When I arrived in her class, everyone was standing around watching. She had broken a chair against the wall too, and she was screaming words I did not understand. I stood at a short distance from her. All she had to do was look into my eyes. Please look into my eyes, I begged. Her eyes had turned red and her entire body was shaking. When she did look at me, after scanning the bewildered faces of the crowd, she stopped screaming. She knew me. I stared right into her eyes and I could see this thing leave; I could see my sister returning.

After that incident I went truant from school. Every morning I threw up. I convinced my mother that I was sick. She asked a boy who went to the same school to tell my class teacher that I had come down with an illness.

I want to be in the same class with you, I said to my sister, so I am going to wait until you are fine so we can go to school together.

They will never allow that. Mother, the teachers, the principal.

Yes they will. It is not like I want to study a grade higher. I want to study with you in the same class.

She and I spent that week doing sketches. With a pencil she could sketch me onto the paper such that it appeared as if I was alive on the page, another me, more happy, less torn, existing elsewhere.

She begged and begged me to go to school and promised me that she would be fine and that every day when I came back she would have new sketches for me.

We spent our days talking, one ear listening out for my mother's footsteps. We would know she was coming by the sound of the door closing when she walked out of the main house, then her shadow would come first through the door of our house.

My mother took my sister to more sangomas and more churches and gave her more bottles of medication. She became unresponsive. She only nodded and shook her head at irrelevant moments – there was nothing else. It turned out later, when I went back to school, that my week of absence had gone unreported. This bothered neither my class teacher nor me. Over the years my sister had missed so much school that I had caught up with her and was, in fact, two grades above her.

A few weeks after I had returned to school, the teacher told us about schizophrenia and I knew then that this is what my sister had and that

all the medication she had been taking would never help her. Instead, it was destroying her. The teacher told us that there is no cure for this thing but I knew that my sister deserved to feel something, anything.

The first thing my sister and I got rid of was her arsenal of medication. This is going to be our secret, I said. On our long walks, away from our mother, we dug holes and buried the roots she had to chew. The way to get rid of the medication drink, I demonstrated to her, was to pour it into the mug and take an empty sip, then when no-one was looking throw it out the back window that had grass growing below it. The window also opened to a large landscape where the cattle grazed. When mother asks if I have given you your medication you must nod, I told her.

I came back from school the following Monday afternoon and she took me to our house and poured her medication, took an empty sip, and threw it out the window with a smile. It was our game.

She began to recognise herself. She and I began to communicate again. We invented our own language because she had stopped talking. We simply gestured to each other and then over time we inserted a few words here and there.

We began to love each other again. I remember the day we connected again. We were in the same room we had always sat in, staring, as we always did, into the landscape, over the mountains, at the horizon, into the sun, until our eyes could not take us any further. It was a day of looking out, smiling, laughing, crying, holding hands.

We sat there and watched the day go by. We didn't even attempt to say a word. I realised then that she and I needed no words.

In the afternoon that day it began to rain. I dragged her out of the house. We jumped in the rain, begging it to pour on us so we could be tall, big, strong, bold. In that moment, my sister returned; she smiled, laughed. That day we began to form new childhood memories, filling the void left by the one that had been wiped out.

We lay on the wet ground, stretched out our arms and legs, rain falling on our faces, and felt free. But my mother had seen us laugh and jump and thought that this thing was going to come again.

The following day the entire village gathered outside our house for yet another ritual meant to cure my sister. She had been through all

these rituals and church sermons and nothing had changed. Each time sangomas and pastors promised that she would be healed within days. There was once, at least according to the elders, a glimpse of these sangomas healing. The tobacco, meat and matches that had been put in the rondavel for the ancestors to take at night, in one of the many rituals, were not there by morning, leading them to believe that the ancestors had healed her. It was not long after that this thing came again, proving that the tobacco, meat and matches had simply been stolen by thieves.

The day of the ritual, I remember how the clouds moved across the sky in a hurry, and how thick fog hung on to the grass, the mountains, the riverbanks and forests as if to announce death. It hung so low that people appeared to be floating with their legs cut off below their knees. The women's chatter and songs reached us long before the crowd was visible. It appeared as if the fog had swallowed them and that the women would never come into sight; all the same, they did. They ululated and chanted songs as they approached our home.

Men came in silence, arms folded behind their backs, carrying sticks.

A few minutes after the women arrived, smoke escaped the fireplace into the sky, dancing with the moving clouds as if the sky was their dance floor. The children ran around and kicked soccer balls that had been made by stuffing papers into plastic bags. Everyone moved in a chaotic choreography. That way went an obese woman balancing a bucket of water on her head; this way went a child with a tablecloth; that way went a dog with a bone; this way went chickens; that way stood women gossiping about my sister. From our house, I could see the chaos amplifying as more people arrived.

I looked at my sister and found her face, as it had become in earlier months, emotionless. In the past few days she had given me hope that she had returned. Now tears rolled down our cheeks. I knew then that she still felt something, that the last few days of holding hands, laughing and jumping in the rain were not a dream.

The fog began to clear and everything came into focus. The mountains, landscape, river and the other villages were there, unmoved.

An old man who had been smoking his pipe behind the kraal emptied it and stuffed it in his pockets. The ritual began. Knives were drawn and the goat was first stabbed in the stomach to summon our ancestors from their enclaves, and then it was meat.

After some time, an old aunt came for us, calling for us to come out of the house. We hugged tightly, my sister and I, wiped each other's tears. It was only after we had heard her footsteps approaching our house that we walked out, holding hands, fingers tightly entwined. The only way to have torn me away from her would have been to cut us apart.

The villagers shouted insults at the 'thing', as it remained unknown to them. For what felt like an entire lifetime, while my sister and I sat at a corner in the kraal, our heads bowed, the elders kept referring to this thing as the devil's work and demons. None of them knew my sister; none of them cared. The sun was up now, thick shadows gathering around the house. Even though there was no wind, the windmill by the fields made a creaking sound.

My mother was torn and defeated and questioned why God gave this thing to my sister – and my father. Secrets stay buried for so long but one day they rise to open like seeds breaking free from the earth. Nobody had ever mentioned that my father had this thing. That he had left one day on his horse, to see distant relatives, and had never come back. To only be seen in the way the deceased are seen after their death, in dreams and hallucinations.

He had been seen in some village at least twice, my mother told me. The person who had seen him yelled and waved but he never bothered to look. They were not sure if it was my father but they were convinced that it had to be. He was never buried, though it is now twenty years later. There was nothing to bury. I have no memory of my father. There was always hope that he would return from somewhere; nobody knew where, nobody cared, as long as he returned.

The night of the ritual, my sister and I slept lying the same way, instead of different directions. I woke up and she was holding me, squeezing me, and she had sunk her teeth in the pillow so she would not cry. She jerked for a few minutes and then fell asleep in my arms.

In the morning, I went to milk the goat. I saw two human shadows hovering above the kraal. At first, though it was unusual, I thought nothing of it even as they mumbled something to each other. In the shadows that leaped inside the kraal, with the smell of manure, I saw that it was my mother and an uncle who had come to stay with us for the ritual. It was as if their heads were bound together into one, creating a

giant head, a ghost even. I had meant to get up but when I heard them mention my sister, I put the jug of milk down and crouched, leaning on the goat so it did not move. My mother and Smellyfoot, the man who had moved in with my mother, were making plans to take my sister away.

The medication and the rituals did not work, my mother said. The way she saw it, my sister needed to go see Nkunzi. This thing is going to come back, she said.

Nkunzi was a sangoma from a remote village in which houses were lined miles apart from one another; he was famous for 'baking' people like my sister, claiming to cure them. It is said that whenever there was a car approaching his village, people would shout for Nkunzi to come out. Your demons are here, they would say.

Smellyfoot, a name that my sister had given him, agreed with my mother. We were not his kids; why would he care? And that was it, they decided: the next day my sister would be taken to Nkunzi to be baked. This is what they did with people who heard voices or demons, as they called them; they baked them until the demons left them. What was even more terrible than the baking was that people had come to be convinced of it.

I had heard of how Nkunzi baked people. He would make a fire from cow dung and wood, and once the fire burned red he would tie the demon-possessed person onto a section of zinc roofing then place it on the fire. He claimed to be baking the demons and that the person would recover from the burns a week later. I had not heard of anyone who had died but I had not heard of anyone who had lived either.

I could not allow this to happen to my sister.

After sunset I got my things and we left together. The twilight was approaching. I couldn't think where to go. We wandered first into the main road then I spotted many eyes staring at us so I changed direction and sunk into the valley. My sister held tightly on to my hand. I did not tell her anything she did not need to know. We were going to see an aunt who had suddenly fallen ill. We have to see her before the sun rises tomorrow, I told her.

There was no aunt who was ill.

We walked in the valley, on the banks of the river, then up a wet mound and over a fence that had once stood but was now lying broken on the ground. We came to a bridge with a tar road and because we were both scared of water we crossed the bridge and walked on the

road alongside the river.

We hardly noticed that it had become night; suddenly a giant moon had sneaked above us and stars had weaved patterns only gods understood. Mountains and landscape were now mere shapes, giant and indistinct, leaving us, tiny as we were then, the only things present in the world.

We walked by the river and then abandoned it, walked up a mountain and down the other side into a village. I was not sure whether it was Philani or another village. I had only ever been there once before and that visit was not even physical. My mother had mentioned it in one of her stories before she moved us into the new house – before a week later replacing our father, and us, with the Smellyfoot.

Once we descended the mountain and found ourselves in a strange village we would knock on the first house that had its light on and sleep there. That had been the initial plan, but it was flawed. Everyone in the villages knew everyone. I was convinced that whomever we asked for a place to sleep, even if we were to lie and give them false names, tell them that we were heading to the next village but something had delayed us, they would have recognised us, either because we have my grandfather's ears or my mother's nose or that they had seen us when we were toddlers, even stroked our buttocks. It had always been said that my sister had my grandfather's forehead. The plan was too risky.

We are close, I told my sister. Close to where, I had no idea. All the same, we were going forward, and it felt like we had reached where we were going, which was nowhere in particular. All that mattered was that we were now far from home.

We had no idea where we were going to sleep, what we were going to eat or how we were going to live, but returning home was not an option. Maybe when my mother dies, I said, maybe then we can return.

We crossed Philani village – I was still I not sure which village it was – with dogs barking at us, or at something else, perhaps a pole that had always stood there. In no time at all we reached another village. My sister stopped asking me why we were leaving home. She squeezed my hand every now and then and I hers.

Many times, I contemplated telling my sister why we were running away from home but I could not. I did not know where to begin. There was and still is no perfect place to begin; the real story would destroy her.

My mother preferred her numb. I preferred a sister. A laughing

sister, a talking sister, and a sister who looked into my eyes and cried and laughed. Imagine the reflections that suddenly appear when one stares into water and beats it. That is what happens to my sister. I want to tell her she has a mental disorder that makes it impossible for her to tell fiction from reality.

We could not see any lights. People had long gone to sleep. We had no idea where we were but we knew that we had reached another village. The moon had disappeared and the stars were now only dots in the sky. Morning was close, I thought, and I told my sister who nodded and smiled.

We had no idea what time it was but it had been a long time since we left home, and our feet hurt. We decided to sleep under a tree, to wake once the sun was up and walk again, to somewhere.

BIOGRAPHY

Lidudumalingani is a writer, filmmaker and photographer from the village of Zikhovane in the Transkei. He grew up herding cattle and moulding goats from clay, and later grew fond of words and images. He writes about art, culture, music and film for the ***Mail & Guardian*** *and* ***Africa Is A Country****, and has been published in the literary journals* ***Chimurenga Chronic*** *and* ***Prufrock****, and the second* ***Short.Sharp.Stories*** *collection* ***Adults Only*** *(writing as Dudumalingani Mqombothi). He currently lives in Cape Town.*

Of ***Memories We Lost*** *he says, 'I am fascinated by mental illnesses, and having seen my own extended relatives deal with it – a sort of ongoing journey – I was trying to find ways or invent ways that could help me write about how one family is dealing with it.'*

Follow Lidudumalingani on Twitter ***@dudumalingani****.*