

THE FALLEN BRANCH

— The story of —

Vetis

I don't remember much about my early childhood. In fact, I do not remember being a child at all. I have always been my own man, doing my own things. I also don't remember a place I could call home. You could call it home, but to me it was a community of people; men, women and children, all living in an open space next to the dumpsite. The older people spent most of their days there, drinking and smoking all sorts of things, arguing over nothing in particular and fighting over anything. They hardly left that place.

I hardly saw my mother during the day. She worked for several households, washing and ironing their clothes. When she came back from work, she went via the dumpsite to pick me up from there. I would be as dirty as the dumpsite itself. We toddlers spent most of our time there, smoking anything and begging for food and money or fighting. When my mother came to pick me up, she would shout from a distance, "*Heyi wena* Vetis, hurry up and don't waste my time. I have no time to waste here." Many times, I heard her scream at me but it never occurred to me that her screaming was in any way urgent. Her screaming never meant anything to me. She was forever screaming at me.

The journey to the tent would only start when she came close enough to grab me by the ear and lead the way. The whole way to the tent she would be swearing and cursing but

I never knew why. She was just a permanently angry person. She would never ask me how I had spent the day. Sometimes there really were some nasty things that had happened at the dumpsite that I would have wanted her to know, but there was never such a forum.

Every day I cursed the sun for setting. I preferred the company at the dumpsite than in our tent. Three of us shared the tent: my mother, my mother's boyfriend and me. The tent was a suffocating prison. It was a stuffy place with a more or less permanent stench of cigarettes and dagga smoke. The outside, littered with all sorts of smelly stuff, did not make things better. In retrospect, the terrible smells were much better than the foul language and indecency that went on in the tent. The constant fights and screaming contests between my mother and her boyfriend was more suffocating than the stench. Their noisy sex games were not helpful either.

This was our life in the tent. A hostile place of fighting, sex games, drinking and smoking. I don't know when I started smoking, but, I would have been around six years old. I was also at liberty to sniff my glue in the tent, I guess because it knocked me off into a deep sleep and gave the other two occupants of the tent a chance to do their thing without having to worry about me.

When I woke up in the mornings, my mother would already have left for work. Her boyfriend would be snoring and coughing like an old engine. I preferred him in that state than having him stare into my eyes with his bloodshot eyes and his foul breath hitting hard on my face as he barked orders at me. I never really grew to love him, nor cared for him; not that I cared for my mother either. My fear and hatred for him was fed by the way he brutalised my mother in their endless and senseless wars. His favourite sport was pinning her down to

their bed and punching her on the face until she said, “*Ngi-yabonga baba.*” (Thank you, sir.) Only then would he climb down, contented and coughing and wheezing his way to calmness.

My first day into freedom away from the tent was unplanned. I guess I was seven or eight years old. I had made a good collection of cash at the traffic circle. *Abelungu* (those who gave us money) had been very generous to me. I had collected R150. This was enough for a week’s supply of *impenga* (sniffing glue) and a few beers with friends and *aboCherry* (girls). The Man, a scrawny, hard-hearted man who had the whole dumpsite community under his iron grip, chopped his share from my earnings. He left R10 for me. The logic for this ratio was that R10 was all that *impenga* cost. If I was given more, I would use it to destroy myself and that I owed all my existence to him.

The Man monitored everybody’s earnings in my dumpsite group and determined how they were shared between him and the earner. Both the dumpsite and the intersection at the traffic lights were his turf. Entrance to this turf and exit from it was sanctioned by him. His ironclad grip on our lives was disarming. You felt both powerless and grateful to him at the same time.

I cried my heart out and proceeded to Mr. My Friend’s shop to buy *impenga*. He met me at the door grinning as usual. He threw his cigarette stub on the ground and ground it under his foot. He moved towards me, and gave me his usual firm hug and said, “Welcome my friend, I have your stuff for you. How many tins?” I was too angry to chat that day. I just raised up my pointed index finger to indicate that I needed one.

On my way back to the tent, I reflected on Mr. My Friend’s behaviour. Every time he met me at the door it appeared as

if it was a ritual to throw his cigarette down and crush it. It appeared to me that he was celebrating that one more tin bought was another chance for him to destroy my life beyond repair. I knew and he also knew that the *impenga* was killing me but none of us did anything about it. I was hooked on the stuff; he was hooked on his money. I was the loser, he was the winner, and hence he celebrated. This made me even angrier. I didn't care about my life; my mother didn't care about my life; the Man didn't care about my life and Mr. My Friend didn't care about my life. I resolved to take harder stuff. I didn't care whether it killed me because *kuyafana* (there is no difference).

When I got to the dumpsite, I was still so angry I didn't want to talk to *aboChomi* (friends). I crawled under the big bush, slumped onto my blanket and sniffed the whole tin without sharing with anybody. It knocked me out. I didn't go back to the tent. My mother did not come to pull me by the ear. *Abogata* (the metro police) raided the dumpsite bush that night and rounded up everybody. I guess I was too knocked up to be of any use to them. They left me behind.

I woke up the next day to a chilly mid-morning. My toes were ice-cold. The numbing effect of *impenga* had worn off. I made a fire and sat there for the greater part of the day, not interested in life. The dumpsite residents started trickling back after midday. The metro police's solution to the problem of *abomalunde* (homeless people) was simple. Now and again they would raid hotspots (spots where homeless people lived), force *abomalunde* into their Quantum vehicle and burn the shacks and everything inside. The evicted people would be detained at the metro detention centre and released in a day or two. We always came back to the same place and started all over, waiting for the next raid in a few months to come.