

*An* **UNTOLD ZULU** *Story*

*Eyes in*  
*the* **Night**

**NOMAVENDA**  
**MATHIANE**

'An expression of radical love and the battle, nay, triumph of memory and commitment to storytelling over mere celebration. Part Ode to the undying spirit of grandma okaMakhoba, and part travelogue to a romantic Zuluness that's gone forever... Hail a new genre: realist time travelling history.'

— **BONGANI MADONDO**

'From an old photograph, the gripping story of a remarkable woman and her times unfolds...'

— **NJABULO S. NDEBELE**

# Eyes in the Night

*An Untold Zulu Story*



Nomavenda Mathiane

  
BOOK**STORM**

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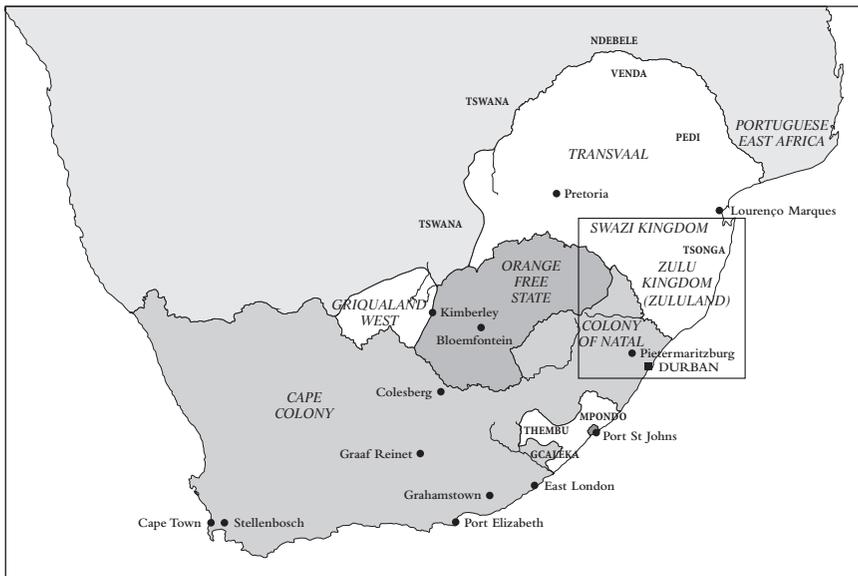
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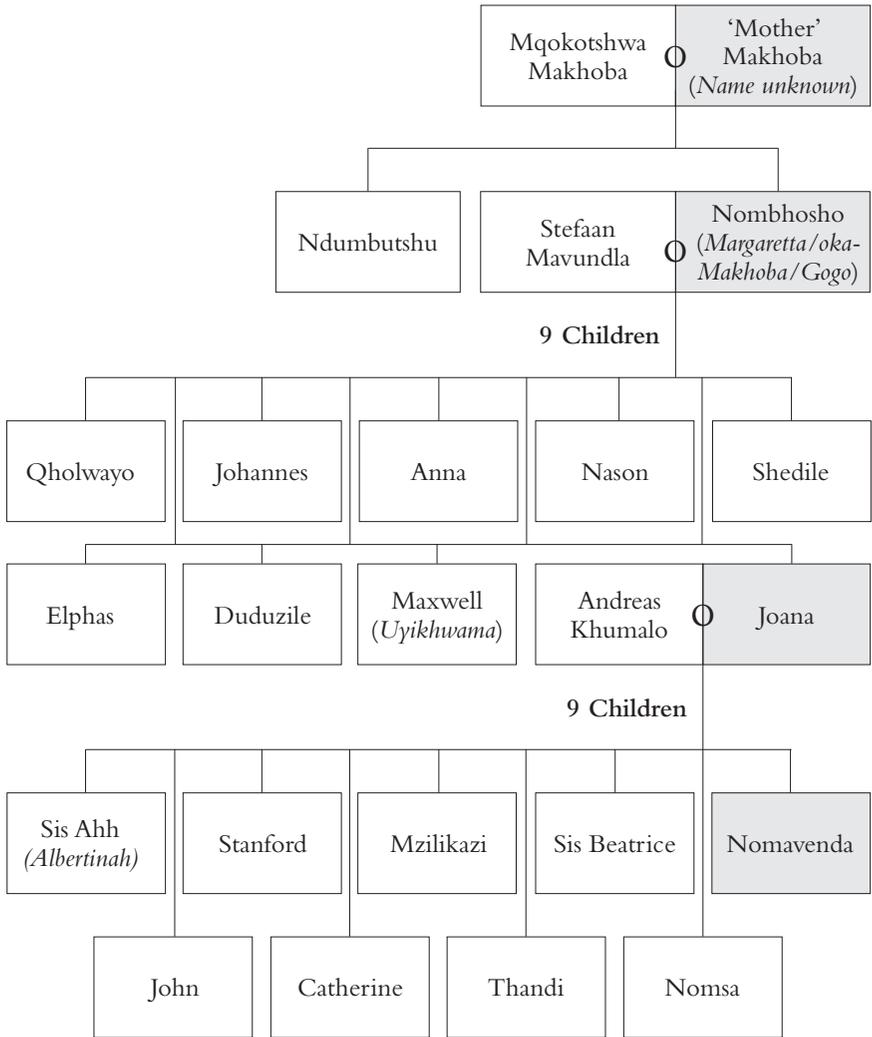
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*Map of southern Africa, circa 1879*



*Map of Zululand*



*Matrilineal Family Tree of the Makhoba Clan*

○ = Marriage

PART ONE



A Nation Besieged

I do not know in what year I was born but I remember that I was a young girl about to reach puberty when the war between the Zulus and the English broke out.

I mention my puberty status because in those days people's birth dates were not recorded. Their ages were determined either by the development landmarks of their bodies, by plagues, or by some historical milestone.

I begin my narrative by recalling what happened in 1879, the year in which I grew up faster than I could shout my name. That year was the one in which we experienced events and encounters that no one, particularly a child, should ever witness. It was also the year my people lost everything – their land and fields – and were reduced to being vagrants and beggars in the land of their birth.

I am the daughter of Mqokotshwa Makhoba, one of King Cetshwayo's generals of the iNgobamakhosi regiment, who was later elevated to the status of adviser to the king. Mqokotshwa named me Nombhoshu, which means bullet. He said I would come out of any situation fast and unscathed like a bullet, and he named his second and last daughter Ndumbutshu which he said was the manner in which a bullet exits the barrel of a gun.

Although I was a young girl when the war broke out I remember as if it was yesterday the political climate of the time as well as the social con-

ditions that engulfed us in Zululand. How can I forget the war between the English and the Zulus, and about King Cetshwayo?

At times when reading the *Ilanga lase Natal* I would get angry when we were told about hundreds of people who had been bombed in Italy and in England. What about our regiments who died by the thousands? Whoever cared to write about them? Whoever highlighted the plight of our nation? We were under siege the moment the strange-looking people set foot in Zululand.

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*For a moment, a picture of my granny flashed into my mind. I was about eighteen years old when she died. Although I saw her a few times when we visited her when my parents were on holiday, her picture remained etched in my mind. I have a vivid memory of the big-busted lady who seemed larger than life. The one aspect of her looks that springs to my mind whenever I think of her is how her pinafore dresses were often chafed and discoloured around her breasts due to excessive washing around that part of her body. She always looked ever so clean, as though she had just stepped out of a bath. Although she was not what one would describe as a beauty, her facial features were captivating. For a Zulu woman, she was fairly light in complexion with high cheekbones, a small nose, piercing yet kind eyes and thin lips. She could easily have passed for Khoisan.*

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My childhood home was in the Oqongweni village in the valley next to the Shiyane mountains. We lived a stone's throw from the now world-

famous Isandlwana mountain. From where we lived we could clearly see the strange-looking people who had pitched tents on the green slopes next to the mountain. There were plenty of unpalatable stories told about these strange people, whom King Shaka called abelumbi.

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*According to legend, King Shaka referred to white people as abelumbi – sorcerers – because he couldn't fathom how their artillery could harm and kill from a distance. However, over the years, the name abelumbi was bastardised to a point where whites are now referred to as abelungu – the good or the kind ones – a word whose origins have always baffled me because while I was growing up in the 1960s there were so many stories about cruelty meted out to Africans by abelungu, stories that made me wonder if these narratives were fables or legends.*

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The arrival of abelumbi on these shores gave rise to many stories. The worst rumour which was travelling fast, far and wide, which more than illustrated the treacherous ways of the foreigners, was the tale of the abduction of young Zulu women by these people. It was alleged that a group of white men on horseback had taken advantage of the absence of Zulu men who had been summoned to the king's palace at Ondini. The white men had wooed young women around the uMzinyathi area to work in their homes. They promised the women heaven on earth. The ones who consented to go with them were made to dispose of their isidwaba, the traditional hide skirt worn by Zulu women, and had to wear invaders'

apparel of unsightly, long flowing skirts. They also made the women shave their heads and remove the inhloko, the traditional Zulu women's head-gear, which they claimed provided a convenient habitat for lice.

When the men returned to their homes, they found their wives, lovers and sisters had gone to work for the white people. To the men who had been away meeting with the king and the nation's leaders and elders, trying to find a solution to the impasse created by the invaders, this exodus of the women was an affront, a betrayal of the nation. The men were so angry that they went after the women. When they found them they beat them to a pulp. Others were simply killed.

Soon the rumours of an impending war became a reality as wagons were seen criss-crossing the land and tents were set up sporadically in many parts of the country. We Zulu people watched in awe as animals such as horses and oxen pulled structures that seemed like little houses with men inside them. They were wagons. When not riding on the wagons or their horses, these strange-looking people could be seen in big peaked hats and red coats strutting up and down the land as if they owned it. To add pain to humiliation and uncertainty, the British Secretary for Native Affairs, Sir Theophilus Shepstone, whom the Zulu people called Somtseu, sent an ultimatum to King Cetshwayo instructing him to disband his regiments as well as pay a fine of five hundred cattle for failing to adhere to the terms put to him when he was crowned King of the Zulus.

When the king learned of Somtseu's demands, he fumed and swore that he would rather die than accede to them. He told his people to prepare for war.

By the end of winter a large part of the country was dotted with

tents, coaches and wagons, as well as horses belonging to the invaders. It was clear to everyone that the foreigners' intentions were to annihilate us and force us off our land. It was also clear that the enemy was prepared to go to any lengths to achieve this goal.

One day the king's spies spotted a new settlement that had sprung up not far from our village Oqongweni.

That was the last straw for King Cetshwayo who immediately gave orders that we should move because he was getting ready to strike at the invaders. He had tolerated enough humiliation from them, particularly from Somtseu who was treating him as his subject and dictating to him how to rule his people. The king swore he was going to show Somtseu and the rest of the foreigners what the Zulu people were made of.

There were other white people who were also involved in the fracas like Sir Bartle Frere, the British High Commissioner for Southern Africa, and Sir Henry Bulwer, the Governor of Natal, to mention a few, but Somtseu was the one who was in our faces. He was the one who interacted directly with the king and his messengers, the one who imposed fines on King Cetshwayo. The rest of the foreigners were in the background.

There is no doubt that Shepstone was the most hated white man in Zululand. The Zulu people did not understand how a foreigner could lord it over their nation. Nobody knew who had bestowed on him, foreigner that he was, the right to dictate terms of governance to the king and his people. It was not the colour of his skin that the Zulus objected to; we just could not understand why he was meddling in our affairs.

Somtseu was not the first white person to interact with the Zulu people. There had been, in the past, numerous white people who had lived

among the Zulus but none had displayed contempt for them in the way that Somtseu did. For instance, there was Henry Francis Fynn, a trader whom we called Findo. He had been trading in Zululand for years and had befriended King Shaka. The two men had a healthy relationship. Findo had learned the Zulu ways and spoke our language. Somtseu also spoke isiZulu and isiXhosa fluently, and was fully conversant with Zulu customs and traditions, yet he regarded the Zulu people with condescension. In response to his attitude, the Zulus saw him as an interloper.

I knew about Somtseu because my father who was then a member of the king's advisory team had, on behalf of the king, met Somtseu on numerous occasions, such as when he had to deliver fines in the form of cattle or elephant tusks as peace offerings or when Somtseu's emissaries delivered ultimatums to King Cetshwayo. My father was part of the delegation that received the British envoys.

The Zulu people were irked by Somtseu's discourteous omnipresence. We did not understand why he featured so prominently in our lives and why we were on the receiving end of his wrath. We could not comprehend why he was persecuting King Cetshwayo when the king had done him no wrong. If anything, it was Somtseu and his people who were the aggressors in our land.

One of the incidents for which Somtseu penalised the king for was the vengeful behaviour of some drunken Zulus who had assaulted two white men who were working on the road. The incident had occurred at the height of hostilities between the Zulus and the foreigners. The Zulu men had seen the white men in their part of the land working on the road and had confronted them. They wanted to know who had given them permission, as foreigners, to do whatever it was they were

doing. When there was no explanation forthcoming from the white men, partly because of the language barrier and partly because they did not deem it necessary to explain themselves to people they perceived as inferior, the Zulus were incensed by their arrogance and beat them up.

When Somtseu was informed of the incident, he was hopping mad and he immediately sent an envoy to King Cetshwayo, fining him five hundred cattle as compensation for the assault on the two white men.

Another matter which I was convinced was one of the main causes of the war between the Zulu people and the English was the Mehlokazulu debacle. Mehlokazulu was the son of Sihayo, one of King Cetshwayo's most trusted and fearless warriors and generals. Though diminutive in stature, Sihayo was revered and popular all over Zululand and is rumoured to have had thirty-eight wives. He lived a stone's throw from Isandlwana mountain. One of his wives, okaQwelebane left him to cohabit with a man who lived beyond the Zululand border, on the side of the Boers. Like his father, Mehlokazulu was brave and fearless. When he learned of his mother's adultery and betrayal of the Zulu cause by opting to go and live with a deserter, Mehlokazulu was livid. Without his father's knowledge or approval, he decided that he was going to kill his mother to avenge his father's humiliation.

The only person Mehlokazulu confided in was his father's second wife, who, when she learned of his intentions responded by saying: 'Tell me you are joking.'

'No, I'm not joking. I am going to smash her head with this assegai and scatter her brain all over the rocky mountain,' was Mehlokazulu's reply as he embarked on his deadly mission. He was accompanied by a group of friends who were as hotheaded as he was. However, the friends

didn't know that he was planning to kill his mother. They were under the impression that he intended killing his mother's lover.

The young warriors set off on their bloodthirsty journey across the border in a carefree manner, betraying no emotion about the nature of their mission. As they didn't want to be noticed or recognised by the villagers where okaQwelebane was now living, they casually picked their way amidst the low cliffs and dongas and arrived at the village just as the sun was setting. They selected a good vantage point behind the dongas of the establishment, where they could watch the activities taking place in and around the homestead where their prey was now living. They saw the boys herd the cattle back to the homesteads and milk the cows; they watched the girls return from the river carrying calabashes full of water while some were making fires on the floor hearth ready to prepare the evening meal.

The young warriors waited until the boys had concluded their daily chores and had locked the cattle in the pen before retiring into their respective huts. Surreptitiously, Mehlokazulu and his friends moved nearer the homestead. They hid among the bushes that were part of the hedge that surrounded the kraal and waited for okaQwelebane to make an appearance. They knew that she would at some stage have to respond to the call of nature. Indeed, when it became dark, they spotted her leaving the main hut and approaching the bushes in search of a place to relieve herself. As soon as she was done with her business, the men pounced on her and frogmarched her away from the homestead.

OkaQwelebane realised that she was being abducted by none other than her son. She knew how hard-hearted he was and that soon, as the isiZulu saying goes, 'the vultures would be hovering over her corpse'. She

began pleading for mercy, reminding her son that she was the woman who had brought him into the world and promising that she would go back home to her husband. But her lamentations and pleas fell on deaf ears. As soon as they were away from the village, Mehlokazulu grabbed her, wrung and broke her neck, dropped her lifeless body on the ground and crossed the border back home.

Somtseu must have rubbed his hands in glee when the news reached him because he now had a valid reason to attack King Cetshwayo, claiming the king had not kept his side of the bargain by not adhering to the terms of governance.

The terms stipulated by Somtseu were that the king should disband his regiments, abstain from the practice of sniffing out witches and stop the slaying of his subjects. Somtseu sent a delegation to King Cetshwayo, demanding Mehlokazulu's head on the proverbial platter. He fined the king five hundred cattle, but not just ordinary cattle. He demanded a certain breed of cattle – the Nyonikayiphumuli breed. This was a special type of cattle that was first bred by King Shaka and from that time onwards they were bred only by royalty. To this day they are still regarded by the Zulu people as a symbol of Zulu sovereignty. They are spotless white cattle which commoners are not allowed to breed. Somtseu also demanded that the king hand over Sihayo, Mehlokazulu and his conspirators to stand trial for okaQwelebane's murder. It didn't matter to Somtseu that the crime had been committed outside Cetshwayo's jurisdiction. Somtseu wanted Zululand, and Mehlokazulu had given him a good excuse to annihilate it. But the king was not about to betray his loyal subjects. He dug in his heels and flatly refused to hand over Mehlokazulu and Sihayo.

This stand-off was to result in the outbreak of the war that took the lives of thousands of Zulu people and hundreds of English soldiers. It displaced many families and was the precursor to the destruction of the Zulu nation.



These events took place not long after King Cetshwayo was crowned king of the Zulu people, an occasion which Somtseu not only attended, but one in which he officiated as representative of the British monarch, Queen Victoria, and placed a tinsel crown on King Cetshwayo's head; read him the governing rights which was a long list of dos and don'ts including a direct order to Cetshwayo to disband his regiments.

Somtseu's participation in the sacred ceremony was perceived by the Zulu people as interference of the worst kind. The nation was incensed by the meddling of a foreigner in such an important national event. They did not appreciate a foreigner, who was by all accounts their adversary, crowning their king and dictating the terms of governance. However, unbeknown to Somtseu, the Zulu people had already performed their own crowning ceremony so they simply shrugged off Somtseu's performance and dismissed it as the expected antics of an outsider.

This was not the first time that whites had interfered in Zulu sovereignty. A precedent had already been set by the Boers who had installed King Mpande, King Cetshwayo's father, as king of the Zulus although the circumstances regarding King Mpande's relationship with the Boers were different from those between King Cetshwayo and the English. King Mpande had strong ties with the Boers. At the height of the war

between King Dingane and the Boers, Prince Mpande had been whisked away across the border and had sought asylum with the Boers. Although this defection was seen by the Zulu people as an act of cowardice on the part of Prince Mpande, it was a political strategy. Mpande was one of King Shaka's brothers, the son of King Senzangakhona. Shaka and his brothers Dingane and Mhlangana did not have wives or offspring. Mpande, on the other hand, was the only prince who had wives and had sired children. As the war raged, it became prudent that in order to save the royal lineage, Prince Mpande be removed from the war zone because had he died at war it would have been the end of the Zulu monarchy. This defection did not sit well with King Dingane particularly because in his flight Mpande took an entire regiment with him, virtually leaving King Dingane in the lurch.

It therefore did not come as a surprise to the amaZulu when, at the end of the war, the Boers brought Mpande back to Zululand and crowned him king of the amaZulu. It was also 'payback time' for the Boers from the man they had protected against his brother. King Mpande compensated the Boers by granting them verdant land between Vryheid, Utrecht and Melmoth. Years later the area around Vryheid would become a National Party stronghold.

Is it any wonder that this is what the praise singer said about Mpande at his coronation:

*UMpande, UMsimude,  
owavela ngesiluba phakathi kwamaNgisi naMaqadasi.  
Mpande, one who appeared hidden between the English and the Boers.*

King Mpande became the longest ruler of the Zulu people, dying of old age in 1872. His son King Cetshwayo succeeded him after killing his rival half-brother Mbuyazi. Not long after King Cetshwayo ascended the throne more foreigners descended on Zululand. They pitched their tents in and around the Shiyane mountains and the uMzinyathi River. To us, it was no longer a case of 'if' we got attacked by the invaders; it was a matter of 'when' we got attacked. The herdboys were deployed to take the livestock into the mountains and the regiments assembled at KwaNodwengu, Cetshwayo's military base, and prepared for war.

The king ordered that children, women and the infirm must flee to the mountains taking with them only the bare necessities: sleeping mats and blankets as well as foodstuffs such as ground sorghum and maize and calabashes filled with fresh and sour milk. We left behind hectares and hectares of fields in which we had painstakingly toiled. We had been blessed with good rainfall that particular year and we were expecting good harvests. Already the maize looked appetising, wrapped as it was in green leaves topped with a lush beard, an indication that the cobs were almost ready to be harvested. Soon the king would have called the nation to undertake the pilgrimage to the sacred mountain to give thanks for the first fruits of the harvest. As the rain had fallen abundantly that year, the verdant hills and valleys of Zululand were overgrown with various kinds of vegetation.

The Zulu people refer to the month of December as uZibandlela, the covered pathways, because the rain falls amply during that time of the year and the grass grows quickly and wildly and covers the footpaths in the countryside. This was the time when the rivers overflowed, nurturing the indigenous vegetation growing along the river banks – the Izindoni

(water berry), a dark maroon sweet fruit, the amathunduluka, a succulent red sweet and sour grapelike fruit, the amahlala (monkey apples), a tennis-ball-sized fruit resembling an apple which has large slippery pips and a hard shell. Some creative people let this fruit dry, carefully opened it up to empty out its contents and then glued back the cut piece before artistically carving its exterior to create different ornamental designs. It was a time when girls enjoyed gathering wood from the forest as they got a chance to feast on the wild fruits. It was the season when snakes came out of hibernation and inhabited the trees searching for food. All of that was left behind when we fled into the mountains.



We left our homes at the beginning of January, one of the hottest months of the year, and we found a cave in the Shiyane mountains that served us as a fortress. The living conditions in this hideout were unbearable. There were about fifty people crowded into a space large enough to accommodate twenty at the most. We huddled together, cousins, aunts, grandmother, my mother and my little sister sharing this limited space with our neighbours. The only saving grace of the whole experience was that, apart from the absence of my father and uncles, the Makhoba clan was still together as a family. This togetherness was to sustain and boost our spirits and helped to maintain our sanity.

Sharing the small space with our neighbours was most uncomfortable. Even though we were members of the same community and knew one another relatively well, being crammed together in this tiny space for an indefinite period of time took a toll on everybody. There was

no room to manoeuvre and the lack of hygiene was a major problem. Because there were no ablution or toilet facilities, the stench in the cave was more than one could bear, particularly during the night.

These intolerable living conditions were being visited upon a people who owned large homesteads, where space had never been a problem. We came from villages where families had many huts for members of the clan. The lack of space which we experienced in the cave meant we had to sleep sitting in an upright position. Sometimes even that posture of sleeping with one's legs stretched out was impossible because there might be a sick person sleeping nearby who needed more space. It was a difficult time for people who came from homesteads where they even had huts for the hens to sleep in.

Although my immediate family was small – just father, mother, my little sister and me – we had several huts. There was a hut in which we did the cooking. This was where the calabashes of milk were stored and fresh mealies were roasted on an open fire. There was a hearth where my mother cooked the game hunted by my father. This room saw a never-ending string of people come and go. Relatives and friends dropped by to see Mother and socialise while she prepared meals for the family. It was also the room that had an ever-present stench of smoke. One didn't need to spend a great deal of time there to emerge with eyes itching, reeking of smoke from fire made of wood and dried cow dung, and added to that the smell of food.

We had a special hut for dining and entertaining, where we often shared a meal of sour milk and uphuthu. Mother prepared my father's meal and asked me to take it to him. I remember the first time she asked me to do this I was nervous, yet also thrilled. I was only knee high and

I wasn't sure if I would be able to carry the food from Mother to my father. For a moment I thought Mother was joking, that she would get up and take the food to Father herself. Then I realised she was serious about it. I took his udiwo, a small, specifically designed clay dish with an aperture covered with a small imbenge – a saucer-like contraption made out of grass that served as a lid on which was placed a wooden spoon for eating. I put the food in front of my father and curtsayed before going back to join my mother and sister who were sitting a little way away from him.

When I looked back at my father, he was smiling. With his kind approving eyes he said: 'Oh, you have grown up, girl, you can even make food for me. Thank you.'

I felt good and proud as though I had personally prepared the food for him. From that day onwards I was the one who served him his food. When he had finished eating, he would call me to remove the udiwo and every time, without fail, he would leave some food for me. Because I was not supposed to use my father's eating utensils, I would empty the food into my bowl and invite my sister to join me in having our father's leftovers.

Then there was the bedroom which stood alone, apart from the rest of the huts. There was a special hut for visitors, fully stocked with grass mats and blankets hanging on the wall. There was the important hut for storing food, where tons of dry mealies and sorghum were kept; where meat from a slaughtered beast was hung high up on the wooden beam that held the grass hut together so that the blood could drain from the carcass.

My uncles had even more huts because their families were larger. My

cousins, girls and boys, had their own huts where they slept and entertained their friends.

Now we were living on the mountain. To us children, life in the cave was fun as well as confusing. It was fun because we didn't have to perform tedious domestic chores such as fetching water from the river or collecting firewood from the forest. Without chores to perform, we idled day in and day out, eating the little food available, telling each other stories and sleeping. The confusing part of living on the mountain was that we did not understand why we had to leave our homes and lead this nomadic life. And nor did we understand why we were being hunted like animals.

The sleeping arrangements on the mountain were simple. The girls and the babies slept in one corner, the women in another corner and the old and infirm gathered in their own little nook. There were discussions about the war day and night. Some of the old people suffered from insomnia and talked right through the night.

It happened often that one would wake up in the middle of the night to the sounds of heated arguments among the war veterans who were sharing the cave with us. These were the old men who had been part of King Shaka's army as young boys, deployed to carry war paraphernalia and food supplies for the warriors. They had interacted with revered warriors who formed King Shaka's gallant regiments of amaPhela and Ombelebele. They had not only survived King Shaka's many battles and skirmishes, but had later fought in battles like Blood River, where thousands of Zulu warriors had died like flies at the hands of the Boers. These men had been the bricks of the Zulu nation and were the glue that had held the nation together. The wise, brave

old men talked about the good old days when King Shaka was in charge of the country and had instilled a sense of pride and bravery in his subjects. They were proud of their customs and traditions, and their heritage.

They argued among themselves about which regiment should have been deployed at what point and why, and they were often critical of King Cetshwayo's generals and their war strategies. They openly longed for the days when they were young boys, watching Shaka's regiments engaging in the renowned head and horns battle formation.

The old people in the cave reminisced at length about the days when the land was under Shaka's rule. They argued that although it was a time when the nation was embroiled in endless battles and numerous unwarranted deaths, it was also a time when people led a relatively bountiful life, when there was plenty to eat and to live on, when every household had cattle and goats and hectares of land to plough. They compared King Dingane's reign with that of King Shaka and agreed that the differences were glaring. While they acknowledged the hardships they had experienced during the reign of Shaka, they also confessed to the realisation that he had been a unique leader, endowed with remarkable intelligence and vision.

They recounted anecdotes to illustrate his qualities. Some of these stories are now legends, such as the one of a white trader who, when King Shaka complained of a headache, offered him a bottle of painkillers, and told him to take two. King Shaka, who was suspicious of *abelumbi*, gave the bottle of pills back to the trader and demanded that he should swallow all the pills to prove that they were effective. King Shaka was believed to be a visionary and examples were given to support their

narratives. One conversation often repeated was of King Shaka asking a white visitor how many kings there were in Europe. The man told him that there were many kings. King Shaka responded by advising the man to go back to Europe and kill all the monarchs so that he should rule over the white people in Europe and King Shaka would annihilate all the kings in Africa and the two would rule the world.

The old people conceded that they had initially viewed King Dingane, who succeeded King Shaka, as a liberator. His reign had been relatively easy-going – he was a king who loved the good life, song and dance – until he plunged the nation into a war with the Boers in an attempt to stop the strangers from settling in Zululand.

The old warriors shook their heads in dismay when talking about the aftermath of that war, which saw people abducted by the invaders and turned into slaves. Others willingly went to the Boers because they could not cope with life after having lost everything they owned.

The old warriors despised the weak people who had capitulated to the foreigners and had become white people's property. The concept of someone working for anyone other than the king was alien and repulsive to the veterans in the cave. As warriors they had been in many skirmishes with the neighbouring clans and had brought prisoners from these wars back to the king. The vanquished warriors were not killed unless they displayed tendencies of arrogance towards the victors. But once they had accepted their status of being defeated, and were willing to be part of the Zulu nation, they were treated like any other person who swore allegiance to the king. They led normal lives as heads of their families, dividing their time between their homesteads and the king's court. The women who had lost husbands in the war were taken on as

wives by the warriors. The transition from enemy to being part of the Zulu nation was made easy because the warring parties were from the Nguni clans; they spoke the same language and practised similar customs and traditions to the Zulu people.

The old people harboured fears for the future. Although we were living in the shadow of death, they did not fear dying; if anything, they expressed a longing for it. To them, death was a better option than a future under the invaders. They spoke fondly of how death would reunite them with their long-departed relatives and friends who were awaiting their arrival in the afterlife. To them, the future was so uncertain that whenever they broached the question of surviving the war, fear was visible in their eyes.

They were not the only ones who were worried about the future; we all were. It was obvious to everyone living on the mountain that life after the war would never be the same.

As the young and able-bodied men were locked in battle with the foreigners, the women and children, the old and the sick were wrestling with the question of what would happen to the nation once the war was over. We knew we could not live in the mountains and dongas for ever. One day, the war would be over and we would have to come down from the mountain. What kind of life would await us?

We also knew that if we won the war it would be only a matter of time before the invaders reorganised themselves and struck again. Hadn't we thought the war was over when so many of our people were killed by the Boers at the Ncome River? Did the outcome of that battle not result in the Boers taking a large part of our land and our cattle? Whether or not we won this war, the invaders had made it clear they

were fighting us in order to seize the rest of the land and turn us into their slaves. Whatever the outcome of the war, nothing was going to change the fact that we were a besieged nation.

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As we spent days and nights in the belly of the mountain warriors from the battle front would sometimes come to the cave to check on the members of their families. They updated us on the progress of the war. We got to know who had been killed as well as learned of the damage inflicted on the foe. Whichever way the battle was going, the young warriors were convinced that ultimately they would win the war. They were not discouraged by the fact that their archaic artillery was inflicting little damage on an enemy using modern and sophisticated armoury. They believed in King Cetshwayo who had instilled a pride of the Zulu prowess and the need to fight for their land. As in the time of King Shaka, his regiments engaged in the much-acclaimed horns and head battle formation.

We were still living in the caves when the news reached us that our regiments had ambushed the invaders. A battle was fought in the early hours of the morning at the foot of the mountain aptly called Isandlwana, which means the mountain that looks like a hut. Our regiments had annihilated the invaders to the point where the few who had survived had made no attempt to retaliate but had fled.

When the king learned of the victory at Isandlwana he slaughtered many cattle and the nation celebrated. However, the euphoria of the regiments' success was short lived because the warriors ignored the

king's instructions not to venture into the areas where the enemy had bivouacked. Driven by the adrenalin of success, the regiments gave chase to the enemy up to Rorke's Drift, previously a trading station built on a plateau not far from Isandlwana whose buildings had been transformed into war barracks to accommodate the soldiers, war paraphernalia and foodstuffs. It was also a makeshift hospital.

When our warriors got to Rorke's Drift, they were greeted by a volley of bullets and gunfire. Thousands were killed and from that day on the fortunes of the Zulu nation were to take a nosedive heralding the beginning of the destruction of the Zulu empire.

After the battle at Rorke's Drift the enemy began advancing towards where we were hiding. With the enemy having been sighted nearby, everyone had to vacate this part of the mountain.

One morning Father arrived at the cave and told us we were no longer safe where we were. He was moving us, his immediate family only, to another part of the mountain. He said this was a precautionary measure. He didn't want the Makhoba clan located in one place in case of an attack. He said my uncles would be coming for the rest of the family.

We were then separated from the rest of the group, from my aunts and cousins and grandmother. They were to find another hideout. Father later told me that as much as he would have loved to have taken his mother with us he could not because the person who was responsible for Grandmother's upkeep was the oldest member of the family and that was Makhoba Omkhulu. My father was the youngest of the lot.

We parted from members of our family and from some of our neighbours. They did not know where we were going and nor did we know

where they would be going to hide. With tears cascading down my cheeks, I kissed my aunts and cousins goodbye. The worst moment was when I had to bid farewell to my grandmother. The war had taken its toll on her. She had aged beyond her years and looked frail and weak from worry and lack of good food. Three of her sons were at the battlefields and now she was to part from us. We said our teary farewells and father led the way.

I walked away wondering if I would ever see my dear relatives again. Taking my sister's hand, I followed my parents. Occasionally I'd look back to catch a glimpse of the mountain housing the members of my family whom I had left behind. Gradually, as I looked back, the mountain seemed to fade away. And soon it had disappeared into the sunset.

We walked the whole day and arrived at the cave in the evening. Along the way we had dug up roots that we planned to have for supper but by the time we arrived at our destination we were too tired to eat anything. Once we had cleared the cave of dirt and made sure that it was habitable, we settled in for the night. For the first time in many weeks Father spent the night with us. But he was gone with the first ray of dawn. He had gone back to the king's palace at Ondini and we were once more left to fend for ourselves.

If living in our first hideout had been unbearable, living in the new cave was worse. We were alone, my mother, my little sister and I. Except for rare visits from my father, we were completely isolated from the world. We did not even know the name of the mountain where we were hiding, let alone what the area was called. We spent days wondering what was happening at the war front. Mother spent most of the time in silence and was emotionally absent. She seemed to be in a perpetually

pensive mood. At times I would hear her singing a tune which alluded to King Cetshwayo's persecution:

*Bayamqala okaNdaba,  
Yena uzithulele, akaqali muntu;  
Bayamqala okaNdaba.  
They are provoking the great one,  
Yet he is quiet and not retaliating;  
They are provoking the great one.*

She sang this melancholy song for hours, slowly rocking her torso backwards and forwards as she sang. Sometimes she would hum it. When she did that, I often saw tears streaming down her cheeks. Added to her meditative and seemingly absent state of mind, she also faced the ordeal of having to deal with the inquisitive mind of a ten-year-old. I wanted to know why we were forced to live in caves like animals. I had had enough of the rough life. I longed for my home and all the comforts it provided. I asked her numerous questions. She could not adequately explain to me why the foreigners were chasing and killing us. She could not tell me what wrong we had committed to be condemned to losing our homes and our possessions.

'My child,' she said, 'these are difficult times. We are living in the wilderness because of the invasion by strange people who want to eliminate the Zulu nation, but I can tell you they will not succeed. The king and our regiments will fight to the bitter end to protect us and our land. I assure you, we will triumph over this.'

Sometimes in the dead of night Mother talked to herself although she

was obviously addressing me. It was as though she was preparing me for the hard times that lay ahead. I would wake up to hear her dishing out advice to me and my sister.

‘One day you girls will be grown up and will become mothers. I want you to know that it is important that you behave well and show respect. You must respect your elders, your leaders, the earth where our food comes from and the animals that provide us with milk and meat. And, more importantly, you must respect who you are and your ancestors. Always remember you come from good and proud people.’

At such times she would also talk to me about the responsibilities of being a girl and tell me about the changes my body would undergo as I grew up.

‘I may not have a broom to swat the two pimples when they appear on your breast, but I promise you, I will use these leaves on your chest and I swear by Cetshwayo that they will disappear,’ she said. There was a strong belief among Zulu women that the development of breasts on teenagers could be delayed or halted by swatting the chest with a hand broom made of grass.

‘But Ma,’ I argued, ‘I also want to grow breasts. Some of my friends have them.’

We engaged in long discussions about what would happen to my body when I grew up. At times I would wake up at night to feel her hands tenderly scratching my head, checking to see if there were any lice in my hair because we hadn’t washed in months.

Sometimes we talked for a long time. I argued with her, telling her that she should stop thinking that we would one day leave the mountain. I was convinced that we were doomed to live there for ever. But she

thought differently. She believed that the king and the regiments would liberate us and we would return to our wonderful life in the valleys of the Shiyane mountains where the uMzinyathi River flowed incessantly.

On our journey to the mountain we had seen many villages that had been deserted. Some had been burnt down. We had come across corpses lying on the paths. They were the bodies of warriors sprawled on the ground with their spears next to them. Some lay with their eyes and mouths open, with flies hovering all over their bodies. In other cases, the vultures were already at work. We had also seen corpses of women and children. It was as if someone had been going about the valley discarding the dead at random, like throwing mealies at chickens. There was no pattern or order to the corpses lying along the paths. In the beginning when we encountered the dead bodies we chased the vultures away and buried the dead in shallow graves. But soon there was no time to conduct burials as the enemy was on our heels. There also came a time when we did not have the energy to chase away the vultures feeding on the dead or hovering on the horizon. We were weak and emaciated from lack of food. We were almost like corpses ourselves and I suspect the vultures were aware of our weak physical condition and were biding their time knowing we could drop dead any minute.

We were now living in this tiny cave. We didn't know where the rest of our family was and I missed my extended family and the happy days we had led at the large Makhoba homestead. I missed my uncles. My father was the youngest of three brothers. My oldest uncle, Makhoba Omkhulu, was the gentlest of the three. Although he was a brave warrior belonging to uFalaza regiment, he was more at home with his cattle and dogs. My second uncle, also a brave warrior, was part of the iNgobam-

akhosi regiment. He was a ladies' man with three wives who, between them, had given him eight children. My father was the bravest and the wisest of the three. He was one of the most respected indunas in the land and had been appointed to join the prestigious inner circle of advisers to the king, spending most of his time with him at Ondini.

I missed my cousins. The Makhoba family was large and close and we did everything together, from sharing meals and thatching huts to working in the fields. My cousins and I spent a great deal of time making grass mats and plaiting each other's hair. I missed the times when we all went to the river to draw water – it was the best time of the day. We would undress and bathe in the river. We loved frolicking in the water, well aware that there were some young men lying in wait for us behind the bushes. We pretended we were not aware of their presence. The sound of our laughter reverberated as we dived in and out of the river naked. The older girls would tease the young men by openly flaunting their naked bums and breasts as they dipped into the water. When the men could no longer stand the girls' coquettish behaviour, they threatened us with abduction. Those of us who were still under age were envious of the games played by the older girls. We couldn't wait to grow up and qualify to participate in them.

Sitting idly in the cave, I often thought about the life I had left behind. I longed for the days when I looked after the goats, chasing after them in the open veld. I had my favourites who would test my patience by wandering deep into the woods, making the task of looking after them even more arduous. I had a great time with these creatures who are among the most agreeable animals under the sun. Unlike the cows that sometimes get into scuffles and pierce each other with their horns, goats

have a gentle demeanour. All they need is to find fresh young succulent leaves to browse on and water to quench their thirst and they will happily gallop all over the place.

The mornings at our homestead were what I missed the most. This was a time of great activity as we got ready to milk the cows. The youngsters in charge of the calves were the first to rise and made sure that the calves were nowhere near the milking pen. Those of us tasked with the job of milking the cows would enter the kraal and fasten the heifers to be milked with leather strips over their heads and thongs to bind their hindlegs. The Makhoba family owned over sixty head of cattle. This number of cattle sharing one kraal made milking a time of jostling for position to do our work. Outside the kraal, the calves would hover around the entrance to the pen and bellow, demanding to suckle, while the heifers still waiting to be milked, paced about the kraal, itching to be relieved of the heavy weight in their udders. The cows that did not want to be milked made our task difficult. They kicked out with their bound hindlegs, sometimes hard enough to send both the can and the person milking flying.

As there was no boy in my family, my father decided to teach me how to milk. I was about eight years old when he first took me inside the kraal and showed me how to squat and hold the can firmly between my thighs and knees. At first I thought I would never get the hang of it. I remember the strange feeling I had the first time I touched the cows' udders, the sensation of handling the warm velvety skin of the teats made my skin crawl. But I soon became accustomed to the touch and began to enjoy pulling the warm hanging teats and to relish the soft sound made by the milk as it travelled from the udders to land in the

can. There was competition among the Makhoba family milking troupe which serviced and provided the clan with milk. Even though I was a girl among boys, I made sure that I filled my can to the brim as everyone else did. But we had to make sure that we did not milk the cows dry. We had to leave some milk for the calves. The family was never short of milk. There was so much of it that we often offered the surplus to some of our widowed or orphaned neighbours.

Away from the rest of the family, I missed my grandmother the most. I longed for the moments when I went to her hut to share her evening meal of sour milk and ground sorghum. For some unexplained reason, her calabash seemed to produce the best sour milk in the homestead, thicker and creamier than anyone else's. I missed snuggling next to her on cold nights and sharing her warm blankets, which were made of skins that Father tanned from the hides of the animals he brought in from his hunting trips. He took great pride in working on the animal skins and turning them into blankets. He'd skin the animal and dry the hide for days. When dry, he applied herbs and fat to it and with his bare hands he kneaded the mixture into the hide until the leather was tanned and soft. He then took a smooth stone and painstakingly ironed over the leather and there it was – a blanket!

We were scared and unprotected, alone in the cave. It was no consolation that we were not the only ones whose able-bodied men were at war. Even boys too young to fight were tasked with the chores of carrying medicine, food and war essentials for the regiments.

Since my father was one of the king's most trusted advisers he spent a great deal of time at the palace at Ondini where King Cetshwayo held court with the elders, the scouts and the spies. There were also a

few white people who served as advisers and interpreters to the king. Ondini was where the king met and entertained emissaries from foreign countries seeking to settle in Zululand and where he received European traders bringing him items such as knives and beads in exchange for land, cattle and ivory. Sometimes they brought large items such as beautifully carved chairs. The king also received European missionaries who were bent on converting the Zulu people to Christianity. Once King Cetshwayo questioned a missionary about the existence of God in relation to uMvelinqangi, the Creator whom the Zulu people worshipped and revered. The missionary told the king that the God he was introducing to the Zulu people was more powerful than all other gods. He described him as 'mkhulukhulu', *bigger than big*. The king shook his head and laughed and dismissed the missionary from his presence.

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One night, as we were getting ready to sleep, we heard movement outside the cave. The sound of whatever was moving about was not a hoofed animal. We remained dead quiet. We heard the tree trunk covering the entrance to our abode move and the big stone that was the door shifted. The first thing that came to my mind was that the enemy had discovered our hideout and they were going to kill us. Mother must have thought the same thing for with the speed of lightning she went for her spear and waited for the intruder. The blade tore at the darkness, glistening, as she lifted it in readiness to strike whoever was entering our sanctuary. My sister and I seized our assegais in preparation to strike the intruder or intruders. We had often practised this drill as we expected to

be attacked at any time. We did not know whether it was the enemy or perhaps one of our people who had been captured by the enemy and was now being used to spy. We were ready to strike whoever ventured into our sanctuary. We had the advantage because we knew the layout of the cave and we were accustomed to the darkness. Besides, the cave could only be accessed by one person at a time, so we were ready to receive whoever came in.

Evidently realising that we were ready to strike, we heard a voice: 'Hhayi bo, it's me, your father.'

Although we hadn't seen Father for many days, we immediately recognised his voice and put our weapons away. I was so happy to see him I wanted to rush to him but was constrained by the size of the cave. I had to be patient and wait for him to crawl to where we were sitting.

He was carrying his spear, a shield, an assegai and a rifle with a bayonet. He put these down and sat next to Mother. He looked tired. Although I was thrilled to have him with us, I was more interested in the rifle. I had heard so much about this weapon but I had never seen one before that night. I had been told that a mere touch could kill many people. I couldn't take my eyes off it nor could I resist the temptation to touch it. I extended my hand with the intention of doing so but Father must have read my mind because he got hold of my hand just when I was about to touch it.

'Don't touch that,' he said. 'It's not a toy.'

Embarrassed at being chided by my dad, I flinched and moved closer to the little space next to my sister, away from my parents. Father realised that I was upset and proffered his hand. I took it and he pulled me towards his chest and stroked my head and said: 'I don't want you to

NOMAVENDA MATHIANE

touch this weapon until I have taught you how to use it. It is powerful and dangerous. I promise you, I will teach you when the war over.’