

Dancing with Life

Today, as the beleaguered President is once again flying East, Mxolisi is also flying, but West – over a low wire fence and into a yard.

Dressed in green overalls, he lands nimbly on the other side, and races past the house, headed for the back, the soles of his sneakers flashing orange behind him. As on most afternoons, a steely sky tightly lids the township, as if it would suddenly lift, let out a puff of steam and the stink of decaying dreams into the beyond, then a shovel prod in to flip this life over into a fresh and purposeful side.

“Stop!” A policeman, mounted on a bike, shouts at him from the street in a harsh voice that has been highly trained to instil fear and, once, instant obedience. But today, the voice, like the country’s much-touted myriad economic turnaround programmes, fires another blank. Mxolisi is clambering over a tall brick wall behind the house – he disappears over it into another yard. The alarmed cluck of chickens from the other side greets his disappearance.

The policeman, unable to follow on his bike, races along the street to cut off Mxolisi on the other side of the row of houses.

Mxolisi appears from a gate into the street this side of the houses, walking slowly, and now dressed in black sports shorts and a white vest that reveals a sinewy body. He is whistling a Second Chimurenga song, whose lyrics he has never bothered himself with, as most disillusioned urban youngsters these days.

At 21, he has a small funny spade-like head that, uncannily, resembles that of a lizard, hence his nickname, Mpankwa, meaning lizard in Ndebele. His eyes are protruding and are always bloodshot from the *mбанje* he chain smokes – just like those of *ntikoloshis* from stories grandmothers scare unruly children with at night. An ex-university student whose laugh can make any person want to laugh too, Mxolisi tossed honesty over his shoulder a couple of years back, after that infamous election scam that perpetuated, as he often curses, ‘official looting’. Now he dances with life daily outside the township sports bar peddling *mбанje* and, with a shrewd squint in his right eye,

providing articulate overviews of the country's political scenario to other loafers, the majority of whose intellectual scope is limited to petty gossip, and just farting around.

Mxolisi had found the policeman behind Figa Sports Bar assaulting his best friend Juluka with fists and boots for drinking a scud in public, and, from a distance, had shouted in his most taunting voice, "*Wena!* Leave that man alone! Can't you see he is not a white farmer?"

"Ah!" the policeman had gasped in astonishment. Then he had picked up his bike lying on the ground, leapt on it, and, without much ceremony, the chase of the week had been officially launched.

Suddenly, the policeman races around the corner in front of Mxolisi, who whistles the Chimurenga song louder.

The policeman brakes to a stop in front of him.

"Did you see a thin fellow in green overalls?" the policeman asks, wiping sweat off his brow, one brown booted foot balancing on the ground, the other cocked on a pedal. He is younger than Mxolisi, but is fitter, and taller.

Mxolisi points up the street, his lips pursed in a whistle. The policeman races in the pointed direction, bent on national retribution, his neon police bib shining brightly in the sun.

A stray dog, as emaciated as drought prone Tsholotsho infants, leaps out of a yard and chases after the bicycle, barking fiercely. A few steps away, it turns back and disappears into another yard, satisfied that it has expressed its displeasure at whoever killed the country's economy and made food scarce from the township bins from which it scavenges.

Virginia watches the policeman cycling hard towards her, and the chasing dog turning away from him. Behind him, Mxolisi is walking in the opposite direction, making hard for the corner of the street, now and then darting looks over his shoulder.

Virginia hates Mxolisi. She also wishes him ill. Two weeks back, he had been intimate with her in the public toilet behind Figa Sports Bar,

and, afterwards, in the faeces smelling darkness, had given her a roll of money. She had charged him two hundred thousand dollars, because, she had hotly argued when he had tried to haggle, his pants around his knees – things were going up by a million per cent every minute in the country – just look at the cost of sending a child to school now! She had a daughter at primary school.

Back inside the dimly lit sports bar, standing in her favourite corner in front of a large mirror that enabled her, now and then, to turn her back to the room so the patrons could see her abundant posterior, her strongest marketing point, and she also their faces in the reflection, Virginia had counted Mxolisi's money, and discovered that it had all been counterfeit. When she had confronted him outside the sports bar where he peddled his *mбанje*, he had clicked his tongue at her, “Nx! If the state is daily printing money that does not buy anything, who are you to complain about my money? You can go and make a report to the police right now if you want – your *gorilla* was not even nice.”

She dare not report him. She knew she would be charged for soliciting. Just last Friday, she had come out of the nightclub at closing time, only to discover, to her shock, policemen ambushing all unaccompanied women at the door and bundling them into a waiting police van. They had all been carted to the police station, where she had spent an unpleasant night in a crowded cell, and in the morning was made to pay a fine for soiling the respected name of the country's newly introduced currency, the bearer cheque, by making men ejaculate inside her in order to fill her bra with them. To add to the insult, the bearer cheques even had the highly esteemed Reserve Bank Governor's signature on them!

When the policeman reaches her, she points over his shoulder back at Mxolisi, who is almost at the corner.

“That's him,” she whispers to the policeman. “He has taken off his overalls.” Her face is concealed by a floppy sun hat and large dark sunglasses. She has a good body, revealed by tight pink pants and a matching vest that leaves her belly button in the open. A small patch of curly dark hairs trails from below the navel into the pants.

Mxolisi, nearly at the street corner, darts another look over his shoulder. The policeman is bearing down on him, seeming to become larger and larger on his bike. Behind him, he can see that bitch Virginia standing watching him – he breaks into a run.

He turns the corner, his feet flying. Everything is now a blur, the houses, the people he passes.

“Mpankwa!” he hears a familiar voice call, but he has no time for it. He rounds another corner, darts into an open gate, past the house, and comes to a stone wall. He stops running, his shoulders drooping in disappointment. The wall has jagged pieces of broken bottle lining its top, imbedded into the concrete.

There is the thud of boots, and the policeman bursts into view.

A hard clap cracks into Mxolisi’s right cheek – he blocks a fist centring for his stomach.

“What’s happening here?” a shirtless man shouts in an angry voice from the corner of the house. “Please get out of my yard. I don’t want any dead bodies here.”

Mxolisi is now in handcuffs, and the policeman drags him around the house and out of the gate. A crowd has gathered outside, so many people, especially kids and women, and some still pouring from the surrounding houses, just like mice out of a burrow flooded with hot water.

“Leave Mpankwa alone,” somebody shouts. It is Juluka. “He is my friend, he has done nothing.” Juluka is holding an empty scud container.

“Yes, release him,” a woman also shouts.

More and more people appear running.

“The country is being raped by men with big stomachs and you are wasting time arresting people spending their honestly earned money,” a man, carrying pestles that he sells around the township, cries out. “This is your thank you to us for providing your salaries.”

The policeman and Mxolisi are now surrounded.

“Open the way please,” the policeman says. “Don’t start something you are not going to finish.”

“We are going to finish it,” the crowd roars back in defiance, and a puppy barks from its midst.

Suddenly, four other policemen, all mounted on bikes, cut into the crowd, and it withdraws.

“It doesn’t matter how many of you there are,” Juluka shouts from the safety of the back of the crowd, waving the scud container in the air. “We are not your wives. Go and fuck somebody else in your cells!”

One of the policemen throws his bicycle down and leaps for Juluka. He trips on a stone, and falls down in a cloud of dust. The crowd roars in laughter and catcalls. The policeman leaps up and races after Juluka, then suddenly stops and turns back, his hand on his belt. His eyes are on the ground, searching.

“What is it?” another policeman asks him.

“My handcuffs,” the first policeman replies in a low voice.

The four policemen, watched by the laughing crowd, search the ground, kicking over the soil, especially where the first policeman had fallen, but no handcuffs are to be found. They finally give up the search, and lead Mxolisi away.

“It’s me who showed the policeman that Gwababa’s son,” Virginia is telling Juluka as they sit on the stones under the shade of the thorn tree behind Figa Sports Bar. “My thing is not forged like his money, even big shots know that, and the money they give me Juluka...”

Juluka pulls on a joint, then pinches his nostrils closed, his lips and eyes also closed. He keeps the smoke in for a few seconds, then opens his eyes, releases his nostrils, and blows the smoke out in a steady stream through his mouth. He passes the joint to Virginia.

“It will never end,” Virginia says, smoking. “I don’t forget that easily. Nobody puts his stick into me for free and gets away with it.”

“But you enjoyed also,” Juluka says, his eyes on the curls under Virginia’s belly button.

“He is selling shit too,” Virginia says. She holds the joint up. “What is this?” She takes another pull. “Even guava leaves are better. Is he not ashamed of himself?”

“Where are the handcuffs?” Juluka asks.

Virginia pulls the front of her pants open, revealing the handcuffs sitting on her crotch over a pair of red knickers with a white heart on the front. She takes them out and covers herself again. “They are for sale,” she says. “Find a buyer *tshomi*. I need the money.”

“Who would want to buy handcuffs?” Juluka ponders. “Throw them away, they are as useless as our MP whom we only see driving past in a nice twin cab – how I wish I could just wash that car.”

“Go and clean your mother’s behind first.” She returns the handcuffs to their hiding place, and passes the joint to him. “I will keep them at my place, they are a donation from the state to poverty.”

“Arrest poverty,” says Juluka, his eyes dreamy. “Lock it in hand and foot cuffs, dump it into a cell and throw the keys into a very deep river.” His chest sounds like a burst drum with phlegm as he lets out a staccato bass laugh.

“*Wuwi!*” Virginia adds her loud soprano laugh, and passers-by turn to stare, some shaking their heads, for they can never understand how productive young people can spend their days loitering at a liquor outlet when so much needs to be done.

A handcuffed Mxolisi trots along a path in a bushy area of the township, headed for the police station. Behind him slowly cycles the policeman who had arrested him. The other four policemen had left them to go and prowl somewhere.

“Stop,” the policeman growls behind him.

Mxolisi stops and turns around. The policeman has dismounted from his bicycle and laid it on the ground.

A slap cracks into Mxolisi’s cheek.

“Repeat it,” the policeman says, and slaps him again on the same cheek. Tears spring into Mxolisi’s eyes. Another slap. “Repeat what you said, damn you!” the policeman shouts, his eyes on fire.

A lizard darts into the path from the undergrowth, stops, and cocks its head their way. It contemplates them for a brief moment, then darts across the path into the undergrowth, startled by the crack of another

slap on the human with a head similar to its own. He must have been one of us in a past age, it is thinking.

The policeman slaps Mxolisi twice more on both cheeks. “I feel pity for you,” he says. He takes out a key from his trouser pocket and unlocks Mxolisi’s handcuffs.

“Go!” he says, and boots him on the buttocks. Mxolisi flees into the wood away from the path, leaping over bushes, the policeman shouting behind him: “If I catch you again...”

“He is not a white farmer!” Mxolisi shouts back, now running hard. He falls into a gully that has sewer water flowing in it, scrambles up, and runs on, his clothes dripping wet, and finally disappears behind an outcrop of rocks.

The policeman, swearing in a low voice, takes out a crumpled cigarette pack from his trouser pocket. He shakes out a half smoked joint, lights it and has a smoke. A few minutes later, he is mounted and cycling away, scowling deeply.

“What is this?” MaNdlovu shouts at Mxolisi as soon as he enters the sitting room from the kitchen. He has used the back door. She is holding up a 2 kg sugar bag. Inside it are twists of *mbanje*. On the table in front of her sofa are stacks of money, and next to them are Mxolisi’s crumpled green overalls.

“Somebody wants petrol outside,” Mxolisi mutters to his mother. His clothes are wet, and flies are buzzing around him. He opens his bedroom door and disappears inside, leaving behind him the stink of raw sewage.

“One day I am going to kill this dog!” MaNdlovu shouts to an empty room, her nose wrinkled against the stink. She places the *mbanje* on the table, just as Ngulube comes in from the kitchen. He has a kitchen knife in one hand and a tomato in the other.

“Did you ask him about that money?” he asks MaNdlovu, wiping his sweaty brow with the back of the hand carrying the tomato.

“Just because he has grown a beard he thinks he owns this house,” MaNdlovu says. She is a huge woman with big hunched up shoulders

that make her look as if she is going to throw a punch at any time. Her head, like her son's, is also spade-like, but her eyes are not as big. "I do everything for him, but still, it is useless!" she rages. Her cheeks are blemished from a childhood skin disease.

"It's him who took that money I tell you, but you keep saying it's me." Ngulube is handsome looking, but in a weak way.

A car hoots sharply outside.

"Shut up and go and attend to that customer," MaNdlovu snaps at him, taking a stack of money from the table and beginning to count it. "And I don't want to hear anything about that money again. I try to help people, but..." She shrugs her shoulders, her lower lip curled down. "They will learn about life when I am no longer there for them."

"But honey, I am cooking." Ngulube wails.

"You now want to go back to your wife? Can't you see I am counting money?"

Without replying, Ngulube lays the knife and tomato on a side table and walks out of the front door.

A cell-phone crows from the table. MaNdlovu picks it up.

"Hallo?" she enquires.

"Inspector," a voice says into her ear. "This is Sergeant Nkomo at the station. A hot tip has just come in. Somebody is selling black-market petrol..."

"Enemies of the state," she promptly declares into the mouthpiece. "Wait for me. I am coming over right now – we are going to pick up the swine."

Ngulube is busy cutting a tomato into a pot of meat on the four plate stove. He stirs it with a tablespoon, then, finished, puts the lid on. A spicy smell fills the kitchen.

"Where is mother?" Mxolisi asks from the sitting room door. Ngulube turns and looks at him, wiping his hands on a tablecloth. Mxolisi is now dressed in clean clothes – jeans and a t-shirt, his face fresh from a bath.

"She has gone on duty, but she will be back soon." Ngulube does

not look at Mxolisi's face. Mxolisi goes to the refrigerator and takes a coke bottle from it.

"Why did you tell her I took that money?" Mxolisi demands, opening the coke with his teeth. "Don't think I didn't hear you. Is that what you came to sleep with mother here for?"

"What kind of a child are you?" Ngulube is bristling with anger. He is older than Mxolisi by twenty five years, but they are of the same height.

"Gives you status to be the boyfriend of an Inspector, doesn't it *chef?*"

"No wonder they chased you out of university. You have a very dirty mind."

"Ah, so says the wife deserter."

"I will hit you if you disrespect me."

"I will hit you if you dithrethpect me." Mxolisi echoes him with a lisp, his mouth twisted. "And I will phone the police station and make a report to the Inspector!" He drinks the coke halfway in one thirsty swig.

Ngulube is now very angry. Mxolisi sees his hand straying to the knife on the table, and throws a last punch, "Your *shamwari* has gone to *buy* more petrol for both of you to make more money out of, while your wife and children are queuing at Social Welfare for free *mealie meal*."

Mxolisi disappears from the kitchen door into the sitting room, still carrying the coke.

"Gecko!" Ngulube mutters to himself, and looks out of the kitchen window. Directly facing it is the ex-chicken coop, a low brick affair topped with wire mesh and roofed with asbestos. This is where the black market petrol is stashed. There had been one full twenty-litre container there, but now it is gone. He dashes out of the door into the back yard. The house is enclosed by a red brick wall. He looks in the chicken coop. The container is definitely no longer there. Five empty ones are lying outside the coop. He races around the house to the front gate, opens it and goes out. Mxolisi is walking up the street, one hand

in pocket, the other carrying the coke. Suddenly remembering the pot on the stove, Ngulube dashes back into the house. He is now frightened. What is MaNdlovu going to say when she comes back?

Mxolisi finds Juluka standing at the street corner. It is now twilight, the cloudless sky a blue-grey, just waiting for darkness and for God to flip on the stars and mankind their vices. A cool wind is blowing away the heat of the afternoon.

“Where is it?” he asks Juluka, taking a sip of coke.

“In the maize field next to the bus stop. You took long to come?” Juluka holds his hand out to Mxolisi, who gives him the nearly finished coke.

“Should I have taken a shorter time?”

“I heard you telling him through the kitchen window.” There is laughter in Juluka’s eyes. He finishes the coke, and hands back the empty bottle to Mxolisi. “Ta my buddy.”

“Did I tell him any lies?”

“Only the truth, and enough to stop him looking behind him out of the kitchen window. But Mxolisi, what about your mother?”

“If she wants to report the theft, let her go ahead. At least you and me will be together in the cells. Let’s go and look for a buyer.”

“Ngulube took your overalls from my father who saw you hide them in our bin when the policeman was chasing you. Did he give them back to you?” They are now walking in the direction of the bus stop.

“I don’t know what I should do about that squatter,” Mxolisi replies. “I don’t want him at home. His family needs him more than my mother. Tell me Juluka, how can an old woman like that like sex so much? And to make matters worse,” his voice lowers, “you know my father died from AIDS.”