

AT YOUR REQUIEM



BONGANI KONA



AT YOUR REQUIEM

WHERE DOES IT BEGIN, the story of how you came to lie here in your dark blue suit?

Everyone thought we were twins. Your mother dressed us in matching clothes. The only difference is mine were red and yours were blue. We had the same broad shoulders and we looked alike; down to our jaw lines and dark brown eyes. ‘No, we’re just cousins,’ you’d have to explain. Once, you said to Miss Saunders, the Sunday school teacher at Heathfield Christian Church, ‘He’s not my twin. Christopher’s mother is dead. Aunt Julia is *my* mother.’

I’m at your requiem, and your rebuttal – ‘Aunt Julia is *my* mother’ – burns through my mind. The story of what happened between us – you, Aunt Julia and me – at the house on St Patrick’s Road, stuck to everything in our lives like shattered glass. Now that you’re dead, I’m the only one left with all these unspeakable things. Broken bits of the past, jagged pieces biting into me.

I rewind time to conjure you back to life.

The paramedics open the doors of the ambulance and wheel you out on a stretcher, your body covered in a white sheet. They walk you back to the jacaranda tree where we found you; your feet a metre off the ground. They leave your body dangling in the restless wind and drive out of New Haven Drug & Alcohol Rehabilitation Centre. Tears dry from our eyes as we file back to our beds and our sobs and screams suck back into our bodies.

Your vertebra snaps back into position and life returns, flooding back into your arteries. You open your eyes and reach for the knot around your neck and untie it. You climb down and make your way to the blue house. You enter through the kitchen and place the nylon rope where you found it in the first place, in the garage, next to the pile of old magazines.

The hours pass and the purple, ochre and orange hues of daybreak darken into night. I loosen the grip of my arm around your neck. And the sound of my careless words – ‘You’ve always been a weak son-of-a-bitch, a mommy’s boy, Abraham! I don’t fucking care if you go and kill yourself’ – fade, like a fog scorched by the heat of the sun.

And there you stand, whole, restored.

I’m sitting at the Methodist Church in Green Market Square with your sponsor, Dirk, and the rest of the folks from New Haven. You’d been clean for thirteen months in the picture they have of you up there.

It's the one of you standing at the pier in Kalk Bay. The sky is clear and blue and seagulls fly overhead. That was four years ago.

Our faces still looked similar except for the scar above my left eye. Do you remember how that happened? We were seven that year and Miss Saunders had given me a prize, a set of watercolours and crayons, for reciting the beatitudes correctly. I still remember saying the words. 'Blessed are the pure of heart for they shall see God.'

At the end of the service Aunt Julia walked around with me, my hand nestled in hers, like a small bird. 'Look at what this clever son of mine did! Show them you prize, Christopher,' she said as we threaded through the congregation. You followed behind us, silent, a mistreated dog being yanked on a leash.

We drove back to the house on St Patrick's with me riding shotgun in the front of Aunt Julia's Mercedes. 'Abraham,' she said looking back, 'you should be more like Christopher instead of watching those silly cartoons the whole day.' You said nothing. Aunt Julia rubbed her hand on my thigh and let it linger, until its warmth started to burn. When we got home she kissed me on the lips before we went out back to play.

You picked up a sharp jagged stone from the ground and turned to me and said, 'I have an idea. Let's play a game we've never played before.'

'What kind of game?' I asked.

'You go stand over there.' You pointed to the mango tree overlooking the vegetable garden. It was early summer and the garden shone a bright green. 'I'll throw the stone like they do in American football. You catch it and then throw it back?'

There was something in the tone of your voice that I couldn't quite register.

'Stupid game,' I said, but you threw the stone anyway.

I remember vignettes of what happened after you give me the instructions. The jagged stone zigzagging towards me at a terrifying speed. Blood everywhere: on my face, on my hands, on my clothes. I let out a scream and Aunt Julia comes running like a rhinoceros, her heavy feet pounding the dry grass. I hear shouting, sobs, before everything goes blank.

I came back from Vincent Pallotti hospital a day or two later, with nine stitches and a bandage strapped over my head. We slept in the same room then, our beds almost nudging, because you were scared of

the dark. Sometimes I think that's all you ever wanted – someone to watch over you.

That evening, at around midnight, Aunt Julia came into our room.

'Christopher,' she said, 'come and sleep in mommy's bed.' The glare of the bulb stung my eyes but I could still make out Aunt Julia. The braided hair which ran down the length of her shoulders; her almond brown skin and her thin face, features sharply defined like those of a wooden chess queen.

'But ma –'

'Quiet, Abraham!' she said.

'– I want to come too.'

'I don't want to hear a sound from you.'

I suppose that's when it all began. Something inside you broke that night. And maybe I lost something too.

'Days like this remind me of what a terrible thing addiction is,' Dirk says in his sing-song preacher's voice. The church is half empty and none of our family is here.

When Aunt Julia passed we sold the house on St Patrick's and split the money. Nobody would have anything to do with us after that. Uncles we hadn't seen in years called to tell us we were selfish bastards; a pair of rich kids who looked down on everyone in the family just because we'd gone to white schools. 'You caused her heart attack!' 'If it wasn't for you...' We didn't listen to a word they said. We wanted to bury the past and everything that came with it.

One night Aunt Julia was naked when I got under the duvet. It was winter. I remember the percussion of raindrops splashing against the tiled roof. She held me close, tight, my head pinned against her breasts. I pushed her away, or tried to, but she held firm. She unbuttoned my pyjamas. I lay in there, limp, my eyes wide open. I felt her bony fingers, cold against my chest, circling lines around my ribcage. 'My beautiful boy,' she whispered, as she kissed my belly button. 'You're my little husband. Who's my little husband? You're my little husband.'

I think I cried, but I'm not sure.

'Don't you love me, Christopher?' she said. A hot steady stream of tears started from my eyes. 'Oh, I'm not good enough for you. Is that it, you don't think I'm pretty?'

Years later, another winter, when you and I were having one of those

spiteful fights of ours, you asked me, 'How do you think I feel knowing that my mother loved you more than me?'

'I got by on the programme by repeating the serenity prayer,' Dirk says, his eyes panning across the room. 'God grant me the serenity to accept the things I can't change and the courage to change the things I can and the wisdom to know the difference. I've been clean nine years and I can't tell you how many times I've said that prayer. Most of the time it works but there are days like this when it has no meaning.'

That summer, Aunt Julia kept summoning me to her room even after the scar above my eye had healed. Even now I can't find the words to truly speak of what happened and my memories are corroded with shame. But I recall how you retreated into yourself. You became quiet and sullen.

Do you remember when we were at St George's Grammar and you started crying in class? Ms Davies had to sit with you in the staff room until you dried your eyes and calmed down. She'd asked you to read your composition in front the whole class because she liked it. She was fond of you too, I guess, but not the way Aunt Julia liked me.

'Class, shh, shh, quiet please,' Ms Davies said. She was heavyset, bespectacled, with short ash-blond curls. 'For your homework I asked you to write about your family. Our Abraham has written the most wonderful story and I've asked him to share it with us this morning.'

Someone at the back – maybe it was me, I forget – muttered something and the rest of the class laughed. You must have been nervous. The way your legs shook, trembled, as you walked to the front.

'My family lives in a big house in Rosebank. There are three us: my mother, my father and me. My cousin Christopher lives with us because his mother died.'

'You liar!' I pushed back my chair, stood up. 'Your father went to start a new family. He doesn't want you, Abraham.' I hurled the words across the room: 'Your father doesn't want you!'

I remember the heavy silence which fell over the class. Even Ms Davies didn't know what to do. She looked at me and blinked. You tried to say something but the words remained folded under your tongue.

You never forgave me for that, did you? You found every excuse not to speak to me. I'd usurped your mother's love and you resented me for it. No, I think the word is hate. You hated me for it.

We fought with each other, day and night almost, like the terriers from number 15 across the road from us. I'd run to Aunt Julia, every time, because she always took my side. She would come charging down the stairs and before you could say a word she would stop you with her words. 'Why do you always have to be a problem?' Once she slapped you across the face. 'What's wrong with you?' she'd yell. 'I send you to expensive schools! Buy you nice clothes! What's the use? Tell me, what's the use of spending so much money on someone like you? You're just like your father.'

The beating and the screaming grew worse. I remember Aunt Julia in a frenzy – your father this, your father that – and then she would sink into a state of remorse. As if someone else, not her, had done what she'd done.

Even in his absence your father was every bit a part of our lives. Whatever happened between them in the past seeped into the present, and as we grew older you became a reminder of the man she hated, and maybe she loved too; loved and hated in equal measure. The tall, dark, childhood sweetheart who wrote her love letters, pages long. The same man who once cracked three of her ribs, and had affairs with two of her close friends.

'The first time I met Abraham...' Bandile says, his voice cracking. It strikes me that I've never seen him without his hat. He's hardly thirty but he's almost bald. He starts over. 'The first time I met Abraham he said living has never been easy. Like most of us who've been using for a long time, he was fragile. He had those eyes of someone who'd lost something. But he was kind. He once told me that when his mother passed on and there was no-one to water the garden, it hurt him to see it die. Pained him physically. So he nurtured it, watered the flowers and vegetables until everything sprung back to life. "Maybe that's all we need," he said, "a little looking after."'

Bandile's eyes dart this way and that, as he says this, until he fixes them on me. I squint and look away. Outside, the traders on the cobblestoned streets go about their business like it's any other day.

What else? We rarely spoke about what happened between us – between you, Aunt Julia and me – at the old house on St Patrick's. Your mother had turned us against each other by the time she died. We had finished school then, and were taking our first steps towards manhood, when her heart stopped.

We made a silent pact to stay out of each other's way after we got rid of the house. That didn't take much doing. You were off on your own, scoring and getting high, picking up odd jobs in sleepy towns up the West Coast. I stayed behind in Cape Town and tried to make something of my life. I got started on a business major but I used to get so drunk I'd lose track of the days. I wouldn't show up on campus for weeks on end. When I think back to that time I have this picture in my head, of me walking down Long Street at 4am or some crazy hour, melancholy in the amber glow of the street lights, making promises to get sober.

Do you remember when you'd been clean for six months and you came back to find me? I'd been on a bender, drinking for three days straight, and it was the first time in our adult lives that I'd seen your eyes so clear. We talked.

'I *wanted* your mother to love me,' I told you. I never understood what it did to me. That's why I drank. A part of me thinks I wanted to make myself ugly. You sought comfort in drugs. You said you liked how it made you feel. It was the only time you never felt ugly and unwanted.

'I can never love anyone, Abraham,' I said. 'That's why I'm like this.' I lit a cigarette and watched the blue flame envelop the tiny flat.

'Don't you get it, it wasn't your fault,' you said. 'She was sick. She was my mom. All that stuff that happened with her and my dad... It wasn't your fault.'

I threw a punch at you, staggered, and fell to the floor. You held me like you used to when we were kids.

'You can't go around hating yourself and everybody else.'

'Of all the people in the world why did it have to be me?'

'Stop feeling fucking sorry for yourself, Christopher. Get up and do something with your life. How do you think I feel? All those nights I watched you get up and go to her room?'

'What can a junkie teach me?' I said, pushing away from your embrace. 'Huh? You come in here acting like Jesus, all Hallelujah and forgiveness and everything, and dragging up the past. All I know is the bitch is dead. No more schools with fucking Latin mottos, no more talk about how beautiful I am. No more of that shit. I know that she was your mother but I'm fucking glad she's dead.'

You got your things and left.

For years I didn't see you, until we ran into each other at New Haven.

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'Christopher and I were born two months apart and everyone thought we were twins. We always wore matching outfits when we were younger. The only difference is mine were red and his were blue,' I say. 'This is my goodbye.'

I see the sadness of the faces looking back at me. But I can't tell them everything. Maybe the truth isn't always such a good thing. Maybe some things are better left unsaid. Look what happened when I told you the truth about how Aunt Julia died?

I was jealous of what you had when I came to New Haven. You had found peace of mind with all these folks around you. It's like back when we were kids after my mom died. I wanted your mother's attention. I wanted her to love me more than you.

I told you I'd gone to see her at the house on St Patrick's. 'I want money, Aunt Julia,' I demanded.

We were sitting in the kitchen. A glimmer of sunshine crept through the windows.

'You always want something, don't you, you're no good, like your father...' I wondered if she thought she was talking to you, Abraham. Mid-sentence, she slumped in her chair. She couldn't breathe. I knew she was sick, maybe dying, but I just sat there. I didn't call an ambulance. I watched her gasp. She clutched her chest with her hands, those same hands that always felt so cold against my bare skin. Our eyes met and I looked at her and I watched as she died.

'She was my mother, Christopher, you selfish fuck,' you said before you punched me in the face. I hit you back and you collapsed onto the wooden floor. I spat on you. 'You were a real mommy's boy, Abraham. I don't fucking care. Go! Go kill yourself.'

'She was my mother, Christopher, don't you get that?' you said. 'She was my mother.'

That was the last time I ever spoke to you.

'We had a difficult childhood, Abraham and I, and we weren't always on the best of terms,' I say, my voice splintering. 'But through all of it, I guess he was my brother. He is my brother.'

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Some wounds cut too deep to heal, Abraham. That promise, *that God will raise us to such a height that we may glimpse the men we aspire to be, and his grace, like the heat of the sun, will burn away the men we have become*, was all child's play.

I'm sitting by the jacaranda tree where the story of your life ends. I can't rewind time and bring you back. What happened between us – between you, Aunt Julia and me – at the house on St Patrick's Road, burned through our lives like mountain fire in a high wind. There's nothing left. Everything is ravaged.



BIOGRAPHY

Bongani Kona is a freelance journalist whose writing has appeared in Rolling Stone (South Africa), Mail & Guardian, Sunday Times, Cape Times, City Press and elsewhere. He is a contributing editor at Chimurenga, a pan-African publication of culture, art and politics. Born in Harare, Zimbabwe, in 1985, he is currently studying towards a master's in creative writing at the University of Cape Town.

Of At Your Requiem, he says, 'I wanted to explore the idea of childhood trauma and how that echoes into our adult lives. So instead of a literal journey, I wanted to chart the inner space of two young men who have lived through some kind of nightmare.'

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