

Possession

By Yolanda Faye Holden

Certain cultures believe that possession is a way of dying temporarily. As the imposing entity enters, the host vacates their body – the soul goes into oblivion, and the victim can remember nothing afterwards.

Sadness Masipa does not know how to tell her conservative parents that she is pregnant. She does not remember when she fell pregnant or how it happened. On her way home from school, walking the seven kilometre dirt road back to the village, she can envisage their response as she confesses her secret: her mother wails hysterically, collapses to the ground while clutching her head in her hands. Her father tackles her with his fists – cursing and calling her vicious names. He might very well chase her away like an unwanted dog and instruct her never to set foot in his house again.

Late at night, while the township's children were sitting wide-eyed around the fire, her Zulu grandmother used to tell stories about the impundulu. The feathers of this incredible bird, which looks like a large vulture or secretary bird, are sold to sorcerers and sangomas who make magical objects with them. Sometimes these birds take the form of a handsome youth with an enormous penis and have

intercourse with a woman, who will give birth to strange offspring. A woman who has a child by an impundulu is accused of witchcraft and ostracised.

That evening, when Sadness tells her parents that an impundulu has impregnated her, everything happens as she had expected. The scrawny teenager rubs zambuck ointment onto her bruises, packs her possessions in a plastic shopping bag, and heads to a friend's house.

Three weeks from the first day of her last menstrual period, the fertilised egg moves slowly along the fallopian tube towards the womb. Within her womb, one egg divides and separates to develop independently with two amnions. The embryos burrow into the womb lining. As the cells divide, some reach out like roots to the mother's blood supply. The inner cells become the brain and nervous system, the skin, ears and eyes. Another layer becomes the lungs and stomach, and a third layer becomes the heart, blood, muscles and bones. The nervous system develops when a groove forms in the top layer of the cells, which fold to make the hollow neural tubes. This becomes the brain and spinal cord. The heart also forms and a string of blood vessels connects it to the umbilical cord. Twelve weeks after conception, the foetuses are fully formed. The twins are growing. Determined to be born, they have no intention to evacuate the womb yet.

“Hey Sadness, are you really going to go through with this pregnancy?” her friend asks as they watch the South African football team, Bafana Bafana, lose against Nigeria.

“I don’t know what to do,” she panics. “Isn’t it too late for an abortion?”

“It is never too late for an abortion. You are homeless, jobless and husbandless. How will you take care of it?”

“I don’t even have money to pay for the procedure,” Sadness sniffs.

“Don’t, worry. My uncle knows someone who helps people in your situation terminate their pregnancies.”

Sadness is stunned, “It’s illegal!”

“Not when you have been raped.”

The heartbeat of an unborn child is very fast, about twice as fast as that of a normal adult. Mpho and Ntwa are shocked. Will their young mother really end their lives before they even begin? Although their eyelids are closed, they sense each other’s presence as only identical twins can - communicating telepathically. Afraid and in danger they hold hands and make an emergency pact to survive.

A week or so later, her friend prods her again, “Have you thought about the abortion?”

“I cannot bear the thought of ending my baby’s life. Maybe adoption would be a better option ... my teacher knows a wealthy suburban couple who wants to adopt a baby.”

“You might be right. At least rich parents will be able to give the child what you won’t be able to - a home, food, clothes and a good education.”

“Do you really think that anyone is able to love a child more than its mother?”

Mpho and Ntwa are surprised. “Adoption is a welcome alternative,” Ntwa suggests. “What about your cultural roots?” Mpho argues.

“I wouldn’t mind living in a double-storey urban mansion – having the best of everything.”

Mpho is disappointed in his brother, “What about mom?”

“She will have an opportunity to finish school and start a new life somewhere.”

“Somewhere? Over the mountain and under the poverty line, where dreams of abuse and incest really do come true? No, let’s consider other options, my brother.”

The twins are growing quickly. Their faces are beginning to look more human, their heads more in proportion and less top-heavy. Fine hair begins to grow. Eyebrows, eyelashes, finger and toenails become noticeable. Each baby develops his unique fingerprint.

The boys are mischievous. They quickly discover that they can eat whatever they fancy by causing their mother to develop a craving for certain foods. In such a poor household their choices are limited, but Mpho develops a taste for sweet potatoes and Ntwa for peanut butter, and they wake Sadness up in the early hours of the morning to scramble an egg or to boil porridge. Although they have only tasted ice cream once, the twins agree that is their favourite treat. Their fatigued mother is not at all impressed with their whims.

One evening after supper, a feeling of digestive discomfort overwhelms Sadness. The shifting movements feel awkward as she grabs hold of her belly.

“Is your baby moving around?”

Her face lights up, “Hey, my friend, this is a strange fluttering!”

Her friend is thrilled, “Do you know what this means? The baby can now respond to touch and sound. You should start talking to the little princess.”

Sadness is upset, “It’s a boy, not a girl!”

“Don’t be so defensive. I bet you it’s a girl.”

Sadness remains adamant. “I bet you your only jersey that my child will urinate standing up. It will be winter soon and I need something warm to wear.”

“You have a deal. Anyway, you will have to go to the clinic sometime soon.”

Ntwa is grumpy, “I do not like that woman! I am going to kick her in the head for suggesting an abortion when she puts her ear against our mother’s belly again.”

“She was trying to help,” Mpho reminds him. “She is also still a child.”

“She is a nosy know-it-all. She thinks she's some kind of soothsayer.”

“Don't be so hostile. Do you want to end up like our father?”

“Don't be silly, we don't have a father.”

“Oh, but we do. His DNA is in our genes, remains our inheritance. But we are not allowed to speak his name in the holy presence of the womb”.

After her visit to the clinic, Sadness is twice as terrified as before. “Twins!” She cannot believe her predicament – her child-rearing expenses are going to double. A part of her is also excited – twins are special. Before bedtime, as she relishes the warmth of her new jersey, she fidgets for her creative writing workbook. English was one of her favourite subjects and she had big plans to become a famous author. Now, she is compelled to give up her dreams and concentrate on raising the boys.

In the dimly lit shack, she fiddles for the matches. After lighting the paraffin lamp, she flops down onto her mattress and reads her story of creation to the unborn children:

In the beginning, there was only water and chaos. The Supreme Being, a hermaphrodite, decided to create order by splitting itself into two separate gods – a god of the sky and a god of the earth. Now, as then, the god of the sky gives light and rain, but also brings drought and storms. The god of the

earth nurtures humans and collects them again when they die. However, when the Creator divided, there were not yet any people.

The gods therefore shaped a giant python and instructed it to lay an egg. Into its womblike interior, seeds were planted. In the womb, the gestating seeds transformed into twins. When the brothers hatched from the cosmic egg, the gods taught them the basics of agriculture and hunting.

Mpho and Ntwa enjoy the story. They sleep peacefully and dream of unexplored continents, compassionate creatures and magnificent mansions.

The following Saturday, Sadness and her friend are invited to a house party. The highly pregnant teenager struggles to fit into her pants, “I’m not going to a bash dressed in a tent.”

Owing to her slender posture, nobody notices that she is pregnant. The simple residence throbs like a ventricle as pumping music fills every chamber. The smell of alcohol, mixed with nicotine, makes Sadness nauseous, but she contains herself. Conversations become a mere droning. She plans to escape, but it is too late. A few of her male classmates have already spotted her and her friends, and

beckon the beauties to join them. Stupidly, she tries to hide behind her friend, “I look like an elephant.”

“Don’t be ridiculous; see how the guys are checking us out. You have that pregnancy glow, Sister. Let’s use it to our advantage – if we’re lucky, we won’t have to pay for our drinks.”

“Fancy a beer?” One of their admirers asks - raising a bottle in the air.

“Let’s go,” Sadness nudges, “I am not supposed to drink alcohol,” but her friend ignores her plea.

“Come on, a few sips won’t kill you or the twins; it might actually help you to relax. You are stressed out of your mind.”

As Sadness succumbs to the pressure and takes a few sips. A bloke with arms like a boxer pulls her down onto his lap. She ejaculates a prayer to the heavens, “Save me – I am trapped in the talons of another impundulu.”

She is relieved when the music of the Afro-pop sensation, Malaika, fills the room.

“This is a sign of deliverance,” she sighs. In mythology, the Malaika are good spirits sent from heaven to help those in need. These African angels, which are created from pure light, cannot even think evil, let alone do it. They often sit on the right shoulders of humans and whisper in their ears what they should and should not do. She does not know where she receives the strength from, but Sadness manages to break free from the giant’s clutches and flees through the door.

Safely back at the shack, the twins are still jiving in her belly. They are the only ones who enjoyed the party. Mpho is slightly light-headed - the beer made him dizzy, but Ntwa is all fired up, "I'm going to get myself a mean sound system and a cellphone as soon as I am born".

"And where will you get the money from?" asks Mpho.

"I'll make a plan."

Mpho is temporarily stunned when he sees the expression on his brother's face.

Sadness is tossing and turning. It is 3 a.m. and her friend is not back yet. Inside her tummy, it seems as if the twins are skirmishing. These days, their sleeping and waking pattern is very different to hers. They obviously have no intention of resting. Maybe she should continue with her story; it might calm them down.

She finds it difficult to read in the faint light. To make matters worse, the torn pages of her workbook are stuck together clumsily with sellotape.

She had once left her creative work on the kitchen table when her father was visiting a tavern. When he returned, he was shoving her mother around as usual – insisting that she serves him chicken and porridge at two in the morning.

Sadness was already in bed, but nothing could stifle the sounds of his intoxicated outburst – not even the blanket that she wrapped around her head could muffle the ranting.

Then, for a few moments, everything became dead quiet. She feared for her mother's life and was afraid even to breathe. Her father then started to sneer and scold as he recited an essay she had written about her dreams and aspirations to become a teacher. He busted into her room and shoved the crumpled pieces of paper in her face. That night he broke her arm as he pulled her about like a rag doll, "Why am I cursed with a daughter? You are just like your worthless mother! Where will you find the money to study to become a teacher? I forbid you to go to school again. You belong at home – cooking, cleaning and having babies. I'll whack your liberal ideas out of your stubborn head!"

As she remembers, tears of desperation stream down her cheeks, but she manages to continue with her story for the twins:

Soon the elder twin became ambitious and planned his escape from the presence of the creator, as he wanted to proclaim his own kingdom.

However, since an empire without light is unthinkable, he stole the sun from the sky.

His younger brother, saddened at what had happened, told him that he would report him. As he turned around to tell the gods about the crime, the elder brother threw the ball of fire in his direction and he was burnt to ashes. Realising that he murdered his only brother, he fled with the moon instead.

The gods restored the sun in the heavens and raised the younger brother from the dead using the sacred drum to restart his heartbeat.

The elder brother escaped using a cord, which he threw down from heaven like a rope ladder. He dug his heels into the sand and found clay with which to mould figures like himself. As he was lazy, he soon grew tired and decided to take a break. He made beer and drank bowl after bowl. Not realising he was drunk, he returned to his task of fashioning the new beings, but because of his condition and the inadequate light, he created imperfect figures. One of his creatures was a monster that devoured humans.

Eventually, because of the creature's immense appetite, only a handful of humans were left in the world. They had gone into hiding when they saw the destruction caused.

Her friend only returns at six in the morning, her make-up smeared across her bruised face. Her dress is torn and bloodied. She cries bitterly as Sadness cradles her in her skinny arms.

Now, since the elder twin forgot to cut the cord, the resurrected brother came down from the sky to try to help the humans to defeat the monster. Armed with only a spear and a protective amulet, he fought bravely, but the monster swallowed him in a single gulp. Unharmd in the belly of the beast, he used his sharp spear to cut his way to freedom. As he tore apart the monster's entrails, thousands of human beings escaped with him.

In the meantime, the elder son, realising that he had lost the battle, was so disgusted with his brother's victory that he severed the cord that connected heaven and earth. Henceforth human beings would not be immortal, but would return to the clay from which they were formed. During their short lives, however, humans are always given a choice to decide which tribe they want to belong to.

During her visit to the clinic, the doctor suggests a caesarean section since Sadness is such a scraggy girl. As he cuts the umbilical cord, Mpho is born with lustrous wings and Ntwa with angry fists.

Ends.

Acknowledgements:

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London: Diamond Books