

Running\*

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I'm a runner. That's the role I've given myself. A sub-role, if you like. I run from the plenary room to the rooms for small groups, to prepare them. I run from these rooms to the office to fetch and deliver messages and requests. I take children from the playroom to their mothers and vice versa (there are three toddlers and one on the breast). I run to call for technical help, something we seem to need often. Even the electricity in this hotel has a mind of its own. I run from the conference venue to our makeshift office, my hotel room, when we need to replenish stock. Yesterday I ran all the way to a taxi, and we drove to the nearest chemist to get anti-allergy medication after a comrade reacted to no one knows what. The doctor said my running made a big difference.

As a team we call ourselves the AST – the 'administrative support team'. I was asked to join when a comrade fell sick. There are five of us. I feel privileged to be working with such women. Accomplished in their professions, steeped in the organisation's politics, respected, women of integrity. All of them much older than I am, in their forties and fifties. That's why I chose to do the running bit; they are not as quick on their feet as they are with their brains. I have learned so much in just a week of preparations.

This conference. Well, this conference is history in the making. As an AST, we are the mechanics. We are the oil, or the nuts and bolts of the train to liberation. We've been talking in the team about the potential historical significance of this conference. Who knows, maybe ten years from today South Africa will be free. MK, the people's army, will have struck a heavy blow to the apartheid regime, freeing the country. Freeing us all.

I suspect the leadership is hiding certain facts. Why have they started preparing a constitution? They know something we soldiers don't. Maybe freedom is closer than we can even imagine. What with all these delegations from South Africa arriving in Lusaka, holding secret meetings with our leadership and then returning home. We are on the brink of something, something significant. I can feel it.

That's the other reason I am so proud to be part of this conference. As a soldier you don't get to hear much. The camps are claustrophobic. Here in the Zambian capital, news flows. I doubt the leadership likes that.

I've become a civilian. I'm a bit conflicted by that, actually, because as a trained soldier of the people's army, I should be with the other soldiers, preparing for a military takeover. Besides, there are so few women soldiers. I love the action, the discipline, the precision, the myriad skills, the versatility. Philosophically speaking, everyone in this movement matters, everyone has a key role to play. But hey, for me, the underground army is it.

My running role at this conference is similar to my role as a soldier. But being a soldier at a women's conference is unique. I'm moving between the two pillars of

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our struggle, mass political mobilisation and the armed struggle. This conference brings in another dimension, the international mobilisation, and I am a part of it. When I think of it this way, my conflict fades away.

The women of the ANC have decided to revise the draft constitution in order to make it non-sexist. That's why we are all here, one hundred and twenty of us, and only fifteen men. Seeing all these women in the flesh, in one place, made my pores sing a love song for my country. The names on the registration forms are now bodies I can touch. When I heard them introduce themselves yesterday during the opening session, I was humbled. It was a pleasant surprise to hear where they all come from, the work they do for the ANC in all those countries. With such an ocean of experience we have a right to call ourselves the 'government in waiting'.

Yesterday went much better than I expected. I ran from morning till late in the evening, but I was very disappointed by the service we got from this hotel. They are riding on the wave of long-lost fame, but I can't deal with such inefficiency. The conference venue is far from the hotel's administrative office, so I found myself running up and down to get the support we need from them.

At the end of the day, the AST came together for evaluation and prepared a summary of the day's proceedings. We smoothed out some administrative glitches by meeting with hotel management. Nomazwi, our team leader, was so direct with them, I know today will be better.

At 7:00 a.m. sharp, we arrive. The biggest room, named after President Kenneth Kaunda, is the main meeting-room for the four days of this conference. For group work we have five smaller rooms named after Zambia's colonial masters, whose claims to 'discovery' I know not.

Nomazwi is clear: "We have to ensure that the curtains are on their hooks before we draw them open for day two. That's what working behind the scenes is about." We do our work with Nomazwi's guidance. Even with the improved service, I still run a few errands before we start. When the delegates walk through the door, we are ready at our table at the back of the plenary room. The conference starts promptly at 9:00 a.m.

Today's agenda is more stimulating than yesterday's. We are getting into the content details of non-sexism. The more interesting, practical things. Yesterday we focused on contextual issues, concepts I know well. I hope I'll be able to listen to some of today's sessions. I want to listen to Comrade Lungile from Washington. Her paper, "Making Town Planning Non-sexist: A Model for the New South Africa", promises to be educational. It's the most unusual thing to choose to talk about. I'm curious. She is the first woman town planner I know.

I'm excited as we walk out for tea. Comrade Lungi is the first speaker after the tea break. When we are all back in the plenary session and Comrade Mapule, the chairperson, introduces Comrade Lungi, my anticipation heightens.

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Someone taps me on the shoulder, indicating with his head I need to step outside. It's a man I know well by now, one of the hotel staff. I step out, closing the door as gently as he had opened it. Just outside the door is Comrade S'bu. He works in the Department of Information and Publicity.

"Comrade, I need to deliver an urgent message to all the conference delegates. Please tell the chairperson I need to interrupt." I notice the piece of paper in his hands. It's shaking. I look into his eyes and know that whatever it is, it's dead serious.

"Come, comrade." I usher him into the plenary room. I bend to tell Nomazwi what's happening and beckon S'bu to come with me. We walk next to each other down the middle of this plenary room to the stage where the two speakers and Comrade Mapule are sitting.

"The fourth section is on spatial concepts and processes. Here I assert that women's freedom is intricately interlinked with the physical spaces constructed around us."

Comrade Lungi flips the white cue card under the small pile in her left hand. I stare at her as I get closer to the stage. She has a black-and-white tailored suit made from kente fabric. An A-line skirt and a jacket. The white collar of her blouse reveals a slender neck, the colour of slightly toasted brown bread. As I get closer to the table, I conclude that she is beautiful. I suspect she is younger than me.

"In the fifth section, I propose options for creating safe spaces for women and for dealing with homelessness. To do this, I use examples mostly from the Scandinavian countries, where this has been achieved with varying degrees of success."

My heart beats faster, with a sense of agitation I don't understand. Walking next to Comrade S'bu is making me anxious. I wonder if Lungi has children.

"The sixth section looks at my proposal for the movement. As you can imagine, comrades, I have very strong feelings about this." She smiles as she says this. If she is disturbed by our approach, she is not showing it.

We step up the three stairs onto the stage. I whisper into Comrade Mapule's ear while Comrade S'bu stands right next to me. His left hand is now in his trouser pocket. His right hand still holds the piece of paper.

"In the last section I conclude with some crucial remarks, pointers really. Pointers I would encourage you all to take into consideration as this historic conference proceeds." Lungi looks at us, waits.

Comrade Mapule stands and addresses the delegates.

"Comrades, for those of you who have not met Comrade S'bu, he is from our Information and Publicity Department based here in Lusaka. Please pardon the interruption, he is bringing urgent news."

Comrade Mapule sits and Lungi follows suit. I squat at the end of the table. I've been squatting a lot during this conference, when it's my turn to carry the roving mike for the open discussion sessions.

Comrade S'bu approaches the podium, his right hand fisted in the air. "Amaaa-ndla!"

"Awethu," resounds in the large plenary room.

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“Comrades, I will not waste your time. I know you are discussing important issues of our movement. We decided it would be folly to delay the delivery of this news. The enemy has struck. Once again, the enemy struck.”

He pauses. An uncomfortable, long pause. He looks at the piece of paper in his hand and reads from it.

“This morning we received news from home. Comrade Reverend Vukile Dladla of the Methodist Church in Edendale, near Pietermaritzburg, in Natal, was gunned down this morning at about 7:00 a.m. He was in his car. He had just finished an early morning meeting with comrades in the church. He died in the seat of his car. Five bullets were found in his body. Three were lodged in his head.”

Silence. Then voices begin to murmur. How did they get the news so fast? Damn, these comrades are impressive! My head begins to spin.

“Comrades, once again we are reminded that the struggle continues. Comrade Reverend Vukile Dladla’s death should be an inspiration to us all. His death is not in vain. His death *cannot* be in vain. The blood that was spilled this morning should remind us that the enemy is not sleeping. Aaaaa-ndla!” Comrade S’bu steps aside.

The revolutions in my head gain speed. He is my relative.

*He is our relative, family.*

Mama’s voice echoes in the distance.

*He is the husband of my mother’s younger sister’s sister-in-law. I ask Mama what I should call him. Malume, she says.*

They made a mistake with his surname. It’s Mdladlane. It’s a mistake people make frequently because Dladla is a more common surname.

After a confused pause, Comrade Mapule speaks, silencing the murmuring delegates.

“Comrades, can we all stand for a moment of silence to honour the fallen comrade.” We all rise. A yawning silence engulfs the room.

They got the surname wrong. They got the surname wrong. I become conscious again only when I hear “Aaaaa-ndla!” and the response, “Awethu.”

The delegates sit.

“Comrades, is there anyone in this room who knows the fallen comrade? Would they please say a word or two about him.”

I feel a lump in my throat. It gets larger as my mind tries to guide me. “Talk, don’t talk.” “Talk.” “Don’t talk.” Another Kaunda silence. The veins in my head are beginning to throb.

Mapule continues, now facing Comrade S’bu: “On behalf of the conference delegates, we’d like to thank you, Comrade S’bu, for bringing us the news, sad though it is. I trust that I speak on behalf of everyone in this room today. We shall never surrender. We are all in here today taking up the spear that Comrade Reverend has left. This conference is a testimony to that fact. Amandla!” Comrade S’bu lifts his right fist, firm. Then he slowly steps off the stage. He walks out of the room, using a side door close to the stage.

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*Events unfold like a video in my head. I'm back in 1977, twelve years ago. Mama is doing her motherly duty. She gives me the number and address. She informs me it will be a good church to go to. That I should be well-behaved, visit the family, treat them as I would my own family. I must be helpful because they may need me. She reminds me they have younger children and that I should be a sister to them, just as I am with my siblings. I am nineteen years old, leaving home for the big city, Pietermaritzburg, to train as a teacher.*

"Comrade Mapule!" A voice, accompanied by a hand in the air, almost shouts from the back. The speaker does not wait for a response. She walks through the chairs in no time, delegates watching. I recognise her immediately. We spoke at length when she came to the registration desk. Her complexion matches black olives. She is based in Moscow, a medical doctor. I don't remember her name. The chairperson waits, clearly giving her permission to speak. She stands in front, without getting onto the stage, speaks loudly without the microphone.

"Comrades, I am thoroughly disturbed by this news. I don't know Reverend Dladla, but as someone coming from Natal, the absence of anyone in this room who knows him is a clear demonstration of our movement's weaknesses."

By now the silence pounds, I'm aware of its rhythm.

Images continue to unfold.

*I called him Malume, just as Mama suggested. He started by making time when we could be alone. He would drive me to the hostel after I'd had supper at their home. He would insist I didn't take the taxi. Auntie would agree. On some days I cooked supper, as Auntie did not enjoy spending prolonged periods in the kitchen. I was doing as Mama had instructed. I liked the children. I helped them with their homework. They liked me. They called me Sisi.*

"The movement is failing the Zulus among us, comrades. People are dying in Natal. Our people. What has the movement done, so far, huh? Can anyone here and now say what the movement has done about the special case in Natal?"

*Malume always had a chocolate bar. He would let me step out of his car, then take a bar from his cubby-hole and say something like, "Thank you. Your aunt's health is going down and down. She really appreciates your coming over to cook for us." I would take the bar, thank him and disappear into the hostel. I didn't understand Auntie's health problem. She seemed fine to me. Secretly I thought she was just lazy, the complaining type, a hypochondriac, really.*

I still wish to correct the small detail. His name is Reverend Mdladlane. Such a detail is important. I cannot find my voice. It's too late, anyway. The mood in the plenary room has changed. I should have spoken at that moment when I was invited to speak. I decide to let it go.

"This is a special case that deserves the movement's attention. I cannot sit here and watch us observe a moment of silence, and then continue as if nothing happened." Comrade Moscow finishes talking and walks slowly back to her seat.

The room begins to vibrate now, voices coming from all corners.

"I support the comrade that just spoke."

Heads turn to where the half-shouting voice comes from. Someone from the centre of the room is speaking right where she is seated. Then everyone begins to talk at the same time.

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Someone from the back, close to my team's table, starts shouting. Her voice carries over every other voice. I don't recognise her face at all.

"Comrades, I'm based in Angola. As comrades from Natal we've been raising this issue with our commanders and commissars in the camps. We are soldiers, comrades. We want to be deployed back home to face the enemy. Our own people have now become our enemy. The state has turned them against us. We are soldiers. We *can* face Inkatha. What do our commanders and commissars say? 'Not yet, comrades. Comrades, that's not a good tactic. Comrades, our tactics need to match our strategy. Comrades, this is a very delicate matter. Comrades, we have to wait for...?'"

"Order! Order, comrades!" Mapule speaks through the mike with a vehemence I never suspected she possessed. It dawns on me that this is why she has the job of chair.

The speed with which the actions unfold make my head feel bigger.

*One day, about six months down the line, as he drops me off, he thanks me for having been helpful while Auntie has been so sick. He says he wants to thank me properly by doing something special.*

*Auntie has been in hospital for a week. For the first time I believe she is really ill. I have done the best I can to make her and the children comfortable. My schoolwork has suffered, though. I have been spending far too much time away from the hostel.*

*I tell him it was nothing. Auntie is like Mama to me. I did exactly what I would have done with Ma.*

It takes time before the Kaunda room responds to the plea for order.

Mapule waits for silence to settle before she speaks.

"I know this is hard for us all, comrades. I may not be from Natal but I know the pain the comrades must be feeling..."

"It's time for action. Now!", a voice bellows from the left side of the room. It's a male comrade.

Mapule interjects, "Comrade, order! You have observer status during this conference."

"As I was saying, comrades," Mapule starts again, "The issue of escalating violence in Natal is undeniably critical. However, this conference is focused on something else. Something I know is close to all our hearts, a non-sexist constitution, a route to women's liberation."

*I'm already out of the car when he tells me about his idea. He asks if I've ever been to the Lion Park. I shake my head. He wants to take me there, on a Saturday when I don't have to worry about school. How generous, I think. Two of my friends have just been there, thanks to their boyfriends. They went there as a group, a foursome, for a picnic. They could not stop talking about the fun they had.*

The doctor from Moscow stands to speak without permission from Mapule. "Therein lies the problem, comrades. Are women not dying in the state-sponsored, Inkatha-executed slaughter in Natal as we speak? Are women not victims of the state's violent machinery? Are women not dying, comrades? If we are here to dis-



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cuss women's liberation, I say the current crisis in Natal deserves urgent attention from us. Us, women at this very conference."

I like the way she speaks. I agree with her. It seems that most of the delegates feel as I do. Many are nodding and making agreeing sounds.

"Amaaa-ndla!", a voice shouts from the front row.

"Awethu!", the Kaunda room reverberates.

Comrade Mapule takes the mike in her hand and speaks again.

"Comrades, this is a plea. Such events are meant to destabilise us. The enemy knows that such news will distract our focus. It's an old trick. Do something to derail the energies of the forces that are against you, and you win. We cannot allow that to happen."

Silence descends again.

*On the Saturday we agreed on, Malume arrives alone at the hostel to pick me up. I ask about the kids. He says it will just be the two of us. My treat. It's his expression of gratitude.*

*There's something in the way he says that that makes me feel ill at ease.*

*My friends are waving me goodbye from the stairs in front of the parking lot. They wish me a groovy time, and I relax.*

*Lion Park, here I come.*

*We take off.*

Mapule continues, "I have two suggestions. First and very important, let's remind ourselves that in this movement, we are one. There are no Zulus, Xhosas, Sothos, nothing. Dividing us along tribal lines was also a strategy for the Boers. Let's remember that as we move forward, comrades. This is not a theoretical suggestion. Thinking differently is an active process. My second suggestion is predicated on this mind shift. Secondly, I'd propose that we put the Natal issue..."

"It's a crisis, comrades. A crisis."

I know her. She works in the Youth League offices. Very tall for a woman, with long braids that give her face a look of someone older. Names are hard to remember today, with so many faces to work with. Her loud voice quivers.

"Unless we start thinking about it that way, we will not give it the attention it deserves. We need a strategy that responds adequately to this crisis. Comrade Reverend's death is meant to remind us of that. It is not a coincidence."

"Order, comrade."

Mapule starts again.

"I suggest we add the Natal crisis to our agenda. This will mean extending the time. We already have a full agenda. We cannot cut it. So, comrades, we'll need to sacrifice. Stay on till late tonight. Let's plan to break for supper as stated on the agenda, take just one hour, and get back at 8:00 p.m. sharp to focus on the Natal crisis."

"Elethu! I second Comrade Chair. Amaaa-ndla!", Doctor Moscow shouts.

The way she carries herself in her black conference T-shirt and black pants makes her pronouncements more believable. Maybe it's her sturdy body. Maybe it's the doctor in her. She has a presence, one that says "take me seriously".

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“Awethu!”

I start to feel pins and needles in my legs. I rise from the squatting position I’ve been in, walk down the stage back to our admin table. Now I feel alone as I walk down the middle of the room, surrounded by all the delegates. By the time I reach the table and sit, the room is silent again.

*The scenery stretches ahead as we drive. The road between Pietermaritzburg and Durban has hillocks that rise and fall for kilometers and kilometers on end. I am half-excited. Malume speaks a lot. He does not give me time to say much. He is talking about the family, then skips to his church work, then back to the family and the community he works with. Now and again he turns to look at me as if to see if I understand him. My eyes are fixed on the hillocks.*

“I also second Comrade Mapule.”

It’s Nomazwi, our team leader. She stood up without me noticing. She is now standing right at the centre, in the aisle next to our table. Heads turn to face her. She would pass as a hospital matron, a kind and sensible one. Yesterday she told me she is a social scientist, teaches at a university in Namibia. Her Afrikaans sounds like that of the Boers back home. During our AST meetings, she slips in and out of it.

“Mapule is making a good point, comrades. I suggest we do as she suggests. That way we stay focused.”

She steps back to her seat.

Someone shouts, “Amaaa-ndla!”

“Awethu!”

“Thank you comrades, we will now proceed. Comrade Lungi, back to you.”

*I notice the sign to the Lion Park and begin to look forward to the picnic. He turns into the park, pays at the gate and begins the slow drive into the enclosed wilderness.*

When Lungi speaks again, I look up and pay attention. I realise that her voice has a husky ring to it that makes you want to listen. Even from the back of the room she looks distinct, the black and white kente cloth adding a layer of elegance to her frame.

“Thank you, Comrade Mapule. In the interest of time, comrades, I propose that I skip the first ... hmm ... let me see. In the first section I was going to give you a broad, very broad brushstrokes really, on the history of town planning worldwide, but zooming in on philosophies and theories of planning. Ok, I’ll skip that section. My paper is in your files...”

The Kaunda room begins to move. Delegates feel around for their files.

*I am surprised the transformation is so rapid this close to the highway. The gravel road forces the car to slow down, even slower than the recommended speed. It’s very dry. Trees look unhealthy, starved and sparse. There isn’t much grass. I ask about the lions.*

*He turns, puts his left hand on my thigh, stares into my face, slowing the car down further. His left hand moves to the inner side of my thigh.*

*I freeze.*

“Read that when you have time. I’ll also skip the second section, but suggest that you read that thoroughly because I delve into crucial issues: heritage, values,



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African values and design as they relate to town planning. That section gives you the context that will be useful when we look at liberation of blacks and women.”

*He tells me that the lions are in their own enclosure, at the other end. That's where we will enjoy our picnic. The picnic spot is right in front of the lions.*

*The car stops. I look around, suspecting there's some wildlife to admire.*

*Then everything happens so confusingly, so unexpectedly swiftly, so violently.*

*Reverend Malume is all over me, his hands, his face. He is kissing me, breathing heavily, his hand is between my thighs, groping.*

“The third section is on governance. I'll also skip that. It's an easy read. Hmm ... I'll start my detailed presentation with the fourth section, on spatial concepts. As I mentioned earlier when I outlined my presentation, I believe strongly that women's freedom cannot be separated from apparently benign issues like physical space.”

*It feels as if the whole car is rocking as he manages to hurl me onto the back seat of the car. I don't know how and when he lowered the back of the seat. I see him, his changed face, as he keeps looking fiercer and fiercer.*

*His body is heavy on mine. He keeps lifting it off as he instructs me to undress while he unzips his trousers.*

*I cannot hear everything he says between his groans. All I can focus on is how to get from under his body and out of the car.*

*My left hand has found the door handle. I pray the car is not locked.*

“So, comrades, I want to start this section by doing a short exercise. I hope the exercise will also get those of us whose eyes are closing to wake up.”

Some delegates laugh. Lungi smiles.

“I need you to sit in groups of five. Let's move quickly into groups, then I will tell you what to do next.”

*I see his penis, black and rod-like, spearing through.*

*I panic.*

*He moves off me. I see he needs room to undress properly.*

*I use this moment to pull the handle down. The door flies open.*

*With all my might, I push him away, wriggle, roll and throw myself onto the gravel. I cannot believe I am out of the car.*

*I get up and run. I run into the wilderness.*

*I stay on the road. I pray for another car to appear.*

*When I turn back, there is a car. His.*

“Are you in dreamland, comrade Zodwa?”, Nomazwi pokes my arm with her forefinger and a smile. “We don't have to move, there's five of us.” My team is looking at me. The whole room is abuzz as delegates rearrange themselves into groups.

I can't do this. I just know I cannot do this.

“Comrades please, you have to excuse me. I have to, I have to run, I mean, I have to go to the toilet.”

I don't wait to hear what they have to say. I stand up, push the door open and run out and away, to my room.

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*I run faster and faster as his car gets closer. The plan in my head is clear. I will run until there's another car in sight. The wild animals can do as they please. I want to see him and his Christian conscience watch me getting eaten up.*

*I run.*

I run.

I run around buildings, not through their corridors. When I arrive at my block, I take the stairs instead of the lift. I take some of them two at a time. I hold firmly onto the rail with each step. I stop only to catch my breath. I reach the fifth floor and turn left. My room is the second room after the stairs. I am grateful I volunteered to have it double up as an office. It seemed logical, for a runner. I share it with boxes, files, books, T-shirts, stationery. Everything the AST needed stored for the conference.

*I look back. I notice another car approaching. My plan will work. The road is too narrow for cars to overtake. When the other car is right behind him, I stop running. He pulls up next to me.*

*"Get in the car. Have you lost your mind, Thixo mntwanandini!"*

*Panting, I open the back door and get in. He drives on without another word. I look back.*

*The car behind us follows. There are three passengers.*

*He picks up speed, far more than the allowed maximum.*

I sit on my bed.

I stare at the conference paraphernalia. Then, I begin to sob.

*By the time we drive past the lions' enclosure, swirls of dust follow us. I can't see anything behind us. He drives through the main gate. We reach the highway. We face Pietermaritzburg again. I sigh.*

I have an irrepressible urge to tidy up, rearrange things into piles and rows.

I begin with the T-shirts. I re-fold. I re-pack.

I cannot stop crying, but things have to be in order before I decide what to do next.