

II

My Name Is...

One tick. 38 messages and one tick for each. My messages weren't going through. Her phone was still on voicemail.

I knew she hadn't blocked me, I tried calling her from work. I used my office number and a colleague's phone but still got "... the number you have dialled, is not available". How could she send me that text and then switch off her phone, was this all a game to her? She couldn't resist, she just had to find new ways to make life hell.

I spent all day staring at my phone, waiting for her to respond, to reach out to me. I had questions and she had the answers, or at least I hoped she did. Could Oratilwe be my daughter? Why did she hide her from me? Why would she tell me about her now? Why was Oratilwe in hospital? Was I losing another child?

Three cups of coffee and deadlines made me jumpier than I needed to be. My manager wasn't my biggest fan, so that meant I couldn't get out of meetings and asking for a personal day would be a mission on its own. How would I start the conversation, "Oh Hi Xolile, I'm not

feeling well, so could I have the afternoon off?... Why, you ask?... Well just yesterday I found out that I might have left my ex-girlfriend pregnant 2 years ago and my maybe daughter might be in hospital, so I need the afternoon off so I can go hospital to hospital trying to find them”.

I had to make it work, make nice and sit through meetings. Fridays were the worst; progress meetings, finalisation of client reports and debates over next week’s planner. As per usual I got the worst assignments.

“Pssst. Pssst”, he whispered trying to get my attention.

I looked over to him, shook my head and mouthed, “What is it Kyle?”

He was as uninterested in Xolile’s presentation as I was. He stood up and moved closer, squeezing his chair between mine and Sam’s.

“You seem distracted bro, excited about tonight?? What's it now? Date number four?”, he said with a naughty grin and holding out his hand for a fist bump. “Tonight's the night right?”

I shrugged my shoulders because sex was the last thing on my mind. Actually, a lot had escaped my mind. In all the drama I forgot I had a date with Lonwabo tonight.

“What time are you picking her up?”, he asked.

“Around 8”, I responded looking at my watch, “She knows we have deadlines today and she understands that I have to work late”.

“I really like this girl man, she’s smart and you two look good together, almost as good as Jessica and I do”, he said sarcastically.

Kyle and Jessica met at the company a year ago and have been in love ever since. They are known as ‘Top Deck’ at the office. One would think it was because of their different ethnic backgrounds but I think it's mainly because they are always on top of one another. In the office they try behave themselves with random shouts of ‘My Venda Queen’ or ‘My Shinning Prince’

but in private, things can get a little awkward. As the token third wheel, I experienced it first-hand multiple times until they felt that they needed to spend more nights in than they needed nights out with the shut-in.

Kyle felt I needed to move on and Jessica felt I was deserving of love. First we tried Tinder. It was okay and just as superficial as I expected, I met a lady named Toni, and she was a doctor. Great conversationalist but too focused on her checklist. She knew everything she wanted in a man but on the second date it was clear she didn't know herself. Almost every sentence ended with "my mother said that's what makes a good man" or "I've seen how my friends were treated". She wanted what seemed to meet the definition of perfect but I wondered if she ever asked herself if it would be perfect for her. I asked her if she ever saw herself married to me and her response bordered on that of one who has given up. She said men feared her achievements, that they found her intimidating and that she found me interesting because of my career and that I probably won't be scared off easily. I understood what she was saying but I wasn't prepared to spend the rest of my life trying to love who someone needed me to constantly prove to her that she was enough. I wanted love, not a second full time job.

Jessica tried setting me up on a blind date with her friend. Kelly was great, the life of the party but it seemed like she never wanted to leave the party. She was a socialite, always politically correct and ready to charm her way into everyone's heart. I met her just before the year end Christmas party 4 months ago, so asking her to be my date made sense. She made people feel comfortable, she networked and never failed to mention she was a qualified psychologist. It was a date but my date spent more time talking me up to the room than she did talking to me. She used what she found on Google to make me sound amazing. Had I had political aspirations, then I would have asked to marry me right there and then. She was great but not great for me, I needed someone who wasn't so good at making things look good but rather someone who wanted to notice me. I had done enough fake smiles with Namisa, sat in rooms filled with loved ones and boasted praises for one another while in the back of our minds we knew we still had to finish the fight we were having in the car.

I had given up on the pursuit but I promised them I would give it three attempts before I locked myself back in my apartment. I had never tried speed dating but it was one of the things on my bucket list, so I had to give it a try. It went quickly, almost like a school cafeteria lunch line and the women formed part of the stationary. The men took turns moving from seat to seat with only 10 minutes to make a connection. The 1st six ladies I met were either too shy or too hyped, it was clear they were either forced to do this or were on the lookout for new sex partners.

It felt like I was wasting time, I could have been binge watching *The Blacklist* or catching up on work but here I was making pointless small talk about the weather. I was fed up and wanted

to leave, I got up and walked to the door and there she was. The last to arrive. She said she was caught up at a parent-teacher meeting but Jessica the romantic, says it was destiny.

“Hello, my name is Lonwabo Zwane, but my friends call me Loni. Am I too late?”. Her smile caught my attention and her eyes told me she was a truthful soul, I wanted to tell her the truth but I knew if I did, she might end up with someone else. There was something about her, something I needed to have. “Hi Loni, I’m Angelo... Angelo Blake. The event is almost done but I wasn’t successful in matching up with anyone and you just arrived. Maybe you’ll let me take you on a date? Give this guy who struck out a chance to redeem himself?”.

She blushed at my attempt at humour and agreed to go out with me. It was late, so options weren’t many and the closest eatery was McDonalds. She didn’t seem to mind though. We had both previously been in long term relationships, so starting afresh was challenging for us. Namisa and I were on and off for six years, she and her ex were together for four years, after admitting that we didn’t know what was considered appropriate first date conversation, we just went with the flow. We spoke at length, debates on the country’s education system, jokes about where we thought we would be in life and I threw in a few compliments every time she smiled at me.

She was a primary school teacher. Her love for children was emphasised by the way her eyes would light up when she spoke of her students. “Enough about me, you know I teach grade 2 and grade 3 students. What about you? What do you do?”, she asked in her gentle voice.

“I’m an accountant. Trainee accountant. I just finished my third year at Pukke and I’m doing my BCom Honours through UNISA while working at King & Associates. I work at the Vaal branch”. The words came out and I felt so stupid. All she wanted to know was what I did for a living and I basically gave her my CV. Despite the nerves I was glad Kyle made me do it, in the 8 years I’d known him this was the best idea he had ever had.

In hindsight though, it feels like I started our relationship with a lie. I wonder if I would answer differently now. When asked if I had any kids, ‘No’ was my immediate response but now technically I am nothing but an absent father. Loni was a week away from moving in with me and the thought of telling her about Oratilwe never crossed my mind. I wasn’t sure if it was because I was unsure if Ora was mine or if I was fearful of how she would react to it.

When she first asked if I had any children, I remember saying no and seeing the disappointment on her face. At first I thought it was because a lot of men my age have at least one child, so maybe she thought I was impotent. In time she confessed she hoped I had one, so

I wouldn't expect it from her. She got ill a few years ago and had to undergo an operation that required the removal of her womb.

I had to figure out what I would say to her. I don't think she would believe me if I told her I had a secret daughter I knew nothing about and I wonder how she would take that I met another woman a week before she was supposed to move in, she would probably think that I was having cold feet.

I looked up at the clock and it was 7PM. I had to leave or I would be late for my date. Kyle offered to finish off the Vanessa Costa report for me, so if I left immediately I would just make it for my date. As I was packing, Jessica came rushing in, "Hey Angelo, your ex-girlfriend is on the phone. She says it's urgent".

"Ex-girlfriend?" I looked at her confused. No one but Loni and my mother had my office phone number. Then I remembered in one of my 38 messages, I included my office number just in case Namisa wanted to call again. I ran to pick up the phone. "Hello, Namisa is that you?".

"Hey Angelo, I'm sorry I disappeared last night. I'm still at the hospital and my battery died. My grandmother brought me a charger a few minutes ago. I didn't want you to find out this way but yes, Ora is your daughter... Ummm... We are at Life Groenkloof hospital, in Pretoria. Would you please come? I think seeing you would make her feel better and it would also give me a chance to explain everything". She spoke clearly but I could hear the fear in her voice, it was shaky. The accident must have been worse than I thought.

The words "Ora is your daughter" kept ringing in my head. I had a daughter and she was in hospital. I had to see my daughter, I knew Loni was important but right now Ora needed me. I couldn't tell her the truth, I wouldn't know where to begin because I myself had more questions than answers, so I texted her and told her I was working late, that Xolile needed me to stay longer. Kyle and Jessica agreed to cover for me, I couldn't tell them what was going on but they knew I wouldn't lie to Loni if it wasn't important.

As I got into the car and made my way to the hospital, I could feel the tears roll down my face. I was scared. I was praying. I didn't even know if her existence until 24 hours ago, so I wasn't ready to lose another child.