

I

HELLO AGAIN

“Did you love her?”, the words rang clear over the sound of glasses hitting tables and forks meeting plates.

I didn't think she would start with that; no ‘Hello’ or ‘How are you?’.

I got there first, I picked a table in the corner so we could have some privacy and if she yelled it would be muffled by the noise from the kitchen. It had been nearly three years since we last shared the same space, let alone looked in one another’s direction.

My nerves normally got the best of me but this time curiosity won the fight and I needed to know why she called.

I was about to order my drink when she walked up to me, her glare scared the waitress off. “Hi, I’m Thembi and I will be your waitress today, would you like to hear any of our Spur specials or can I get you something to drink?”.

She shook her head gently then sat down. Thembi could tell it wasn't a date and excused herself in the most polite way she could think of, "Would you like 5 more minutes to decide? Sure". We sat in silence with seconds feeling like hours, taking turns to look at our phones or stare at anyone who walked past the entrance. She let out a sigh and then led with her question. I knew better than to make her wait but I didn't have enough time to plan my response and "I didn't love her, I loved how she made me feel" slipped out.

"How did I make you feel?" she asked. This time I paused, I wouldn't rush it and say something she would find fault with. "She looked at me like I had worth, you just noticed that I was there".

"That wasn't what I asked", she quickly responded.

"You made me feel alone". She sat and stared at me, her response was the look of disbelief on her face. She never took to my pain well. Whenever I was hurting or not okay, she saw it as a test of strength. Maybe I was at fault for feeling like I always needed to be strong or that my character made it seem like I could handle anything but the problem this time was that I never expected to feel this kind of pain.

"You were alone Angelo? You were the one alone? We had just buried our son and while we were mourning you found comfort in your mistress, I was alone. You... You were happy". The sarcasm in her voice was a reminder of why communication was our biggest struggle. She couldn't acknowledge anything other than "I love you" or "Yes, whatever you want" but this time I wasn't hung up on making her happy but saying what I have been keeping in.

"I was in pain. Pain you chose to ignore. I needed someone who didn't make their pain feel more important than mine and while I was finding ways to deal with the pain, I hurt you and I am sorry for that. I apologized for it and you said you forgave me. I thought you forgave me". It came out. It was my truth, I just wasn't sure if it was enough for her but it was my truth.

"No. I said what I knew you wanted to hear. How do you forgive someone who finds new ways to hurt you while you are struggling to heal? I told you I still loved you and that only had meaning for you after she was done with you. When she was done, it was my bed you ran to and because I needed to feel something other than the pain, I let you in".

“Namisa, I am not justifying what I did to you, I am telling you what happened. Someone else had to deal with the problem you chose to ignore. You chose to overlook that I wasn’t okay because you needed me to be there for you. You needed me to be perfect, she wanted all the broken pieces. So she took them, so I could be who you needed”.

I could see the anger building in her eyes but before she could let out a slew of insults, she was interrupted. “Hi guys, is everything okay? Would you like to order now”, Thembi arrived with her best smile on. She could feel the tension but she knew she had a job to do and that Namisa wanted her gone. “I will have a passion fruit and lemonade, he will have an Appletizer please. No ice for both of us”, she said. Thembi looked at me for approval, I nodded but she looked on for a second longer, almost as if she was waiting for a hint or sign from me asking for help to escape or if this was really okay.

Old habits die hard. As Thembi walked away, we once again sat in silence. She seemed upset she still knew what my favourite drink was. After dating for six years, we had been on enough dates to know what the other likes. I wasn’t sure if she was upset or rather embarrassed. She was quiet when Thembi returned and asked what we would like to eat. I felt the need to make her feel like she wasn’t alone in this, that the memories were still clear in my mind, so I ordered on her behalf. A steak fillet with extra onion rings for her and a full portion of ribs for myself.

“I love you. Those were your words”, she whispered. “You said them first Angelo, you broke down my walls. How could you have done that to me? To us? I admit that I could have done more, been there more but did I deserve that pain? I haven’t been able to let anyone else in since you left”, she continued. She looked down at her plate. Took a deep breath and asked, “Do you regret it?”.

I had never thought of it or asked myself that question. “Do I regret it?” I asked, “Is that why you are here? Are you here for closure?”. She shook her head. “If not closure, then why are you here Namisa?”.

“Angelo, the truth is I just wanted us to talk”, she said calmly. Her body language and demeanour had changed. Her face had a serious expression. “We need to talk about everything that occurred between us and what happened afterwards because ...”.

Before she could finish the thought, her phone rang.

She stared at it for a moment, contemplating whether to answer or not. “Sorry Angelo, it’s my grandmother. She has been texting me all day. Her calling means it must be something serious, if you will excuse me”. She stood up and went to the bathroom. I sat playing with my food, while waiting for her. I couldn’t understand the purpose of our meeting, if all she wanted to do was rehash the past then this served no purpose, we had both moved on. She got a new job, moved out of the Vaal and I had just started working.

“Angelo, I am sorry. I have to go”, she said out of breath as she rushed to take her handbag. “I am sorry, I have to go”.

“Wait. What? Is everything okay Namisa?”, I asked a little concerned.

“Yes”, she responded. “It’s just something I need to deal with at home. I will call you and we can meet some other time. I am so sorry. I have to go”.

Her phone rang again.

“Hello. Yes, this is Namisa Khuzwayo speaking. Yes, Oratilwe is my daughter. Yes... Yes... My grandmother just called me. I am on my way to the hospital right now”. She took her car keys and rushed out without giving me a second look.

At first I thought she was rude but I understood that it was a family emergency and that her daughter needed her. I called Thembi over and told her to pack away the food and bring the bill. I drove home. Poured myself a drink, thinking of our past together and how we always thought that our love would last forever.

It hurt to think that her life had moved on without me. Namisa and I both wanted to have children. We both wanted to big family and now she had Oratilwe, a name we chose for the daughter we would have one day.

“Hi. Angelo. I know it’s late and I am sorry I had to leave like that. Oratilwe was in an accident and I am currently in the hospital. She keeps crying saying she wants you. So if you have time, please come. Her full name is Oratilwe Jasmine Khuzwayo.”, I read the text a few times confused as to why her daughter would want to see me. I felt my heart begin to race the moment I realized that her middle name was the same as my mother’s. She had my mother’s name.

Without a second thought I texted her back asking for her location, I needed to go, I needed to see for myself, I had to know if what she was trying to tell me earlier was that she was pregnant when our relationship ended.

