

Background

As you might or might not know Binga (AKA Sikwenkwe Nkosana) who my father 'took in', in gratitude for how he came to my mother's rescue when two youths attacked her while she was preparing them something to eat and drink, was driven to Somerset Hospital at 01:00 in the morning by Roddy & Taryn and then, months later, by Robyn. After exhaustive tests Dr Varkel of Somerset Hospital diagnosed that Binga had had two strokes on opposite sides of the brain that probably triggered meningitis TB leaving him semi-paralysed and incontinent. He was then transferred to The Booth Hospital for rehabilitation that was to end today, Thursday 21st when he would either have been transferred to a CPOA frail care (the first opening for indigent patients being only at the end of November) or to his family. After long deliberation both Siphewe (his nephew) and Abongile (his son) each representing a side of Binga's family concluded that he must return to his home in Qumbu in the Eastern Cape. Last week, however, Siphewe telephoned to say that he didn't think Binga would last until the 21st and that he felt Binga should leave sooner. Instead of hiring a minivan for the journey

Matthew offered his and Sasha's clapped out Merc which I drove back from Zuurbraak two weeks ago and that returns this weekend.

Wednesday: Fiorini fixes the Merc

On Wednesday Fiorini in Kloof Street, who has for decades been fixing the Mentzs' jalopies serviced the Merc and fitted new rear brake pads but strongly recommended two rear shocks from Speedies.

Thursday: The family wants him to return home but what if the journey is deemed to have killed him; are we then looking at manslaughter?

Thursday evening Abongile, Nontsikelelo, Nomakhaya and Siphewe came round to my flat and then, joined by Marika, confirmed they wanted us to go ahead with the plan to drive Binga to his home in the Eastern Cape. Thereafter we returned to The Booth so that they could take leave of Binga.



Thursday evening some of Binga's Cape Town family and friends take leave of him at The Booth, L2R: Siphewe (nephew), Nubeshu (daughter), Nontsikelele (niece), Caxton's friend, Caxton, Marika, Abongile (son), Nomikhaya, Hendrik with Binga at the centre

However, later that night while writing my report Doret alerted me to a potential hazard that we hadn't considered. What if Binga died *en route* and the GP we asked to sign the death certificate in the next town doesn't want to sign because he puts the cause of death down to the journey? Are we then looking at a charge of manslaughter? I slept fitfully.

Friday: The all-clear, trailer, the coffin, shocks, Binga's will, packing, supper & sleep

Next morning early I sent an SMS saying that we first needed to check with The Booth before we would go ahead with our plans. Christina, the social worker attached to The Booth, however confirmed that it was ultimately the family's decision and that invariably in cases such as this the family opted for the Eastern Cape. Dr Taslim Rass completed a two-page report for the clinic on the other side and then I drove to Maitland to pick up the trailer, after which I purchase a coffin in case Binga died on the journey, left the trailer in Higgo Vale for Binga's furniture and other possessions that Abongile and Nubeshu were sorting.

Late afternoon I drove Nubeshu's team to the station and then returned to hook on the trailer after which Nubeshu, Siphewe and I drove to The Booth where we met Doret who had earlier arranged with Marika to take responsibility for Binga's will. We met the night staff (see below) who would be preparing Binga for the early rise (03:00) that would commence his journey.



Security who let us in at 03:00



The night staff who prepared Binga for the long journey: nurse Joan Brikkels, staff nurse Wilna Knoetze and nurse Minnie Pietersen

Already at Binga's bedside was Mark who confirmed Binga's wishes and served as commissioner of oaths, validating his will, including taking his thumbprint. The three of us then drove to my Disa Park pad via Doret's home who handed over carry bags filled with padkos and money for Nubeshu to buy whatever was necessary. I retrieved the sail from Doret's backyard to cover the trailer which we then positioned for the night in my parking bay. We ordered Butler's pizza while re-packing the furniture under the tarp (which unfortunately was shredded by the time we reached De Doorns) but Siphewe preferred some of the chicken Doret had packed because he doesn't eat pork. It was nearing 24:00 when the three of us finally found a space in my flat to try to snatch two hours' sleep before picking up Binga from The Booth at the scheduled time of 03:00 (well, actually, we arrived half an hour late).

Saturday: The Booth, Karoo, knocking (on heaven's door?), Lusanda Spiritual Group, cross-generational stuff, the tortoise survives, heeding advice, The Nativity in reverse, Justine's B&B, initiation of different kind, and we all sleep soundly under snowy duvets

Cape Town was fast asleep as Binga was eased from his wheelchair and awkwardly placed in the corner of the back seat with Siphewe and Nubeshu. I put on a brave front but secretly shared the unspoken apprehension of Joan and Minnie (see above) who, I sense, were shocked by what they saw: an old, rusty Merc that would be carrying five passengers including a dying man and a large trailer packed high with furniture to the Eastern Cape. We heard later, however, that the man from security (above) assured them that our mode of transport would not be unique in the Eastern Cape. And yes! And that was also Matt's take: we are who we are. We are not rich. 'n Boer maak 'n plan and this was ours.

Next stop was to pick up Abongile and by 04:00 we were heading down Buitengracht Street towards the N1 with all of us, I'm sure, privately fearful and secretly praying.

The first leg of the journey was fine but going up the pass beyond De Doorns I started worrying after we all heard knocking which I feared were pistons or something equally ominous. After the problem persisted I phoned Matt who explained that the sound was actually the front wheels that on bad surfaces pick up a rhythm and then bounce, and that we should have balanced them before the journey commenced as advised. I was relieved and then felt I could increase out speed from 80 KMs an hour to 100 + which took care of the knocking as the car glided through the early-morning Karoo. We stopped in Laingsburg and Doret's padkos started, in earnest, to be consumed while I continued steadily drinking my way through a flask of espresso.



Pit stop



Laingsburg & Binga wakes to enjoy an early-morning cup of coffee offered him by Nubeshu



Going somewhere, slowly. An early-morning stop at road works other side of De Doorns.



The A-team: Abongile, Nubeshu and Siphewe (not forgetting the photographer ☺)

We filled up in Touws Rivier and were making good progress across the Karoo. Abongile was DJ and systematically worked his way through Matt & Sasha's tapes. When he ran out of inspiration he handed the box of tapes to Siphewe to choose and who then presented two tapes for playing: Brenda's *Mali* and the Lusanda Spiritual Group's *Abanye Bayawela* the latter which became a fitting soundtrack, if not anthem for our journey.

And it was a profound experience. Here I was in Hennie and Barbara's grandson and partner's jalopy fuelled by petrol supplied by their second (Mentz) grandson and wife; towing a trailer filled with furniture heading to the Eastern Cape. Inside was Binga going home: now an old man hanging on to life; his daughter, son and nephew and me all grooving to the Lusanda Spiritual Group harmonising against the backdrop of the crackling Karoo. And I wept as I drove. I wept because I was reversing time. I wept because I felt in some small yet significant way that I was putting right some of the harm done by my generation and my parents and their parents' generations. I also wept because this was my personal journey home to that dark, fearful and unexplored place of dread that is the placeholder for the past out of which we are all formed. And the tears were also of gratitude to the interlinking communities comprising all listed above and the many who don't appear (family, friends, employers and medical) who were moved by their love for Binga or simply by their humanity and who were making this journey possible.

When we finally arrived in Beaufort Wes and filled up we could see that Binga was taking a lot of strain (below is perhaps the most cheerful photo I could find to show you).



Beaufort Wes and Binga's face tells us that he's taking a lot of strain but we're all relieved even amazed that he's still with us

On the other side of Beaufort Wes we all, working together, successfully changed Binga's urine-soaked nappy and felt very proud of ourselves. We were on our way again. Filled up at Graaff Reinet (she took her first and only additional pint of oil) and then started the longish haul to Queenstown. One scare was hitting a huge tortoise that skidded across the road but was undamaged (hissed at me as I anxiously picked him up to check the damage) and so carried the heavy load to the other side and put him down to continue his ancient journey in peace.

By this time I was feeling the strain and lay on the side of the road, resting. I was, however, conscious that the shadows were getting longer. We then had to accept the inevitable and switch on our headlamps and reached Queenstown in the dark with still 120 KM ahead to Mthatha and a goodly stretch thereafter to reach Qumbu.

I phoned Doret to announce our arrival in Queenstown who urged that we book in somewhere for the night. I resisted her advice, filled up the car and as everyone stretched their legs looked in on Binga propped up against the back right door.

"Binga, ons is in Queenstown. Netnou is ons in Mthatha daarna is jy by jou khaya."

He concentrated on what I was saying.

“Kan jy uithou?” I asked.

His response I'll never forget. He slowly lifted his arm and made a ball with his fist and answered: “Moet, boetie,” and I wept again.

Siphewe then directed us on the road to East London. By this time it was pitch dark, had started raining and the front left wheel was bouncing ominously as we found ourselves negotiating terrifying potholes. We stopped to cover Binga's TV on the trailer and Siphewe admitted concern that the road wouldn't take us to Mthatha¹ and so I wisely heeded Doret's advice, did a u-turn and very worriedly returned to Queenstown to seek a suitable B&B at 21:00. Talk about The Nativity in reverse.

By this time I was desperate because Binga was breathing with great difficulty. We kept drawing blanks regarding accommodation and so we drove Binga to the state hospital to be met if not by indifference then the slow wheels of bureaucracy oiled by accusation. Why do you bring him to us? Are you dumping him here? And so Siphewe stayed behind to sort out all the paperwork while I again went in search of a place for us to sleep.

And yet again I had this funny suspicion that we were all in good hands (whatever that means) because despite mad and impossible odds things just kept working for us. We phoned one of the B&Bs that was full and the lady at reception said it wasn't her task to give us alternative numbers to phone and that we could find a place ourselves. We didn't even consider the Casino Hotel as we knew they wouldn't let us past the booms let alone into the foyer and one of the hotels on the main street I suspect was actually a brothel so I announced: “My vibe is to follow up on the very first suggestion,” made by an inebriated security official and found ourselves in a quiet back street outside Justine's B&B that from what I could make out as I peered through the high wooden gate, looked shut for the night. Mercifully a security guard emerged from the surrounding darkness and let us in after I explained that Siphewe would be following after we had admitted the old man to the hospital. Nubeshu and Abongile booked in while I returned to pick up Siphewe only to discover that other than providing Binga with oxygen and a bed on wheels they would do nothing more for him and so Siphewe volunteered to remain with him for the night, which was out of the question so we wheeled Binga back to the car, explained to Justine's security guard that we needed also to book the old man into a room with two beds so we could take turns looking after him.

And then the strangest thing happened (sorry, Abongile, that I'm telling this at your expense but I think it was priceless): the security guard told us that there was only one room with two beds and so he awoke Abongile from what appeared to be a deep sleep and to his credit Abongile helped us bed Binga but not before our initiation into dealing with a heavily soiled nappy requiring gloves, a black bag over 4-star linen, our slosh bucket from the boot of the Merc and lots of washing. I'm extremely proud of the fact that it was I who took the lead and actually did the

¹ In fact Siphewe was right we discovered the next morning, as the road later forked, the one route taking us to Mthatha.

washing and general coping while Siphewe and Abongile did the assisting. After we had tucked Binga beneath a snowy white duvet alongside a resigned Abongile who now had the task of looking after his father while Siphewe and I both exhaustedly went to our separate rooms where we each discovered to our amusement two beds! We put two and two together and concluded what the security guard had orchestrated the whole thing and so Abongile and not we would be keeping an eye on Binga for the night and were both very thankful.

And so after I had eaten the vegetarian padkos Doret had provided I switched off my lights at about 00:30 and fell into a delirious sleep until six in the next morning.

Sunday: The Red Sea continues parting, Abongile to the rescue, Qumbu, Binga is carried into his home, joy in the valley, men don't cry, a sheep is slaughtered, lots of photographs, the rains are approaching, we leave to children singing, we drive through the night: Siphewe and I taking turns

The next morning there was more magic. I knocked and was told that Binga had again soiled his nappy but that it wasn't necessary for me to do anything because this time Siphewe and Abongile were in the process of initiating Nubeshu into the intricacies of what lay ahead for her and the family that would henceforth be looking after him. I was very touched that I had been let off the hook.

At breakfast I explained the romantic version of the previous night to Justine our hostess. But after she had seen Binga and how scary he looked I sense that had she been at reception when we arrived the night before and not her security guard she might not have wanted to book us in. And who could have blamed her because actually we were mad. Totally irresponsible. But we were nevertheless doing what we were doing because there was no other doing for us to be doing and the wonder was that the Red Sea kept parting before us.

Rested, Binga clean, our tummies full and feeling a little bit naughty and pleased with ourselves we were on our way again and with me thankful for Doret's timely and wise council particularly as it took us until 14:00 traveling in daylight to reach Qumbu.

It also allowed us an opportunity to sort out what I hadn't sufficiently thought through, namely, how do we arrive? Will there be food or would that be deemed our responsibility? So in Mthatha Nubeshu whipped around Checkers buying chicken braai packs, coffee, sugar, long-life milk, bread, sweets, etc. that we packed into three green Checkers hold-alls

Because we would be returning that evening we filled up the tank and I set off to find an auto teller. Quick thinking as Siphewe instructed Abongile to accompany me because "there are a lot of crooks in Mthatha." Thank goodness because I was confronted by scam artists at both auto banks the second of which actually snatched the card from my hands and proceeded to take over the entire operation until Abongile intervened. I then drew my R1000 while Abongile stood guard and we sprinted back to the car taking a short cut across the parking lot.

We then drove to the town of Qumbu where Siphewe had arranged with a family member to store the coffin as it would not, according to Abongile, Nubeshu and Siphewe, have been proper to have arrived with it on the trailer.



The town of Qumbu



Qumbu from the other direction



Abongile, Nubeshu and Siphewe with a friend in Qumbu



We have now left the town of Qumbu and are approaching the valley where Binga's family lives.

Thereafter we headed even deeper until we drove into a wide and beautiful valley with traditional mud rondavels one of which had been set aside for Binga.



Binga's home awaiting him



Binga's home from the front

Within seconds (unfortunately I was too slow with my camera) his family had carried Binga into his khaya and placed him on a double bed that served almost as a throne. I, enraptured, took pictures until I heard melodious singing coming from Binga's khaya, so I nudged open the door slipped in and sat on the floor while the women sang for Binga. Then I heard a man's voice praying after which Siphewe stood up and explained what we had done and why I was there. Abongile was then instructed to translate after which I was thanked. And I wept some more: this time from relief and gratitude (Siphewe took me aside and told me that men don't cry and I spent most of the journey back tackling him on this issue ☺).



The women sitting on the one side on the floor looking up at Binga who is lying on the bed. They sing to him. Nubeshu is first left



There are fewer men, who (mostly) sit across the way and on chairs.



Binga on his throne-like bed



Here you can hopefully gain a sense of the size of Binga's home. The TV that Abongile tuned is in the background



The women



Mission accomplished

I took more photos as they unpacked the car and trailer and the contents was either carried into the khaya or distributed. Abongile tuned the TV set and then told me that they were killing us a skaap to say thank you. And were those men adroit? Within no time the skaap was skinned, gutted and the vleis was in the cooler bag being carried to the car.



Binga's family



Family and neighbours



The ladies



The kids



Life's never been this good



Abongile and Siphewe walk out the valley

As the rains were approaching we bid farewell to Nubeshu who had volunteered to stay behind for a week to train, sort out the clinic and wheelchair fortuitously arranged by Sasha via Nico and Alexa's father (Dr Andre du Plessis) who was a medical doctor in East London (see what I mean?!).

Our farewell included children who had climbed onto the trailer and who sang us out of the valley. On the way out Siphewe showed us his ancestral home and the two of us took turns driving through the night.



It's getting dark (taken with a flash) and the kids sing farewell



Siphewe's ancestral home

Monday: a shin bone; die slaghuis; more knocking; Phillipi to meet Siphewe's wife; nog drama; deliveries and sleep

Near Beaufort West Siphewe noted a slow leak (Speedy said a bone had caused it!); Matt's jack had seized so I thought it advisable to buy another one, just in case. For R20 we had the skaap cut into chops at a slaghuis and drove on more slowly because the knocking had returned (don't worry Matt & Sasha, Fiorini fixed it on Wednesday), returned the trailer at closing time and Siphewe directed us through the back ways to Phillipi where we met his wife; said goodbye; drove off only to have a car shoot past in the Phillipi main street and block us off, the driver rip open my door, hit me with the back of his hand and about to drag me from behind the steering wheel, to be saved yet again by Abongile who, also a little shaken by what had suddenly and inexplicably unfolded, explained that we didn't know what we had done wrong. My attacker must have got a sense of who

we were (I think we were both pretty exhausted and probably had an aura of goodwill – well I was feeling positively spiritual) and thought better of what he was doing, turned on his heels, returned to his car and roared off.

Abongile and I divided the meat into parcels and delivered those we could and we all fell asleep wherever we lay our separate heads.

Kind regards

Hendrik Jeremy Mentz (Thursday, October 22, 2009)

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