





## The Pier

Nakhane Touré

I

IT WAS VERY early, and still pitch dark outside.

Nokulinda had not checked the time when she woke up, but she could deduce from the sporadic passing of cars on the main road, and the general silence, that it must have been after three am. She stayed in bed with her hands clasped over her breasts, her mind treacherously clear. She noticed that her hands were shaking, and for a second she feared rheumatism. Her eyes roved around the room. It was lit by street lights, and shadowed by white lace curtains and what she thought were ineffective but demonstrative burglar bars. All was as it had always been: a bland and matte pinewood wardrobe that was starting to chip embarrassingly, a dressing table with a triptych of mirrors she had inherited from someone (she always forgot whom), and shoe boxes stacked up against the wall, sometimes used as storage or hiding spaces. In front of the dressing table stood an old-fashioned suitcase. She had packed the night before for her trip. She stared at it. In the street light, the leather was a hue between brown and maroon. The gold buckles whose keys were long lost, still shone brilliantly. She remembered that when her son had left for Johannesburg, she had tried to insist

that he take this suitcase. He'd balked at the idea. Who was he, he'd asked, a character from *Cry, The Beloved Country*?

After a few minutes' hesitation, Nokulinda sat up and slid her feet into her slippers. She pulled her pink dressing gown, the one with the floral embroidery on the breast, out of the wardrobe and shuffled to the kitchen, buttoning it right up to the top as she went. The house was not cold. The lounge, situated between the bedroom and the kitchen, was furnished with an oversized room divider, slippery leatherette couches, a scuffed armchair, and a matching coffee table. Every room in the house was tiled.

She flicked the kitchen light on. The fridge droned monotonously. She opened the door and took out a slab of cheese, a couple of tomatoes, margarine, ham, and lettuce and placed them on the kitchen counter. She sniffed, then frowned as if she had committed a transgression. She leaned her back against the counter and listened. What had she forgotten? Outside, a car was growling away. She remembered: bread. Bread was what she had forgotten.

She prepared the sandwiches for her trip, wrapped them in tinfoil and packed them into a Tupperware container. She heard the clock in the lounge. It ticked with an unforgiving regularity. She didn't remember when she'd bought it, but suddenly, for the first time in all the years she had lived in this house, she stared at it and she hated it as if she had suffered great betrayal from it. Its gilt frame, beige face, and black hands offended her. It ticked on. The second hand performed its revolutions. And she hated it. She walked into the dark lounge and pulled the armchair across the floor to the wall where the clock hung. The chair got stuck between two tiles and she kicked it violently, almost falling over backwards. She felt a sharp pain around her hip area. She remembered the tremor in her hands. She pushed the chair against the wall, until it was directly beneath the clock. It met the wall with a muted thump. She removed her slippers and climbed up onto the cushioned seat. When she had lifted the clock from its nail, she ripped the batteries from its back. The tips of her fingers were sore. She fell into the chair, holding the clock tightly in one hand, and breathed heavily.

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She had eventually gone back to the bedroom to fish her cellphone out of her handbag. The cellphone now lay on her lap. Outside, taxi horns were beginning to blare. She unlocked her cellphone and the shock of the screen's white light initially startled her. She read the article again. The words were still there. Permanent, unimportant, not highlighted,



**Steve Locke, *Library (The School of Love), with Student #4*, 2016.** Image courtesy of the artist and Samsøen.

not typed in italics; yet she could not stop looking at them. Her hand was shaking again. She went over the words repeatedly, reading them like a meditative mantra. She clutched the cellphone with both hands. Her son had bought it for her as a Christmas present.

“Now you won’t have to go out every morning to buy the paper. You can read the news on this.” He had tapped the box twice with his forefinger and smiled shyly.

“But I like the walk,” she’d mumbled, and immediately scolded herself. He was sensitive. She knew that.

She had put the package down. It had not been wrapped—no garish Christmas trees print, no red and green, no snowflakes. She’d smiled again, a smile she hoped was warm and loving. It was meant to show appreciation and a mother’s love. What he saw and interpreted was out of her hands.

“Thank you.”

That was the last Christmas he had spent with her. She had bought him nothing. It was not their tradition. What they spent their money on, and what they understood as love, was the feast she cooked and the spring-cleaning he did in the morning of Christmas Day; both minor and repeated sufferings for both of them. They were small self-flagellations: ways to express appreciation for the year behind them, a way to blot out the grievances they might have had against each other.

“Mama,” he would call out. “The doctor said no beating of rugs because of my allergies.”

He spoke these words annually, his face always a grimacing mask as he beat what he thought was a Persian rug with the back of a hand broom.

“Take a pill!” she would reply, stirring something in a pot, on her face a frown of severe concentration. He understood its meaning. It had and yet hid no malice. It was their little joke. She suffered it all: the rushing to the stove before something got burned, the grating, the pickling, stings on her arm from sizzling oil; and most of all, the duty and unwavering quality of it all. And he did the same for her.

“It’s the Lord’s birthday,” she’d say. “You don’t want him visiting a dirty house on *his birthday*, do you?”

This was another of their Christmas jokes.

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The dawn performed its duty. Nokulinda put her cellphone back into her handbag. She heard the school children chattering as they walked to school. Initially, she had been relieved to not have to teach anymore.



It never really gave her any pleasure. And it was certainly not something she was passionate about. As the years brought her time for retirement nearer, she had thought that what she would lose in routine would be gained in time and freedom. But she quickly realized that all retirement did was bore and depress her.

She almost fished her cellphone out of her bag again. Instead, she ran a shallow bath and scoured herself quickly and brutally. At this age, she thought, there was no need for the mirror to be a witness to anything. She knew what her body was, she knew each fold, each bruise and scar. She understood the shape and she had an excellent grasp at what clothes worked. The only things she swiftly checked for were remnants of breakfast between her teeth and toothpaste smears near her lips. She wore no make-up and her head was almost always covered. She put on a long navy blue pleated skirt and a plain white blouse, which she tucked into the skirt. For modesty, she wore a powder blue cardigan long enough to cover her behind. The shoes were black leather loafers with simple tassels.

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**Steve Locke,**  
**Student #38,**  
**2016.** Image  
courtesy of  
the artist and  
Samsøñ.

A knock on the door pulled her out of her reverie. She shuffled to the door. Behind the security gate stood Nompendulo, an ex-colleague and a friend who hadn't yet retired. She was on her way to work.

Nokulinda unlocked the gate and walked back to the lounge. As she sat down, she smoothed her skirt from her waist to the back of the knees and stuffed the remaining material between her legs. She heard Nompendulo push the latch shut, and then close the door with a hard and satisfying bang. She imagined her seeing the Tupperware container, the out of place armchair, the clock.

"Sisi," Nompendulo said as she entered the lounge, switching on the lights. They never addressed each other by their given names, not even in argument. "Have you slept?"

Nokulinda cleared her throat and tried to answer politely: "Of course I slept." She looked up. "You gave me those sleeping pills. Of course I slept."

"Did you take them, Sisi?"

"I said, 'Of course I slept!'"

"Okay, Sisi. Okay."

Nompendulo eased herself down onto the couch. Nokulinda stared at her blankly, drew in a deep breath and held in a sigh.

"I packed my church clothes," Nokulinda said.

"Good." Nompendulo nodded.

"Black and white. Beret. Stockings. Brooch. Polished my shoes. Packed my Bible."

Nompendulo hesitated, and then said, "I'm praying for you." She looked up. Nokulinda had not taken her eyes off her. "We are all praying for you. All the mothers. We can't . . ." She stopped herself and held her tears. Up until now, the bereaved had shown no tears. How could she cry for someone who appeared to not want anyone else's tears? ("Your tears. The tears of all those church members and the world don't console me, Sisi," Nokulinda had said on the day she had found out. "I hate them! Stop crying.")

"We all have children," said Nompendulo.

"You do." Nokulinda was preparing to rise from her seat. Instead, she smoothed her skirt on her knees. Unable to move, she had to do something. She did not want to hear the noise of the world. She did not want to hear the breathing of her friend. "Why did you send me the article on my phone?"

Nompendulo had got up again and was wandering around the house. She looked into the bedroom and saw the suitcase. "You've packed already? I was going to help you."

"Why did you send me the article on my phone? Why did you hammer in the nail, Sisi? You must have known that I already knew. *It was in the paper.*"

“I wasn’t thinking. I was thinking. I thought not to. But then when I looked down I had pressed ‘send’. I don’t know how to use these things. My son sent it to me . . . the article. The boys grew up together.”

“You still have your boy.”

Nompendulo looked at her hands. “Besides the one you saw in the paper, this is the only other one that exists.”

“Cellphones.” Nokulinda shook her head. She laughed quietly and her mouth created a terrible moue. “Just two articles? That’s all he was worth?” She gave out a tremolo sigh. “Sisi . . .” She looked up at Nompendulo and gave out an animal howl, her jaw jittering.

Nompendulo shuffled closer to her. “I know, Sisi. I know.” She squeezed her shoulders. “Do you still want to go to the beach?”

Nokulinda nodded.

“Okay, Sisi. I’ll fetch you in the afternoon. I’ll drop you off there and fetch you an hour before your bus. You’ve packed everything?”

Nokulinda nodded again.

“Are you sure you want to be around all those people?”

“Yes.”

“I can come with you.” She searched her friend’s face. “Nobody wants to be alone at this time. I can come with you.”

“No, Sisi.”

**“Your tears. The tears of all those church members and the world don’t console me, Sisi,” Nokulinda had said on the day she had found out. “I hate them! Stop crying.”**

## 2

She had received the news late in the afternoon.

She was beginning to prepare supper when her cellphone rang. Its vibration on the kitchen counter startled her, and when she answered, the voice on the other side of the line was sober and measured. Professional. It gave her the news with no detail or sentimentality. She listened attentively. She imagined the person on the other side eating a snack, swiveling on their chair as they relayed the news to her in a disinterested tone. Her son had jumped from the balcony of a residential building. He did not survive the fall. In a half whisper, she thanked the voice and put the phone down on the kitchen counter. She stood still. She did not keel over, like a ship being tossed about by waves. No. She withstood this wave by standing stock-still and silent. She did not wail. Nor did she call a single person to share the news. Her son had died and all she did was lean against the kitchen counter listening to her breath, her eyes open, dry.



**Steve Locke, *The Technocrat & Student* #56, 2016.**

Image courtesy of the artist and Samsøen.

The next day the story was in the paper, and she was called by consoling relatives and friends. Having walked to the shop to buy it, on the way back home she'd flipped through the pages to find the story. Its absence was no relief. Instead, it engendered an anger towards her consoling kin. What would they gain from such a lie? Had she bought the wrong paper? She walked back home with the newspaper rolled up and tucked into her armpit. When she arrived, she flipped through it again, more deliberately this time, and there it was: a little story placed in that middle section of a newspaper before it turns into sports. She read it a few times, noting how similar the tone of the journalist was to that of the voice she had listened to on the phone the day before. There *was* a sentence, though, that was new. She read it repeatedly:

*"The spectating crowd roared for the man to jump."*

She dissected this sentence:

There were spectators.

Her son was watched.

*He was watched.*

Her son was watched by people who did not know him.

It was a crowd.

She tried to wish her imagination away, but she saw him standing and heaving behind the balusters. He put one foot on the balustrade to climb. The black leather shoes shone. And the pants, they were ironed to perfection. She had taught him well. She almost smiled. She heard the sound of the crowd. Was there blood, she thought, trying to pull herself out of her reverie. If there was, how much? She was back in it. She couldn't see his face. She tried to imagine his face. It evaded her. Was the street filled with his blood? That crowd, God. Did they scurry away as soon as they saw red? Didn't want to stain the hems of their dresses. Didn't want it on their shoes.

. . .

Nompendulo had dropped her off near the Visitor Information Centre on the beachfront. It was a coral pink house turned pastel by time. It had been built (she guessed) around the 1920s. She often drove past here and thought how it used to be a house. People had lived there, a conventional family. White, of course. And in her imagination, a



**Steve Locke, *Student #43*, 2016.** Image courtesy of the artist and Samsøen.

parent died—the children independent by then—and the remaining spouse, having no obligation to keep the house, sold it to some smiling man who turned the house into a place of business. Over the years, the type of business practiced there changed, and now there it stood on the corner of the street, a Visitor Information Centre, facing the beach.

The house was a relic, both in its architecture and use—“People use the internet now.” That was the answer she received from her pupils about almost everything—a token of the city’s welcome, a center for information, a place for the lost. It was available for those who sought it, but its dwindling traffic was further proof of its discordance and anachronism to the world around it.

She walked down the promenade to the pier.

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As one climbed the stairs from the promenade onto the wooden planks of the pier, the view of the sea and its horizon were momentarily obscured. One had to be on the actual pier, held in by the white-painted railing, to see what lay past and beyond it. Before climbing the stairs, she glanced around her. Cameras clicked, smiles flashed, and laughter echoed in poultry cackles.

Walking towards the end, she could see the churning water underneath, between the wooden planks held in place by firm but rusting nails. She had no fear of what was below. She trusted the pillars that held this architecture together. She trusted the planking. She trusted that if one leaned on the railing, it would not crack and break, causing them to fall into the sea.

Earlier, when she had arrived at the beach, she had stood in line to buy a cone of vanilla ice-cream. It was a strange craving, as she was never one to have a sweet tooth. The son was, though. As a boy, he was the one always tugging at her skirt. Sometimes she obliged. But there were other times when she stared down at him with such menace that he would look away as if he were averting his eyes from an impending blow, silently crying. Holding him by the nape of his neck, she would whisper into his ear: “If I hear one more ‘nywe’ from you, it will be the last time I bring you here. Now wipe those tears. People are staring.”

She couldn’t remember how long the line was for the ice-cream, or how long it took for her to be served. But she did remember that

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the girl behind the counter had the uniform smile of retail workers. These smiles did nothing for her. They never made her like the person more. The tip she gave never rose or fell depending on how wide the smile was. Rude or accommodating, it made no difference. There was a percentage and she stuck to it.

“Life is hard out there,” she’d protest to her friends who would sometimes refuse to tip a particularly rude or incompetent waitress.

“Oh, Sisi. You’re being *too* nice,” they’d tease.

“No. Life is hard out there. You can feed your children. Let her feed hers.”

There was too much choice in the ice-cream shop.

“I don’t want the scoops. I want the vanilla out of that machine,”

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she ordered without even looking up at the girl behind the counter. “A cone,” she added. She had already put together the exact amount to pay. The exchange was swift. She took the cone while she placed the money in the girl’s hand.

As she turned around to leave the shop, she heard the girl already beckoning the next customer forward. “Next, please.”

Those words rang in her head. Next, please. Please. Please? “Why do they say Please? Whose manners are they minding? I don’t believe that ‘Please’. They hate us.”

Walking towards the pier, Nokulinda licked the ice-cream like a child. Some of it started to run down her hands, chilling her palms, smearing her cuffs cream-white. She licked them too before rubbing them clean. The cone became soggy and the ice-cream began to seep from the bottom. She lifted it above her face and sucked from the bottom. The son used to do that, and on her obliging days, these little-boy-actions not only amused her, but reinforced and strengthened the love she felt for him.

He didn’t have it hard, she thought. “No. *We* had it hard. And we’re still here.”

When she had finished chewing the last of the cone, she wiped the corners of her mouth with the ice-cream-sodden serviette that had been wrapped around the cone and continued her walk. She reached the end of the pier and watched the sea. These were her last hours in this city, before she went to Johannesburg, where her son’s body lay frozen in some fridge. She held onto the railing and watched.

“It ends somewhere,” she thought. “Somewhere past that line is someone standing at a pier looking at their horizon line, and maybe they feel like I do.”

It could be a young and romantic couple clinging to each other, seeing nothing but beauty; the antithesis of what she was: an elderly woman irritated by the aftertaste of the cheap ice-cream she had just eaten. A woman alone, a woman whose imagination and memory were beginning to victimize her.

The gray sea roared beneath her. She watched it roar towards her, away from her, and wondered if there were any similarities between what her son saw and what she was looking at now. They had roared, those people. It had been written, coldly and plainly. That was the word the journalist had used. Roared. Not “cheered”, not “encouraged”. They roared. Her son knew for certain that jumping off that balcony would end his life unless someone caught him. Who would catch him amongst that ravenous crowd? All they wanted was to be entertained. They were bored and for a moment she even doubted their cruelty. They were bored, she thought. Whether he jumped or not didn’t matter to them.

They were still going to go home and tell the story. She shut her eyes tightly, digging her nails into the palms of her hands. There was nothing to catch her down there. There was not even a guarantee that she would die. She imagined herself being pulled to shore by a lifeguard, her clothes heavy and clinging to the body she made sure remained opaque. She imagined the crowd gasping around her in wonder. She’d heard people quip before about women her age killing themselves: “What was the point? She was old anyway.” If she didn’t understand the nuances then, she knew, with astonishing clarity now, what *one* point was. And that was enough.

She imagined her own gasping. She felt the humiliation, as if the deed had already been done, and she quivered at the thought of the failure, and the salvation.

Closing her eyes, she actively tried to conjure the image of her son. They hadn’t seen each other in months and she knew his face: how the nostrils flared when he tried to hide rage, the pockmarks on his cheeks from years of acne as a teenager, the shaved head, the slightly slanting eyes, the silly moustache he insisted on keeping. But now that she needed to see it most, all she saw were his shoulders and neck. His face was a featureless black oval.

There was a gust of wind and the gulls swirled up in the clear sky like puppets in the hands of a novice. Sand swept into the small breaking

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waves and formed, for short, repetitive seconds, a loose paste of mud. The sand in the air, the specks playing slave to the wind, were ruthless to her neck and face. They delivered instant pricks. The air began to chill and she pulled her cardigan closed over her breast. Everyone was enjoying this. It was supposed to be calming, but all she saw was a confusing mania in the hordes. Standing at the end of the pier, her elbows on top

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make her jump?**

of the railing with her forearms dangling, her right leg was slightly bent; her weight rested on her toes and the ball of her foot, while her left leg was straightened and extended tautly backwards. It was as if she were preparing to participate in a race. She brought her hands to her face and cupped her cheeks. The repetition was tedious. The sea, ebbing and flowing, the moon: filling and emptying, the earth orbiting endlessly. Was it boredom that made him jump? Was it enough to make *her* jump?

She turned to walk back to the promenade. Nompendolo would be waiting for her. She shut her eyes every time she walked past a couple, or saw a running and maniacal child in a swimsuit. And every time, she saw the black oval.

A memory came. Years ago, sitting next to him, watching the news. They were having supper together. A kwaito star's brother had killed himself in a club. She could not remember now why. But she remembered clearly that he had shot himself in a toilet cubicle in a club. Footage of the funeral was shown to the entire nation. The kwaito star was wearing casual overalls. And, most offensively, a red, worn-by-wear T-shirt. She remarked so—now she remembered it with regret—blithely: “That’s what you get.”

He had looked up at her with eyes that were filled with sorrow. He was that kind of child: almost silent and almost sad. She’d mostly only heard him laugh with his friends from a distance. Outside the house. Away from her, she thought.

“That’s what you get,” she repeated. “You kill yourself and your brother will not even bother to dress up to send you away.”

The black oval.

Nompendolo had parked her car outside the Visitor Information Centre. She seemed to be preoccupied with something on the back seat. When she fell back into the driver’s seat, they caught each other’s eyes. Through the glare on the windscreen, Nokulinda thought she saw her smile. She pulled her cardigan over her breast. When she entered the car, Nompendolo turned to her and smiled.

“Sisi,” she said.

“Sisi,” Nokulinda replied.

“Okay. Let’s go.” Nompendulo started the car. “The bus will leave you.” She checked all her mirrors. “We have everything?” she asked, as she pulled out of the parking space.

“We have everything.” 🌐