I bumped into the Sun Chaser far away from home. We showed no surprise at seeing each other. After all we had both seen some things.

The Sun Chaser changed my life. I remember vividly the day he came back to our village. His disappearance had made the biggest news then. No one had ever left the town; we were all content living under the hills of Manga. But as much as his return caused a stir, the news also died down quickly. That’s because in Manga showing excitement was not encouraged, it made people jittery.

Back then I was a stout eight-year-old who had a weakness for dismantling and climbing things, and collecting stray animals. He was a chaser of dreams, a wanderer. We made the perfect couple. So I started following him around, me and my favourite stray, my dog Honey.

It was a beautiful Saturday morning the first time I decided to follow him, well beautiful to a Mangayan. The empty streets had just been sprinkled with water so the air smelled clean and dust-free, it would get really hot and dry later but for now I was
enjoying the morning sun and doing my most favourite chore, tending the flower garden. Honey was snoozing, lazily thumping her tail to keep the insects at bay. I was working slowly so that by the time I was done my siblings would have finished cleaning the house. "Molo sisana", a soft voice brought me out of my reverie. Honey jumped and started barking excitedly.

Honey was scratching at the gate, yapping and whining with excitement. I turned my gaze to the voice and was shocked to see him, the Sun Chaser. I had never heard him speak before, his voice sounded old, but he did not look older than 12.

My hesitant "molo nawe" didn't reach him as he had already walked passed our house. I looked at Honey forlornly as if she was the reason he had passed so quickly. I looked back to the house to see if anyone was watching me then sneaked open the gate and walked hurriedly after him, Honey following closely.

The streets were empty as we snaked our way through the town. We made our way into the hills of Manga, my favourite playground. As we walked up the stream in this fashion I started musing over how much I loved this part of Manga. The birds were playing among the trees and singing their pleasure, the trees swooshing to the beat, the lizards and sometimes a snake or two sunning themselves on the yellow rocks, the stream purring its rhythm section. It was this place that made me understand the sanctity of time. Here I could grasp the concept of the Divine Creator. It was this place that made my heart sing and dream. I would sit on the banks looking at my reflection on the water and dream of how I would shape my world. I would wake up to my own world again. I would dream that somehow it was up to me to dream my world back into being.

As the path veered away from the stream and up the hill I saw him already at the top gazing at me calmly. Even at that distance his gaze felt like a light shower of rain washing away my guard. All the clever explanations I had thought of wouldn't work, I knew that. So I just slowly made my climb to him. Honey got there first, circled him a bit sniffing him, giving out a small yelp and settled down to enjoy the morning sun.

When I got to him I planted my feet firmly and squaring my shoulders looked him straight in the eye and said: "I won't say sorry for following you here, it's my spot. I'm the one who always comes here. In fact you owe me an explanation, you're trespassing". To which he just smiled, showing a dimple that made his eyes dance.

We sat down looking at the town below. For a while neither of us spoke. Only Honey was snoring. I was trying hard to stay still and not fidget.
“You know we are the invisible ones, we walk around trying very hard not to leave a mark on anything. We are even invisible to ourselves, we pretend away life, staying safe in our cocoons. Isn’t that just blasphemous? That’s why I left Manga,” he started up.

But as quickly as he started he stopped, looked at me and blasted me with one of his smiles. I noticed how that smile made him the most beautiful boy I knew, even though he was rather on the ugly side. Broody eyes, a low forehead, his hairline almost reaching his bushy eyebrows, high cheekbones that crinkled his eyes when he smiled, and rather generous lips. I remembered that for the longest time he couldn’t walk properly because he was born with a really bad kiss-kiss. A kiss-kiss is when your knees touch when you walk. But his mother had saved for years scrubbing floors and finally he had an operation to fix his legs. I was a loner also, I too had a deformity, I stuttered.

But what it meant at that moment was that I identified with him.

As he grew quiet again I said: “What happened here Sun Chaser? I feel strongly in my spirit that something is twisted about this place? What happened to our people?” Then I broke into soft laughter.

He laughed too, then began again: “Three days after I left Manga, exhausted and light-headed with dehydration, I came across a blind, old woman sitting under a tree by the road. Her eyes were completely glued together by pus. A sound came out of her, something between a laugh and a cry, I can’t explain it. She was cackling, maybe she was laughing at me?”

He continued: “‘Hayi wethu mfanyana’ she said ‘this time I have come to give you something, something you have already laboured for. What you need is information. Of all your losses knowledge has been your biggest. So focus all your energy on what I am about to tell you. It will save you.’”

He repeated the words of the old woman. “Once there was a big war, hundreds of years ago. This war involved all the tribes of the continent. It started with one man’s dream, his name was Khanga and he was from the tribe of the Thausa. Khanga was the beloved son of the Great King of all the tribes and a mighty warrior. Most of all he was a kind and generous man.

“He also loved to tease his grandmother, Nomkhubulwane, or Khubu, as she was lovingly called. Khubu liked nothing more than to sit outside in the shade smoking all day long and ordering everyone around.

“But there was a deep love between grandmother and grandson. You would often find them embroiled in deep conversation about cultural laws and divine laws. They were
very close, sometimes he would fall asleep in her hut even though it was not allowed for a man to sleep in a woman’s hut outside of marriage.

"On one of those nights Khanga woke up screaming. Khubu was not amused and started hitting him over the head with her pipe.

“Yebantu! What kind of a man is this screaming like a child, wake up wake up you are embarrassing me and our family.”

The Sun Chaser said: "Khuba stopped in mid-sentence though when she saw the look in her grandson’s eyes.

"His eyes had become dark pools of grief. He stood up only to collapse a few steps later. Suddenly his mouth was dry. He stood up again holding his hands to his head. You could see his mouth trying to work out words and after a while a croak came out, 'I have seen the future', Khanga said to this grandmoother.”

The Sun Chaser continued: "Khubu hurriedly lit her incense, putting herbs in the water and taking out her bones preparing to divine. The incense smoke quickly filled the small hut. She took out a small root gestured to Khanga: ‘chew, don’t talk,’ she said.

"Khubu paced up and down as she waited for the herbs to boil. Soon the aroma of the boiling herbs mixed with the smoke and the room became stuffy and they started to sweat. She started muttering incoherently to herself as she paced. After a while she took the boiling herbs from the fire, went to him and said: ‘Spit’.

“Then she started talking loudly: ‘They are here to wash us away, they come with the water to us and it washes us away, they build monuments on our backs, they sell our children … no we sell our children. Ngabathakathi bezinja! Yo yo yo! What is this?’ Mdali wezulu nomhlaba, igazi elingaka!!”

She never got to throw the bones.

“Those were the days when our magic still worked,” the Sun Chaser said.

“Nowadays show me a sangoma and most times I will show you an impostor. I mean after all, how can a people who don’t know who they are understand the intricate secrets of their divinity?”

Khanga had seen a great war, brutal beyond measure. A war that involved all the tribes of the continent. A war not just based on conquering, but on exterminating everything we knew of ourselves. This was the story of a man who refused to see his people die.

The Sun Chaser returned to the story he had been told: “The next day a call was sent
out to all the diviners of the continent to gather in the great place. The whole day you could hear the drums echoing throughout the land.

“Khanga had seen that we would not win the war. He had seen that the enemy’s god did not view our people as good people, or as people for that matter, and thus the passion they fought with was fuelled by the belief that they were fighting evil. Besides, spilling blood was not our way of warring. But Khanga’s wars began and would last for ten years and give rise to one of the biggest tribes on the continent, the Mlungu.

“Khanga had failed in part, because most the tribes decided to flee rather than adopt the customs of another. It was easy to flee because we lived light, as long as we had our cattle herds, we could live anywhere. No one owned land; they were just custodians and could not refuse us a place to stay. He had failed also because rather than the wars building solidarity they sowed mistrust, even from those who had surrendered and been sworn into the new tribe.

“Thus one of the conquered kings, on a hunting trip, shot him with an arrow as he was stooped drinking water from a stream.

The conquered king cited mistaken identity, but the people who had become used to bloodshed tore him to pieces right there, no one remembers his name and he was never buried.

“When our enemy from the sea finally came we were easy pickings, so weakened were we by the wars, but we still put up a brave fight. Thirteen wars we fought with them; there had never been so much bloodshed on our land. They starved us and our children. When we did finally emerge from our hiding places, crazy with hunger they picked those they felt had good genes for working in the fields, kitchens and mines and they got rid of the rest. Thus began our new life as slaves on our own land. Some, like you in Manga, chose to find the most remote, most unattractive areas in our enemy’s eyes, and settled there.

“And so began the process of making ourselves invisible, so they would never see our light and want to take it again, so that we would never be a threat to them again,” the Sun Chaser told.

“Slowly we lost control of our lives and became more like sheep, going whichever way we were being herded. We became our own jailors; anyone who spoke of the old days was quickly silenced, even in remote areas like Manga. It was as if just the thought that we were once a great human race would bring about the wrath of the enemy on us. We just crept into our prisons, locked the doors and waited to die. Even the Mlungu failed
to keep our spirit alive, even after they came to power. I think it is because they already had died of spirit.”

But the old woman also told the Sun Chaser this: “Know that Khanga did succeed in doing one thing and that was to preserve our sacred knowledge, my child. It’s out there for you if you want it, that’s all you have to do, want it hard and sincerely enough.”

“Khanga finally did meet with the diviners in-between his wars and it was decided that the diviners would create a very powerful spell, a spell so powerful that it would destroy them in the physical realm, but would never allow them to move on to other realms. They would merge into one big consciousness and spread themselves like a blanket all over the continent, and then this consciousness would settle into all of us. One of those diviners was Nomkhubuwane. So we all each have a small piece of Khubu’s consciousness in us,” said the Sun Chaser.

The Sun Chaser repeated the wise words of the old woman: “So my child let your guard down, let go of what you think you know and be receptive to the guardians in your heart, then you will understand the foot you put forward. Seek my child, sharpen your intellect by absorbing information, seek to understand and embrace your demons.....”

The Sun Chaser turned to me as he concluded his story in his tired voice. “I haven’t been the same since I met the old woman who told me the story. I can’t shake it off, my toes are tingling with excitement, something is in the air, and I panic that I might miss it. That is why I come to this place to pray, as she had also instructed. I come here to atone for our biggest sin. Maybe that is my path. Yours is different from mine, but somehow they serve the same purpose, this I know.”