I recently bumped into the sun chaser in Senegal, of course we both showed no surprise at seeing each other so far away from home, after the things we had both seen. My Dance Company and I had come to do a dance piece called ‘Making Our Chains Dance’ on Gorée Island, in memory of the many atrocities that took place on its tiny surface. It was a big production with a crazy film crew. I needed to get away as I was going mad with all the frenzy around me.

I found him sitting just outside the Door of No Return, rocking backwards and forwards. He said he was still atoning for our sins.

The sun chaser changed my life. I remember so vividly the day he came back. In our small town village his disappearance had made the biggest news. No one had ever left the town; we were all content living under the hills of Manga. The news had quickly died down though, because at Manga showing that kind of excitement was not encouraged, it made people jittery. When I first came into consciousness I had found this quite odd, but was beginning to
accept that people liked you more when you asked fewer questions though no one would berate you. People are very polite in Manga.

I was a stout eight year old who had a weakness for dismantling things, climbing things, and collecting stray animals. No genius for sure, but, I was a true village girl. My time in the village had sharpened my awareness. 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. Those were the days when kids could still walk around unaccompanied. Sadly those days are gone. So many things are gone....

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 out front. 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 they would have finished cleaning the house also. I hated doing house chores. When it came to this one thing, being a girl sucked big time.

What was the big deal really? In my house I was always trying to stay out of the way of my father who was a big grouch and my mother who was always running around cleaning everything. It would have been fine if they left us out of their peculiarities but they did not. My father would have an aneurism at the sight of a smile and well laughter just might get you a hiding. My mother on the other hand was suffering from not being a good enough woman for him. So now we were not good enough also. We were not behaving like proper women, not sitting properly, not eating with manners, not tidying up properly.... Maybe it was all this that made me prefer the outdoors. I could spend all afternoon just admiring the flowers, the bees and the sky. That afternoon I laid on a wide tree stump, my dog Honey at my feet, pretending to travel on floating clouds to the far away places I had read about in fairytales.

“Molo sisana”, a soft voice brought me out of my reverie. Honey jumped and started barking excitedly. Honey liked to chase people. She would chase you then when she caught up with you she would give you a small nip in the leg, thigh or bum, not enough to draw blood but enough to leave a mark. She hated it when people did not run, it spoiled her fun, so she would try to push them with her nose to run and when they didn’t she would turn around dejectedly and slink home without biting them. I found the thought of putting
her on a leash horrifying to say the least, so these escapades would continue for as long as she lived. Thank heavens there was no SPCA those days.

Now she was scratching at the gate yapping and whining with excitement. I turned my gaze to the voice and was shocked to see him as the voice sounded quite old. I had never heard him speak before but he did not look older than 12.

My hesitant “molo nawe” didn’t reach him as he had already passed. I looked at Honey forlornly as if she was the reason he had passed so quickly, then I looked back to the house to see if anyone was watching me, sneaked open the gate and walked hurriedly after him, Honey following closely. I didn’t really have a plan, so I kept a safe distance. The streets were empty as we snaked our way through the town, only a few shops were open and the attendants looked listless, looking forward to an uneventful day. That was the other quirky thing about Mangayans; they worked hard all week long, then; burrowed in their houses the whole weekend, as if nothing in their lives was worth celebrating. There were never any celebrations besides the necessary ceremonies like weddings, initiations etc. Even during these, people gathered quietly in small numbers, big crowds were not encouraged.

We were now making our way into the hills of Manga, my favourite playground. I checked to see if I was wearing proper clothes that would not reveal my wanderings when I got back home, luckily I had been gardening so I was dressed in my gumboots, old pants that were held together by a string and my red dress which was 2 sizes too small. I liked that it was small because then I had to wear pants with it; that was the only time I was allowed to wear pants as a girl. If any of the clothes I wore got torn no one would notice as already they were quite shabby.

As we walked up the stream I started musing over how much I loved this part of Manga. The birds were playing amongst 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. It was the sand at the bank of this stream that made me grasp the concept of The Divine Creator. It was this place that made me understand that I was and that no one decided how I was. That it was my pact between me and my Creator. I would sit on the banks looking at my reflection on the water and dream of how I would shape my world. I would dream that I was living in a dream and one day I would wake up to my own world again. I would dream that somehow it is me who must dream my world back into being. It was confusing, I usually ended
up falling asleep unless I had a book, then I would escape into its pages, go
to Fort Hare (eDikeni), Nigeria, America, maybe Mars. I really loved to read,
I could read anywhere; living in a book’s pages was most times much more
exciting than my real life. I was almost knocked down by a car, because I was
reading while walking from school.

Luckily everyone drives at a snail’s pace in Manga.

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 I felt his gaze peeling away all
my guards. All the clever explanations I had thought to say as to why I followed
him wouldn’t work, I knew that. So I just slowly made my climb to him. Honey
got there first, circled him a bit, sniffed him, gave 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”….to which he just smiled showing of his one dimple and making his
eyes dance. I still want to ask him how he did that. After a long uncomfortable
silence I decided to join Honey and sat down to enjoy the sun.

We sat down looking at the town below. For a while no one spoke, you could
just hear the sound of Honey’s snoring. I always wondered how she could
sleep with one eye open and still snore like that. I, on the other hand, was
trying hard to stay still and not fidget, the tension was killing me. We sat like
that for what seemed like hours, not saying a word, just observing the view.
When our gaze fell onto a lone chair in one of the houses closest to the hill we
both laughed.

There used to be an old man there, may his soul rest in peace. Every morning
without fail, he would wake up and dress in his best suit, which had seen
better days, take his newspaper, which had also seen better days, his hat and
walking stick; and go sit on that chair to read the paper. Luckily for him the
chair was under a big tree otherwise I don’t know how he would have dealt
with the Manga sun. Most times he read that paper upside down, that was the
reason for our laughter, the second one was you would at times hear angry
voices from the house and you might see him running out only in his undies
shouting “I will not wash, I gave birth to you maan rha, you can’t make me
wash. Where’s your manners you disrespectful unmarriageable girl?” Then you
would see a middle aged woman running out with a blanket, livid with anger,
looking around and hoping for no spectators. Hayi! May his soul rest in peace!

“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 as long as we are safe in our cocoons....That’s why I left Manga,” the boy says.

As quickly as he had started he stops, looks at me and blasts me with one of those smiles of his. I notice how that smile makes him the most beautiful boy I know, even though he is rather on the ugly side. Broody eyes, a low forehead, his hairline almost reaching his bushy eyebrows, high cheekbones that crinkle his eyes when he smiles, and rather generous lips.

I remember 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 now his spoke more of deformity than a normal oddity. I can’t imagine how he must have felt walking down the streets with all those people always stealing glances at him, pointing and talking behind his back. He always wore out his shoes quickly because of his deformity and thus his shoes were always flapping tatters all around his feet. I wonder if that is what bred the loner in him. Anyway his mother had saved for years scrubbing floors and finally he had surgery to fix his legs. Now he was bowlegged with quite muscular legs for his age. I was a loner also, I also had a deformity. I stuttered...so I identified with him.

“At the time though I didn’t know this”, he continues.” I was just desperate for a sign of life; I felt I was just waiting and watching time come for me. Surely something is supposed to happen between living and dying. We are not just born to die are we, how can our biggest aspiration be to die a good death? I mean it is well and good to want to live an exemplary and godly life, but doesn’t it defeat the purpose of living if it stops us from searching. Don’t ask me for what, but surely surely, something has to happen between living and dying. I feel I’m in a dream and I must____”

“dream myself back into my own world”, I finished his sentence almost in a whisper.

I continued, “what happened here sun chaser? I feel strongly in my spirit that something is twisted?“

My laughter softens the impact of my words. “My mother says I read too much and it’s poisoning my brain, frankly I don’t know how Nancy Drew can poison my mind, our school library is full of that stuff.”

He laughs too and says, “well it at least gave you an analytical mind. Let me tell you the story of what happened,” he says....and he began to tell me the story of what would be the first of his many adventures...
“Three days after I left Manga, exhausted and lightheaded with dehydration, I came across a blind old woman sitting under a tree by the road. Her eyes were completely glued together by pus. I shuddered remembering the story from our childhood about the old woman who asked a girl to wipe her pus-filled eyes with her tongue or face the consequences of being blamed for not helping the elderly. Geez! I didn’t want to wipe her eyes with my tongue either!

A sound came out of her, something between a laugh and a cry, I can’t explain it. She was cackling, was she laughing at me? “Hayi wethu mfanyana”, she said, “this time I have come to give you something, something you already have laboured for,“

At that point, the dehydration was beginning to take its toll, my eyes were so dry I could feel them scratching my eyelids when I blinked. I was tired, hungry but most of all extremely thirsty. I had thought I would find water on my travels, but all around for kilometres there was nothing. This was barren country. I guess I should have followed the stream. Strangely, I felt quite light though as well, I could have gone on until I simply dropped dead.

She rapped me on the head with her knuckle, knocking me back from semi-consciousness.

“What you need is information, as you are what you eat,” she said. “You also are what you know and what you believe. Of all your losses... knowledge has been your biggest. So focus all your energy on what I am about to tell you”. She took out a pair of sunglasses from a big flowery bag lying next to her on the grass and put them on.

“The sun is too bright”, she said as she adjusted them over her pointy nose.

I noticed that she was wearing very cool addidas sneakers. I decided to focus on the logo to keep from passing out, very nice font, not overbearing at all, decidedly understated.

To be continued...
The Sun Chaser

by Simphiwe Dana

Part II

The Sun Chaser began to tell his story in the voice of the old woman who first told it to him and changed his life.

The old woman began her story.

“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, beloved of the kingdom. They say he loved to charm the girls on their way to fetch water with trinkets he had brought back from wars, making them promise to love only him and to wait for his return with dancing and ululations. He was a handsome man but he never took advantage of the maidens who swooned at his presence. Sometimes a maiden would act as if she had tripped and fallen so he could come and pick her up, then she would talk about it for days as if she were now the official girlfriend until another maiden came up with a similar story. Khanga also loved to tease his grandmother, Nomkhubulwane, who liked nothing more than to sit outside in the shade smoking all day long and ordering everyone around. Now that woman apparently had a mouth, she knew every swear word ever invented and could use them to effect, maybe she is the one who invented swearing. Even the dog was not safe from her biting words. It seemed it was only Khanga and the very young kids who were not perturbed by her words or her stones, who would tease her about her rotten and tar coated teeth, then scanter away from the stones being thrown. It was normal for kids to tease the elderly as it was normal for the elderly to do whatever they wanted, including smoking all day and throwing stones at kids or anyone for that matter.
You wouldn’t say there was animosity though between Khanga and Nomkhubulwane, or Khubu as she was lovingly called, if you would see them together embroiled in a deep conversation about cultural laws and divine laws and such. They were very close, sometimes he would fall asleep in her hut. I suspect because there were times when she hated being alone as her spirits would be too strong for her. She was a strong diviner in the village, maybe that's why people feared her and allowed her to curse them without retorting.

It was not allowed for a man to sleep in a woman’s hut outside marriage but Khanga was a beloved.

It was on one of those nights that he woke up with a shrill screaming shrilly. Khubu woke with a start and was not amused. She was next to him in a second 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___”.

She stopped in mid sentence when she saw the look in his eyes. His eyes had become dark pools with grief. He stood up only to collapse a few footsteps away, his mouth suddenly dry. He stood up again shaking his head with his hand as if to dislodge something. You could see his mouth trying to work out words and after a while a croak came out, “I have seen a terrible future”. Then he plonked himself down, there was a soft thud as his bum hit the dung floor. It was very dramatic really. Already Khubu was on the move lighting her incense, putting some herbs to the boil and taking out her bones preparing to divine. The incense smoke quickly filled the small hut.

She took out a small root and gestured to Khanga, “chew, don’t talk”.

She was pacing 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 and swearing, “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, now show me a sangoma and most oftentimes 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?,” the old lady stated in disgust, and carried on after clearing her throat.

“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 is the story of a man who refused to see his people die.

The next day a call was sent out to all the diviners of the continent to come and 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. War to us was all about outwitting the enemy and incapacitating them, then taking all the spoils; then we were still had values not twisted, women were not part of the spoils. To our newfound enemies preferredit was smiting the enemy, starving them out and, enslaving them. And they had superior weaponry, he had seen in his dream, whatever magic it was, it could kill from far. We did not stand a chance.

He decided that because it was his dream he would take responsibility for it, he wouldn’t wait. He wasn’t the army general for nothing. He would force all the tribes into one big tribe at the point of a spear. This is the only way he decided, as all the tribes were very divided, each one thinking they are better than the other. It would be a way of preparing them for the bloodshed to come and also of consolidating our knowledge, so that hopefully when we rise again we would remember our greatness. Had he waited for the diviners’ wisdom things might have turned out differently, but, he had the impatience of the young. There are times when that impatience serves progress well and
times when it has disastrous consequences.

Tears were running down his face as he explained his dream to his army. It would be a day that would go down in history. His warriors had never seen him cry. Sure they had seen him show his emotions a lot of times, but never tears. A feeling of dread filled the air. Their prince was instructing them to go take kingdoms by bloodshed if they had to. They had never spilled blood intentionally. Life was sacred; all the kingdoms knew that law. They would be despised forever for what they were about to do, they were about to change the psyche of their people and their way of life, but they would follow their prince to the grave....

So began the Khanga Wars that would last for ten years and found 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 herd, 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 Khanga him with an arrow as he was stooped drinking water from a stream.

The conquered king cited mistaken identity, but the people who had gotten used to bloodshed tore him to pieces right there, no one even remembers his name to date 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 out. 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 remotest most unattractive areas to our enemy, and settled.
Thus 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.

We were mortally wounded, how could the god of these people decide that we were not human enough? Were we not human enough? Their god had to be different from ours, because ours walked with us everyday and enjoyed our tussles with life. Did we dare doubt our God after all the stories we could tell of her divine presence?....

Yes we did, and we still do and sadly it means we doubt ourselves.

The Mlungu decided that they would learn the ways of the enemy and find ways to dismantle his system from the inside. They sent delegates to all four corners of the globe exposing the crimes of the enemy in our land. They would bring back international media with them, do protests marches so the media could watch the enemy go berserk and kill our children. It was easy for the enemy to do this; it seemed. I still wonder if they lost any sleep over their heinous deeds. Here in these areas we have never even seen the enemy, but I must say already I am petrified of him and dread the day I must meet him.

So 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. The best part of ourselves was stripped, ripped out by our own hand. Was it really a way of preservation? Pulling down everything that threatened to excel? No that was and still is self-hate. The war was lost....we were lost.

So we started thinking small, begging for ‘one day at a time, lord’. We just crept into our prisons, locked them 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 had already had died of spirit, clearly for me they were no longer fighting for our liberation, but they were fighting for acceptance into the enemy’s world. You would see how proudly they walked in their suits as they were going on their myriad of trials brought on by the enemy state. They had already stopped
believing in our dream; they were buying into the enemy’s dream.

Places like your Manga have been breeding grounds for a new age for a while now...because of your isolation from the world of the enemy.

Because of your isolation from everything...it has made you in touch with your spirit. You haven’t lived with the fearful enemy in your midst, you haven’t felt the iron of his hand on your throat in your dreams, you still feel what it is to be us. Most Some of us have forgotten”.

She moved her face close to mine until I could smell the herbs in her breath. I gagged; the smell was so pungent, stronger than garlic and onion put together. There was a hardness to her lips that hadn’t been there before.

“Now know this - Khanga did succeed in doing one thing.....preserving 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, always nagging us about our greatness, coming into even our waking dreams, being a real nuisance. Always there for the seekers who surely have the eye to see, the humility to empty themselves and receive. One of those diviners was Nomkhubulwane....so we all each have a small piece of Nomkhubulwane’s consciousness in us. What a sacrifice! Can you know a greater love than that, someone who would give up an eternity for you?

So my child pull down your guards, 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 our demons......”

I looked at the words on her sneakers to keep from passing out, focusing on each letter: “a – d – d – i – d – a – s _____”

PPEN
Public Participation Education Network
I remember her rapping me painfully on the head again before everything went black. I felt I was floating in a waterless translucent milky liquid, in fact I was caught in it, it was keeping me from falling. Shapes kept bobbing up and submerging in this liquid. Everything was connected by very delicate threads that could stretch forever. Myriads of threads twisting and curling and knotting. There were some threads that had broken off and they looked like tentacles blindly searching for something to latch on. Everything was so noisy, it sounded like a thousand voices reciting a thousand scripts. I remember trying to block the noise with my hands and realising I couldn’t bring my hands to my ears, the threads were pulling me down. The liquid tried to hang on to me for a while, but the threads were stronger. I fell for so long my voice got hoarse and I couldn’t scream anymore. I felt like a foetus whose umbilical chord had been ripped off. I curled onto myself, put my thumb in my mouth and fell asleep immediately. The last words I heard from her were, “Pray!” It sounded like she had said it in the mountains, because the word echoed forever in my head.

I was feeling much better when I came to and the sun had set, the air was more breathable. I walked straight back home, not even trying to be careful of the wild animals of the night, or the trees that ripped into my clothes and skin, trying to hold me back perhaps. My mother was outside making fire for the morning tea when I got home. She gestured me to her room, where I drank a large jug of sour milk, jumped into her bed and slept for two days. When I woke up I was dressed in clean clothes and smelled clean myself. She had washed and bandaged me while I was fighting the trauma of the discovery of so much information.

He turns to me and with a tired voice and concludes his story. “I haven’t been the same since. And 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. I come here to atone for our biggest sin; that of doubting our greatness and being caught up in other people’s dreams. Maybe that is my path. Yours is different from mine, but somehow they serve the same purpose, I know”.

The sun was setting. In my language we would say it is going to its mother, and suddenly I remembered my own mother.
This time I was really gonna get it. A girl taking off without consent and being gone for the whole day! I was in for it. I just hoped my father wasn’t there because his methods of punishment were rather painful, a dry towel all over your ass or even, pray god not, a nice thick stick from the pomegranate tree when you really pissed him off.

I was too happy to dwell on these unhappy thoughts. The sun chaser had told me a story that changed his life which in turn changed mine. I left him there on the hill, where we had been seated for hours, still lost in the layers of the old woman’s story. Still praying. Tomorrow would be a different day, because I decided that would be the day I would start practising to be a star. One day I would be the greatest dancer the world had ever seen, I promised myself. Dancing would be my prayer for our atonement. Honey nipped me in the bum, making her mark on me, and we both skipped home.

I would get a lot of hidings for disappearing with the sun chaser in the future, but all the adventures we had were worth a thousand hidings. Maybe one day I’ll tell you the whole story.