

My name is Mary Seabata Thakamakau. It has been three months now since I have heard from my husband, Banodube, three long months without money for food or water. Every day we long to hear from him, to know he is alive. Kada, my youngest son of five years old, stares into the distance for hours on end, along the dusty dirt roads and mountains, waiting for his return.

Two years ago, Banodube, left home on the back of a truck heading to the centre of South Africa, looking for work. He undertook a job working on a gold mine, working at the world's deepest mine, AngloGold Ashanti's Mponeng mine, about 65km (40 miles) south-west of Johannesburg. Every month, he would send money home, enabling me to buy enough food to feed myself and our four young children. However, in the last three months, we haven't received money and we have been living off any wild berries and fruits we can find. Due to the drought our town of Transkei has been experiencing, all the crops have died, and there isn't any clean or even dirty water to drink. How much longer can we live like this? I can feel the presence of death approaching our town, lingering in the shadows, waiting for the starvation to drain all the energy out of our thin and lifeless bodies, ready to pounce. Along with many of the other women in the village, we are struggling and fighting the lack of food and water. The earth is dry and hard.

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It was the first Sunday of the fourth month since we had heard from Banodube. The sun was blazing over the fiery red mountains. Our three oldest sons were out collecting debris and any fruits they could find along the beaten tracks. Kada waited and remained standing on the edge of the dirty, rough lane which ran past our mud hut and then on into the mountains. When I look into his eyes, I see hunger, ache, pain and desire for his father. He stands stationary waiting for that day. The day Banodube returns, hands outstretched, running to hug his baby boy. Kada has not said a word since the last letter from Banodube, four months to this day. Despite this, I can see his emotion portrayed in his yearning eyes.

Without warning, Kada ran down from the track, to where I was standing beating the dust off the little clothes we owned, screaming and crying for me. I did not know that Kada was capable of making such an ear-piercing noise as our mouths were all dreadfully dry due to the lack of water. I immediately dropped the clothes into a pile on the ground, and ran with him, holding tightly into his emaciated, skeletal hand as he dragged me to the road. There he was, Banodube, the love of my life. However, he did not have his hands outstretched, running to hug his baby boy. But instead, he lay motionless on the back of truck. He lifted up his arms and held my hand.

He whispered to me, 'I am home at last, where I belong.'

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The doctors came to visit Banodube in the following week. He was suffering from both silicosis, an incurable lung disease, and tuberculosis. He would tell us all about his experiences and the horrendous, appalling conditions in which he worked, despite his struggles to breathe sometimes. He is constantly in pain, and his chest feels as if it is on fire. Every day he fights for his life, and yet every day he looks more ill. The tuberculosis is so terrible that he is unemployable and will never be able to work again. He worked as a driller underground. They often worked speed shifts. This meant blasting the earth three times a day. Regardless of the dusty conditions, Banodube and the other men were not even given masks

to protect themselves – well the black workers were not. Treated like wild animals, they were not given breaks as time was money. The black workers had the dirtiest jobs, drilling underground, with no protection. Meanwhile, their white colleagues were given on-site showers. The Anglo-American company makes billions each year through gold mines, and we cannot even scrape enough to keep body and soul together.

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Death has taken my husband and four children, now it has taken me.