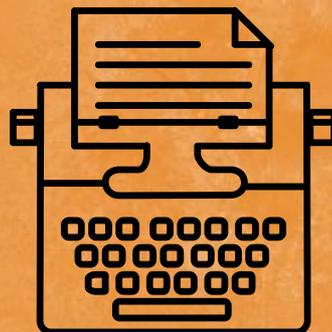


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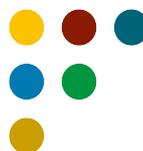
Author:

Occupy Climate Change (OCC!)

Creative story entry



FORMAS



HOW TO BAKE A CAKE IN THE 23RD CENTURY

By Buhle Zitha

‘Niki,’ Khensani roughly shook her best friend’s shoulder. ‘You have to get up.’

Nikiwe was momentarily disoriented as she groaned and pushed her away. She could still hear the ambient music from her bedroom’s hologram machine; the room emitted the sweet calming smell of sage, set to tranquil meditation music in the scene of a warmly lit spa. The hologram was meant to switch itself off in the morning with an alarm; Niki could still hear the music and smell the sage, which meant:

‘It’s still nighttime,’ she whined. ‘Leave me alone.’

Khensani huffed through her nostrils, annoyed, and she pulled the blanket off Nikiwe’s body. ‘We have a lot of work to do. Get up.’

Agitated by the sudden disappearance of warmth, Nikiwe reached up for the blanket, but Khensani threw the thing as far as she could behind her back. In one swift motion, Khensani located the remote and switched off the hologram, plunging the room in total darkness.

‘I’ll never understand why you’re so mean to me,’ Nikiwe muttered as she got herself up from the bed.

She was still practically sleepwalking as her friend led her to the kitchen. The lights switched on above their heads as they entered and Khensani turned to the fridge. ‘Cold water,’ she commanded.

The fridge placed chilled glasses on a tray in the door and dispensed ice-cold water into it. Khensani flicked droplets of the freezing water onto Nikiwe’s face. Shocked back to life, Nikiwe shot daggers at Khensani as she yanked the glass out of her friend’s hand.

‘That was uncalled for,’ she said between clenched teeth.

Her eyes fell on the clock displayed on the house’s central control system and her face contorted with disgust. ‘Four-fifteen? You woke me up at *four* in the morning?’

In the background, behind the clock, the control system displayed a heavy thunderstorm. Over the past weekend, a fierce thunderstorm ripped through the Mpumalanga province, battering its capital city, Nelspruit, and surrounding areas. The worst of it brought hailstorms that battered homes and businesses and caused flash floods in informal settlements and in the northeast neighbouring town of White River. Lightning had struck a powerline that plunged Nelspruit and Barberton into darkness for two whole days.

The latest report from the Municipality was that the worst was over but howling gale-force winds were still knocking down trees on farm roads and moderate rainfall was still pouring down steadily.

Khensani didn't care for any of Nikiwe's complaining as she stepped to the kitchen island, where a large, black box sat in the middle of the counter. 'Ration Control just dropped this off.' Her eyes came alive with excitement as her palms stroked the box's surface area. 'We need to get started if this is going to be ready by the time the courier arrives.'

Nikiwe and Khensani were best friends and business partners. They ran a café called the Brew & Chew in downtown Nelspruit, which was known for having the best mushroom coffee in town. As a pastry chef, Khensani had always been happy making a living off doing what she loved, but with the summer's drought damaging crops all over the country she was forced to turn down orders because of lack of available crops.

Today, Khensani had forced Nikiwe out of bed before sunrise so they could get a head start on a new order that they hadn't worked on for a while, a cake.

It had been several months since Khensani had accepted an order for a specialty cake. There had been a drought over the summer that had damaged maize and sugarcane crops. The lack of availability for ingredients forced her to pick and choose which orders she accepted. She turned down requests far more frequently than she liked. The hard part was having to deal with the varying degrees of disappointment, anger, and irritation from the orders she rejected. Once, she tried to present an alternative to a client by offering to print the cake instead of baking it. Her customer was so offended by the mere suggestion of paying someone to print him a cake he turned bright red.

'Why the hell would I pay you to print me a cake?' he roared. He waved his arms around, eyes ablaze with rage. 'I can just do that myself, in the comfort of my own home!'

The café had gone silent as every patron stopped and gawked at the irate customer. That situation quickly dissuaded Khensani from ever suggesting that to customers ever again.

Today's order was for a chocolate cake for the retirement party of a top executive at Hawthorne & Modise Mining Interests and they had specifically requested Italian meringue as the icing. The Brew & Chew offered animal-based products at a premium rate, when they were available, but Khensani took the chance to hike up the prices for chocolate and the traditional meringue just a little more. She had tried to persuade them to pay slightly more for Khensani to use dairy milk and butter for the sponge, but they backed off because they had considered that they'd splurged enough.

The timing of the order was unfortunate, and they would never consider accepting an order like this during a high-alert weather event like the storm, but the money was too good to pass up. They were determined to make it work.

Nikiwe dragged her feet across the kitchen to join Khensani at the island. She placed the glass of water on the counter and it lit up with thin circles of blue light rippled around the glass's base.

'Let's make this more interesting,' Nikiwe said, her eyes on the glass.

The counter's surface turned a soft pink colour and the water's colour transformed into a greyish liquid with a pink tint to it that released the light-bodied aroma of pinot grigio. Nikiwe giddily downed two big sips as her friend placed her hand on top of the box and green lights spiralled around the entire surface as it scanned her biometrics.

'Ration Control delivery for the Brew & Chew Café successful,' the large cube said in a pleasant voice. 'The Municipality of Ehlanzeni thanks you for your cooperation.'

A dramatic smoke effect created by dry ice swelled out of the cube as the sides folded away. They stood over the kitchen island with their hands on their hips as they surveyed the ingredients laid out before them.

Usually, the cake would be made at the café, but they had to close the business because of the storm under the advisement of the Municipality. In the days leading up to the storm, everyone had hoped that the rain meant that crops would finally be getting their overdue nourishment. But, as it drew nearer, the Municipality made an announcement calling for people to evacuate the city and neighbouring towns. There would be shelters provided for people who didn't have safety available to them; mosques and churches were providing sanctuary and every high school in the entire district from Barberton, through Nelspruit and White River would be opened to provide refuge as well.

To avoid food shortages, every household would be provided with rations to get them through the storm. The Ration Control Hamper only consisted of staples: maizemeal, eggs, milk, fresh produce and bread; toiletries such as sanitary pads and soap were available upon request on the application form. Everything else would have to be bought.

Khensani and Nikiwe could get a higher portion of rations from the Municipality for the Brew & Chew, as well as get preferential consideration for organic food. But there was always something missing in their parcel every month. In the ten years of the coffee house's existence, neither Nikiwe nor Khensani could think of a single time when they got everything that they applied for.

'Is this everything?' Nikiwe asked.

Khensani shrugged, unconvinced. 'It should be.'

'Take a closer look.'

Khensani placed her right thumb on the closest corner of the marble counter and the table woke with a screen. After tinkering with some buttons, Khensani found the order confirmation receipt that the Municipality had emailed to her when she submitted her Ration Control application, where all the items she requested were listed.

'Soy milk,' she said.

'Check,' Nikiwe replied.

'Flour?'

'Got it.'

'Eggs?'

Nikiwe's long pause made Khensani look up at her. Nikiwe shook her head. As though they were communicating telepathically, they split into opposite directions and began searching high and low on both sides of the kitchen on the hunt for eggs.

'Are you sure you even ordered eggs?' Nikiwe asked.

'Yes.'

They searched high and low, but the eggs were nowhere to be found. Finally, they met each other back at the counter, dejected, and looked down at the incomplete assembly of ingredients.

'We probably don't even have to make a real cake. We could just print one,' Nikiwe suggested.

Khensani raised her eyebrows, horrified by the suggestion.

'Okay, okay. No printing,' Nikiwe held her hands up in surrender. 'We'll make a real cake and use aquafaba for the meringue.'

Aquafaba was the water in which chickpeas had been cooked. When chilled, it made the perfect substitute for egg whites and could be beaten into meringue just the same. Nikiwe and Khensani were no strangers to substituting ingredients. The existence of the Brew & Chew depended on them finding ways to produce the food that people liked, even when the traditional ingredients weren't available. They regularly used apple sauce in place of eggs, found sweeteners in the form of dates and stevia, and relied on plant-based milks.

It was a perfect plan, but there was just one problem:

'We charged them extra for real Italian meringue,' Khensani said, pinching the bridge of her nose. 'Made with eggs, not chickpea water.'

'They won't know the difference.'

‘Yes, they would. Chickpeas have a smell, which means the brine smells like them.’

‘Then we’ll mask the smell with coffee. Problem solved.’

Khensani chewed on her bottom lip as a knot of anxiety tightened deep in her stomach. Meanwhile, Nikiwe refilled her glass with water and put it back on the counter. She never got bored of watching how the liquid magically transformed.

‘Seriously?’ Khensani remarked.

Nikiwe glared at her friend from under her eyelashes as she returned to the kitchen island. ‘Don’t judge me. You’re the one who woke me up at the asscrack of dawn – I need to find a way to sustain myself.’

Khensani looked at the time on the fridge; if they were going to get this cake made, they needed to hustle. ‘I could find some at the Plaza.’

‘Ha!’ Nikiwe responded. ‘If the Municipality couldn’t get us eggs, what makes you think you’ll find them in that hole?’

‘It’s worth a try.’

Nikiwe extended her wine to Khensani. ‘I think you might need this more than me right now.’

Khensani was already pulling on her rain gear. ‘Get started on the sponge. I’ll be right back.’

It was still raining firmly as Khensani stepped outside and ran up to her waiting floodcab. It bobbed on the surface of ankle-deep floodwater that flowed downhill like a river. The cab’s doors opened automatically, and she climbed inside. The interior was a soft mint green colour and the heater turned on automatically. She paid for her ride by placing her thumb on the dashboard and the windshield came alive with a touchscreen.

‘Thank you for using public transit,’ an automated voice in the cab spoke up. ‘Based on the travel history provided to us by the Municipality, we recommend the following destinations.’

Khensani waved away all the options until the screen presented the Brew & Chew to her. The muddy terrain where the Plaza was located made it difficult to get there by car, so she would stop at the café and walk the rest of the way.

The cab slowly began floating against the flow of the floodwater towards the middle of town. The ankle-level water wasn’t the only evidence of the past weekend’s storm. Shivering homeless people in tattered, dirty clothing huddled together around fires made in steel barrels, trembling as they sought shelter from the continuous downpouring. They watched Khensani’s cab passing them with wide eyes and long faces. It had been a long

weekend for everyone, but she knew that the hail and stormy winds had punished them the most.

The floodcab slowed to a stop in front of the Brew & Chew. ‘Thank you for traveling with us,’ the voice said. ‘Please enjoy your day.’

‘You’re welcome,’ Khensani instinctively replied under her breath.

She stepped out of the cab and opened a large umbrella, starting to walk down the sidewalk. As she passed the grocer, she had an impulse. After a moment’s hesitation, she ducked into the dimly lit, sad-looking place. There was a faint stench resembling rotting vegetables and electronic music played in the background. Walking through the bare aisles filled her heart with dread. Had there been a time when the shelves were ever actually full?

Just as she suspected, there were no eggs. She did find the last two giant cans of chickpeas. She paid for them, much to her chagrin, by scanning her wrists at the pay point by the exits before she made a break for her actual destination.

The Plaza was several blocks down the street, too close to drive and yet, somehow, also too far to walk. That was the thing about Nelspruit; it was always in the middle, too small to be a city but too large to be a town.

About fifty years ago, there were rumours that the last bit of the province’s coal could be found in the land that the Plaza was built on. Hawthorn & Modise then began buying up the land and evicted the supermarkets, clothing retailers and hair salons that drove a third of the city’s economy. They didn’t find a single lump of coal in the company’s twelve years of operation. It became apparent that they were wrong about the coal within the first five years, but Hawthorn & Modise kept digging, expanding the mine further downtown, collapsing bottle stores and private medicine practices. They dumped their waste near the Crocodile River, the city’s main water supply, making the water undrinkable as it turned toxic. When strong winds blew over Nelspruit, they carried the mine dust with them; particles of lead and zinc, as well as substances a lot harder to remember, like kaolinite.

On her walk, Khensani caught sight of two skyscrapers in the distance, belonging to Hawthorne & Modise. The heavy clouds of black smoke coming from the buildings made them look like they were on fire. Nobody knew what they were burning in there, but it gave off a foul stench that descended on the city, so harsh that it made people nauseous and dizzy. It was such a problem that the masks became a necessary nuisance of everyday life. If memory served Khensani correctly, there were about five individual lawsuits pending against the company by their former employees who had contracted lung disease after working for them.

The failed mine had left a giant, gaping hole that looked like a deep, gaping wound gashed into the soil. In the years after the mine closed, informal traders had slowly trickled back what used to be the Plaza. They cleaned up what they could and worked together to create a network of tunnels and pathways, everyone carving out their own stall to sell whatever they managed to grow. Farming was allowed at a subsistence level, but commercial agriculture, no matter the size, was an offense punishable by imprisonment because of the damage it did to the soil. People grew just enough extra crops to sell at the market without alerting Municipal officials. Police officers tended to look the other way, just as desperate for something real to eat. The allure of organically grown food and cheap animal-based products was too good to penalise.

The Plaza was teeming with people despite all the rain. Makeshift gazebos on unsteady wooden pillars lined the leftover hole in the ground; they were topped with corrugated iron roofs, but those on the unluckier side of the spectrum had to make do with whatever kind of plastic they could find – another illegal item. Since plastic wasn't biodegradable and nearly ubiquitous, it was easy to find and cheap to use.

The pathways were slippery and Khensani despised the way the dark soil discoloured her red boots. This was a minor issue compared to the problems of others affected by the thunderstorm though. She wondered how many of these vendors had their houses destroyed by the weekend's storm. How did they get here? By floodcab, like her?

She went from vendor to vendor, methodically making her way through the network and asking asking them all in SiSwati if they happened to have eggs. They were all only selling what little they could harvest before the storm; decent-looking tomatoes, and fresh spinach, maize, and lemons. There were some who were selling the last of what miscellaneous stock they had, like sweets and snacks for the school children who took the bus to school from the Plaza. But no one had any eggs.

'Animal products are hard to come by these days, even for us,' one of the vendors explained to her. 'We're lucky if we can even find a *chicken*, let alone a hen to lay eggs.'

Khensani found herself quietly seething as she went about her search. Eggs weren't the only unavailable animal products; milk and butter were also absent. She caught sight of Hawthorne & Modise's skyscrapers again and her blood started to boil. She would put good money on whether the retiring executive could afford to have chickens who could lay eggs for him to whip up his own meringue. He probably had an entire farm of real animals to pick from; cows for steak, pigs for bacon. All that while everyone else had to get by on Municipal rations if they were lucky. She'd concede that this hypothetical farm owned by this

hypothetical old man had been affected by last weekend's floods as well, but it didn't affect his access to food the way it did for everyone else. She felt a slight sense of vindication knowing she and Nikiwe had charged the company extra for the meringue. Nikiwe's aquafaba idea was beginning to sound appealing. Even more appealing than that was the idea of just printing the cake, like Nikiwe had suggested right at the beginning. That would show them.

As she was thinking this, she felt a slight vibration in her right palm. She wrestled her umbrella into her other hand, sliding the grocery bag down her forearm. She looked at the back of her hand and a hologram screen appeared in the L-shape between her thumb and forefinger. Nikiwe made Khensani jealous with how warm and laidback she looked in the comfort of their house.

'Are you drunk yet?' Khensani quipped.

Nikiwe stuck her tongue out at her mockingly and Khensani laughed at her friend's childishness. 'Where are the eggs?'

Khensani huffed. She had spent over an hour wandering through the Plaza's informal market with no luck and the cans of chickpeas in her grocery bag were growing heavier by the minute. 'We've just got to keep the faith,' she finally said, hoping her raised shoulders would project an air of confidence.

It didn't seem to work on Nikiwe. 'Just come home. We'll use the aquafaba.'

'Did you start making the sponge cakes?'

Nikiwe rolled her eyes. 'Yes, boss,' she said sarcastically.

'You didn't print them, did you?'

'What kind of person do you take me for?'

'I'll look around for just a few more minutes.'

'You won't make it in time before the courier gets here.'

'I'm here now anyway,' Khensani argued. 'Just half an hour.'

'If you say so.'

The screen shut off as Nikiwe hung up. Khensani checked her watch. Her stomach rolled. She should have just stayed at home; printed the sponge cakes and used aquafaba and everything would have been perfect and easy and...

No! No negative thinking. This was going to happen. It *had* to happen.

She took a deep breath to renew her energy and she wandered around the corner, further into the tunnels. The back of the market. It was less crowded here and darker, but a little more shielded from the rain. She was unnerved by gruff, husky voices calling her over,

trying to get her attention. A cursory glance over the items on display immediately told her these were counterfeit items; there was a daily deluge of stories of how vendors used old printers for their food, using hazardous chemicals to brighten so they looked organic. It was one thing to buy food unauthorised by the Municipality, but it was a completely other thing to use your hard-earned money to buy *fake* unauthorised food. You only realised your mistake once you made it out of the Plaza and the redness of the apple you bought rubbed off on your hand, or what you thought was a banana was actually a stick of sugared chalk and clay.

It did seem a little ironic to her that she was put off by counterfeit food when she made a living selling coffee that wasn't made from actual coffee. Of course it wasn't the same, she decided; they were upfront about her coffee being made from mushrooms at the Brew & Chew. There were no inorganic or harmful chemicals in their food – they were selling alternatives, not fakes.

She found a middle-aged woman getting help setting up her stall from a little girl. Khensani didn't know what it was that drew her to the woman. Maybe it was because she was the only one who wasn't yelling out at her. The vendor had a kind look in her eyes and there was something in her than Khensani found motherly. Maybe it was the little girl. She wondered if the pair were mother and daughter; or maybe the little girl was the woman's granddaughter. But it was mostly because her food looked like it was actually grown from the ground and made from an old printer.

'*Sanbonani,*' Khensani greeted politely. 'I've been looking for eggs everywhere, I'm hoping you'll be able to help me.'

The lady relayed the instruction to the little girl in SiSwati. Khensani felt her heart swell with excitement. She reigned herself in, reminding herself never to celebrate before the victory. After a few tense moments, the child re-emerged cradling six eggs in her hands. Khensani's heart exalted. She reached for them, but the seller blocked her with her hand.

'Two-ninety,' she said.

Khensani's jaw dropped and she let out an incredulous laugh. Two hundred and ninety rands for eggs? She had thought that the hunt for the eggs would be the hard part, but this was the real test. The lady was serious, though, staring her down.

'*One-ninety,*' Khensani negotiated, trying her best to match the intense gaze fixed on her.

The vendor plucked three eggs from Khensani's pile. 'Two-fifty.'

Khensani blinked at her. 'Two-ten.'

The lady paused. Khensani heard her heart pounding in her ears. Finally, the vendor nodded and Khensani happily paid the negotiated price. She carefully placed the eggs in the bag, which she carried in her arms like precious cargo as she made her way back to the Brew & Chew to call another floodcab to take her home.

The decadent aroma of freshly baked chocolate cake was like the hug Khensani didn't know she needed until she stepped into the house. She found Nikiwe in the kitchen, engrossed in an article projected between her hands. Khensani was even more surprised to find that Nikiwe was sipping on something new: a large mug of coffee.

'Did the wine wear you out so soon?' Khensani said jokingly.

'It turns out that baking requires sobriety,' Nikiwe replied as she looked up at Khensani. Her eyebrows shot up with excitement. 'Success?'

'Success!'

Nikiwe jumped off the barstool and reached for the bag. She lost her balance and her body lunged forward. She blindly reached for the counter to steady herself but her arm collided with the shopping bag, pushing it over the edge. They watched in slow motion as the shopping bag tumbled to the ground, the cans hitting the tiles with an ear-splitting *clank*. A pool of egg whites and yolks formed on the floor beneath.

'Looks like I had more wine than I thought,' Nikiwe said quietly to herself.

Khensani glared at Nikiwe in total disbelief. 'Seriously? These cost a fortune!'

Nikiwe shrugged, apologetic. Khensani groaned as she looked down at the splattered eggs on the floor. She couldn't bare the sight of her dejected front, head bowed and sombre.

'What else was in there?' Nikiwe asked.

'The last cans of chickpeas from the supermarket.'

Nikiwe arched an eyebrow and Khensani rolled her eyes. While Nikiwe cleaned up the mess, Khensani drained the water from the chickpeas and reduced the liquid in a saucepan. She put the liquid in the fridge to chill before she could start whipping it. Before she made the sugar syrup for the meringue, she checked on the sponge cakes. They weren't entirely cool just yet, but she was more surprised that Nikiwe hadn't tried to steal a piece from them.

'At least you had the foresight to buy the chickpeas,' Nikiwe said in an attempt to comfort her.

'Foresight?' Khensani responded, as she watched over the syrup. "'Or did I jinx it?'

Nikiwe shrugged. 'One always meets his destiny on the path he takes to avoid it.'

Khensani retrieved the chickpea water from the fridge once it was chilled and whipped it. She added the syrup slowly, and then put cream of tartar and chunks of butter gradually as it puffed up and began to thicken. The smell of the meringue icing that she was worried about earlier wasn't as pungent as she thought it would be. After they coated the cake with the velvety meringue icing, Khensani piped the message on the top: *happy retirement! Enjoy your permanent weekend.*

'It looks like something my Gogo would make for her pastor,' Nikiwe commented. She brought her finger close to the cake. Khensani swatted Nikiwe's hand away before she could make any dents in it.

The rain was beginning to lighten as the day went on, but the heavy clouds kept the sky dark and dreary. The humanoid courier robot rang their doorbell at around half-past four in the afternoon. When Khensani and Nikiwe opened the door, it stood motionless and silent, waiting.

Nikiwe tapped its chest lightly and nothing happened. It didn't move. There was no pinging or ringing or music. The thing stared at her. She and Khensani eyed the courier, standing still as a statue in their doorway.

'Try it again,' Khensani suggested.

This time, Nikiwe gave the courier a smack in the center of its chest and a panel on the robot's chest opened. Khensani put the box carrying the cake into the slot. Once the cake was safe inside the courier bot, it extended its arm and a receipt rolled out of its wrist, which Nikiwe took. The robot turned and walked away. From a window, Khensani and Nikiwe watched the robot disappear down the street, unbothered by the rain as its mechanical feet marched along the sidewalk.

'I can't believe we still charged them extra for chickpea water,' Khensani remarked.

Nikiwe patted her on the back. 'No one will have a single clue.'

Khensani caught her lower lip between her teeth. 'Should we call him back and give him a refund?'

'No way,' Nikiwe argued as she linked her arm with Khensani's. 'This is business, not personal. If anyone can understand that, it's them.'

She pulled her friend away from the window and guided her to the sitting room, where two mugs of fresh, steaming coffee were waiting on the coffee table. The full-bodied aroma of the beverages coated the room as Khensani and Nikiwe took their mugs and plopped down on the couch in front of the hologram screen.

‘Trust me,’ Nikiwe said as she pulled a blanket over her legs. ‘They won’t notice a thing.’

‘Just like with our coffee?’

Nikiwe knit her eyebrows together. ‘What do you mean?’

‘You know – how it’s not real coffee because it’s made from mushrooms.’

Nikiwe blinked at her friend. ‘Everyone knows you can only make coffee out of mushrooms.’

‘Yeah, today. But, a hundred years ago, people made coffee from the actual coffee bean.’

‘Did you bump your head on your way to the Plaza? Because you’re talking nonsense.’

‘It isn’t nonsense. It’s true. This isn’t *real* coffee.’

‘Mm-hmm,’ Nikiwe replied flippantly, still unconvinced.

On the hologram screen, the opening score to their favorite movie soared and they settled in, letting themselves forget the day’s stresses.