AFRICAN BOMBER

THE TRUE STORY OF SIYA KOLISI

BEHIND SIYA KOLISI'S MASSIVE BICEPS AND THUNDERING TACKLES LIES A REMARKABLE STORY ABOUT RUGBY, THE TOWNSHIP AND TRAGEDY. IT IS THE STORY OF A NEW BREED OF SOUTH AFRICAN HERO.

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THIS IS WHERE SIYA KOLISI learned to play rugby. Dan QeQe stadium. Zwide township. Port Elizabeth. Out on the pitch, lush grass has carpeted the stony patches and buried the thorns, but everywhere else there are signs of the long, hard season just past. A crossbar slants into the ground. The skeleton of a scrum machine lies abandoned in the dead ball area. Litter drifts. Wires dangle from the floodlights, and snatches of music and the muffled barking of dogs blow in on the breeze. This is the proud home of African Bombers Rugby Football Club, and Siya Kolisi is glad to be back.

Kolisi is a rugby blueblood, with a pedigree stretching from Grey High School to the Stormers and the Springboks, but it is club rugby that runs in his veins. It was African Bombers who, more than a decade ago, took him in as a boy and began to mould him into a man. As a stout little prop with protruding ears, Kolisi's nickname used to be 'Shrek'. Now they call him 'the Bear'. With a jagged scar where his thumb was pinned together and twin seams stitched over the screws in his shoulders, Kolisi is no-one's idea of a philosopher. But the 100kg flanker knows better than most that if a man is nothing without a future, he is even less without making peace with his past.

Kolisi has seen Dan QeQe in all its seasons. Running out for the Bombers Under-9 team. Practising with the neighbourhood kids, girls included. Playing for Emsengeni Primary School, who plucked him from obscurity but didn't have a pitch of their own. Singing and swaying in the stands, crammed in with hundreds of fans. Eventually, breaking into the Bombers first team itself – and then, whenever he could, bunking out of Grey High to play.

Club rugby was neither easy nor fair. There were never enough socks and jerseys to go round, boots were few and far between, and first aid meant pouring cold water on where it hurt. But rugby practice was a home away from a difficult home, and offered more than the prospect of being a tsotsi ever could.

DAN QEQE STADIUM
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Kolisi's first team debut was a ferocious rite of passage. Bitter rivals Spring Rose were the opposition, Springbok hard man Solly Tybilika was his opposite number, and Kolisi himself was only a raw 15-year-old. With his first touch of the ball he drew his man, passed beautifully to set up a try, and was then smashed by a late tackle that ended in a red card after he was driven dangerously into the dirt.

Not much could scare Kolisi after that – certainly not Under-16 rugby back at Grey. And nothing else could match that deep sense of belonging that came from playing the game he loved among the people he grew up with. Even when he was in matric and had signed for the Cheetahs (prematurely, it turned out), the call of the Bombers was impossible to ignore.

NOT MUCH COULD SCARE KOLISI AFTER THAT - **CERTAINLY NOT UNDER-16 RUGBY** BACK AT GREY.

All of which explains why, whenever he returns from Stormers duty, Kolisi heads straight to the Lifa n Mafa butchery-and-braai joint to grab some chow and chill with mates, just like the old days. Here, the good times start early on a Friday. By 11am, the fires are already scorching hot, girls in school uniform are wandering past, and mellow kwaito beats anticipate the payday crowd to come. Two hundred bucks buys enough braai meat for four, plus a loaf of brown bread and a 2L Coke. These are simple pleasures. The good life.

"I've got two homes," says Kolisi, tearing into a perfectly grilled drumstick. He is that rare South African, a man who is totally unconflicted about his roots. No vague justifications, no awkwardness. "I don't forget about PE," he says, with a huge and unguarded grin. "I always want to come back. It's my happy spot."

ZWIDE LIFE
NO VAGUE
JUSTIFICATIONS,
NO AWKWARDNESS.

TWO HOMES. ALWAYS THE TWO HOMES. Cape Town and Port Elizabeth. Newlands and Zwide. Grey High School and 17 Mtembu Street. His gran's place and his mother's shack. Where did Siya Kolisi truly belong? If he had been a less resilient child, it might have been a question that plagued him, perhaps triggered a crisis of identity. But Kolisi instinctively knew where his loyalties lay – with those who cared for him and gave him the opportunity to flourish. So what if that constellation of people did not resemble a stable nuclear family, or fate cruelly intervened? So be it. He had never known any differently.

Kolisi was born on 16 June 1991 – exactly 15 years after the Soweto riots, and 16 months after Nelson Mandela's release from prison – and his early years mirrored South Africa's rough transition to democracy. When his mother's family, alarmed at their daughter giving birth while still at school, decided they could not afford to feed an extra mouth, his father's mother took the infant in and raised him as her own. Her two-bedroomed house was home to five, so Siya slept on the floor on a bed of cushions near the front door, wedging them tightly so they wouldn't slide apart. The dusty back garden contained a patch of cabbage and spinach, and a long-drop toilet in an outhouse. Money was short and food was scarce. Often the only meal that Siya had all day was lunch at school: powdered milk and a thick slice of white bread, smeared with peanut butter.

"Sometimes I wouldn't eat but my gran would go to a friend and bring back a slice of bread for me," Kolisi says. "Sometimes she wouldn't eat for a while because whatever she got, she gave to us. She always told me to smile and stay positive, and that rubbed off on me. I was always smiling and I had energy, hungry or not. I wouldn't complain to her. She would tell me, 'There is nothing I can do today.'"

Apart from hunger, crushing boredom and hopelessness stalked the streets. Parents would dispatch their kids to fetch booze from the local shebeen. If they had any money, boys would spend it on drink or weed.

17 MTEMBU STREET
AFRICAN BOMBERS COLOURS,
AND A BED ON THE FLOOR.

Even with virtually none, they could still 'smoke' petrol. They would squeeze five rands' worth out of the pump, shake it up in a plastic bottle, inhale the fumes and bliss out. Sometimes it was hard to say no. Back at home, when the hunger pangs really bit, sugar water might do the trick. Kids spooned it in, made it sweet, downed it quickly and tried to sleep.

BY SMUG MIDDLE CLASS STANDARDS, Zwide seems anything but a happy spot. Yet Kolisi offers no excuses and makes no complaints. It's an extraordinary, almost revolutionary, brand of honesty. "Playing in the street, we didn't feel apartheid," he says. "I don't even know what that is, actually. I read about it and heard about it at school, but to me it was never an issue. It wasn't a new South Africa for me. It was just normal South Africa, the same as it is today. But I was very poor. I had no toys. I used to use a brick and pretend it was a car. But, *sjoe*, I would drive that brick! It was the best thing ever."

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Clearly, the poverty did not extend to Kolisi's imagination, and the only effect it had on his rugby was to drive him onwards. He would do anything to play more and better and, when he was all of 12 years old, he made the call to switch schools as soon as well-known talent-spotter and Emsengeni deputy head Eric Songwiqi invited him to. Songwiqi expected the kid to turn up the next year; instead he arrived the next week.

It was a life-changing decision made by a youngster who had already seen too much of life. When his gran's faculties failed, Siya had to stay home from school to care for her. "I washed her, fed her, and walked around with her," he remembers. "One day, we were in the kitchen when she just dropped. I caught her and put her down slowly. I was

LIFE-CHANGING
ERIC SONGWIQI AND
EMSENGINI PRIMARY.

talking to her but she wouldn't say anything back. I ran next door and called the neighbours. They came, and the pastor came and checked, and they said she had passed away. But I was too young to know what had happened. I didn't freak out. I didn't cry. I still haven't cried to this day… which is actually killing me whenever I think about it."

Songwiqi's first act was to pack Kolisi off to Eastern Province Under-12 trials where, in shiny purple boxer shorts, he made enough of an impression to be selected for the B team. Having morphed from chunky prop to skinny wing to ball-carrying loose forward, Kolisi turned heads at inter-provincials, and by the end of the year he was settling down not into Emsengeni Primary but into hostel at Grey Junior School, thanks to a rugby scholarship which covered his every cost. A boy is never too young to make his own luck.

THE TOWNSHIP CONVERSION, as Kolisi calls it, began in 2004. At first, it was not pretty. Kolisi flunked two terms while he grappled with elementary English. (Teammate Nick Holton patiently tutored him and checked his homework every day – and learnt Xhosa in return.) When Kolisi joined his white classmates in the pool – of course he could swim, of course he could jump in the deep end – he sank like a stone. Courage and a sense of humour were called for.

"You shouldn't be scared to try," was Kolisi's conclusion. "I remember the things I used to say, like 'Ow! I hurt my toe!', when I meant 'my finger'. Just laugh at yourself more than other guys laugh at you."

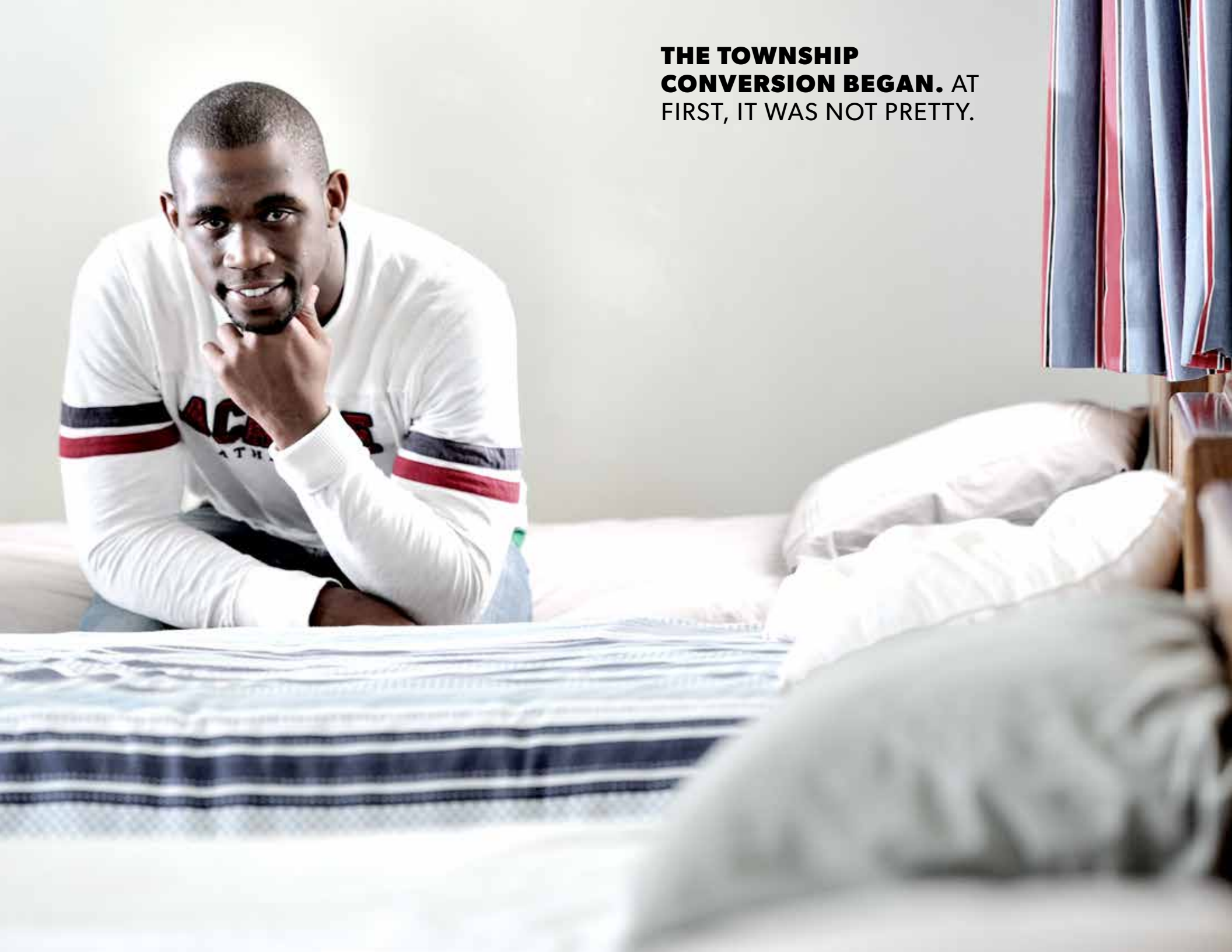
He thrived on structure and consequences. Detention and curfew got his attention. If the masters boozed, no-one saw them do it, and no-one ever smoked dope. "In the township you could do whatever you want. You could get away with it. It was like no-one really cared," he says. He realised that although he had always known right from wrong, it took a boarding school regime for him to *really* know.

Kolisi and the other black guys on the team sang Xhosa rugby songs in the changerooms and, ignorant of reputations, inspired their U13A team to a season of upset wins. When his growth spurt (and Bombers first team experience) kicked in, Kolisi's rugby took off. He captained the Grey U16A team, helped EP win Grant Khomo week, and turned out for the 3rd XV, then the 2nd XV. Photographs accumulated on the humble mantelpiece back at Mtembu Street. Two years of SA Schools colours beckoned.

But Kolisi's conversion could never be – was never meant to be – total. He had not gained a new identity in order to reject the first. Straddling two worlds, however, was tougher than anyone knew. Township teams loved to knock the stuffing out of him whenever they played Grey. Former friends in the location slid into a murky, fatal world of crime and drugs. During a weekend break in Zwide, a drunkard once smashed a beer bottle over his head, then gashed him in the neck with it. But Kolisi refused to get down on himself, even when real trouble came knocking.

"I NEVER TOLD MY MOTHER THAT I LOVED HER. WHEN SHE PASSED AWAY... **OH, IT WAS HARD,** BUT I DIDN'T CRY."

"I was at Grey, sitting with my friends, when I got a phone call to say that my aunt had just passed away," Kolisi says. "I sat there and thought, 'No, man. This can't be real.' She had been sick in hospital for I don't know how many days and no-one had told me. Then my mother passed away. My gran, my aunt and my mother were the three closest people in my life. They did everything for me. Everything. Whatever I needed, whether they had it or not, they would try. And I never told my mother that I loved her. I don't remember saying that. When she passed away... Oh, it was hard, but I didn't cry."



THE TOWNSHIP CONVERSION BEGAN. AT FIRST, IT WAS NOT PRETTY.

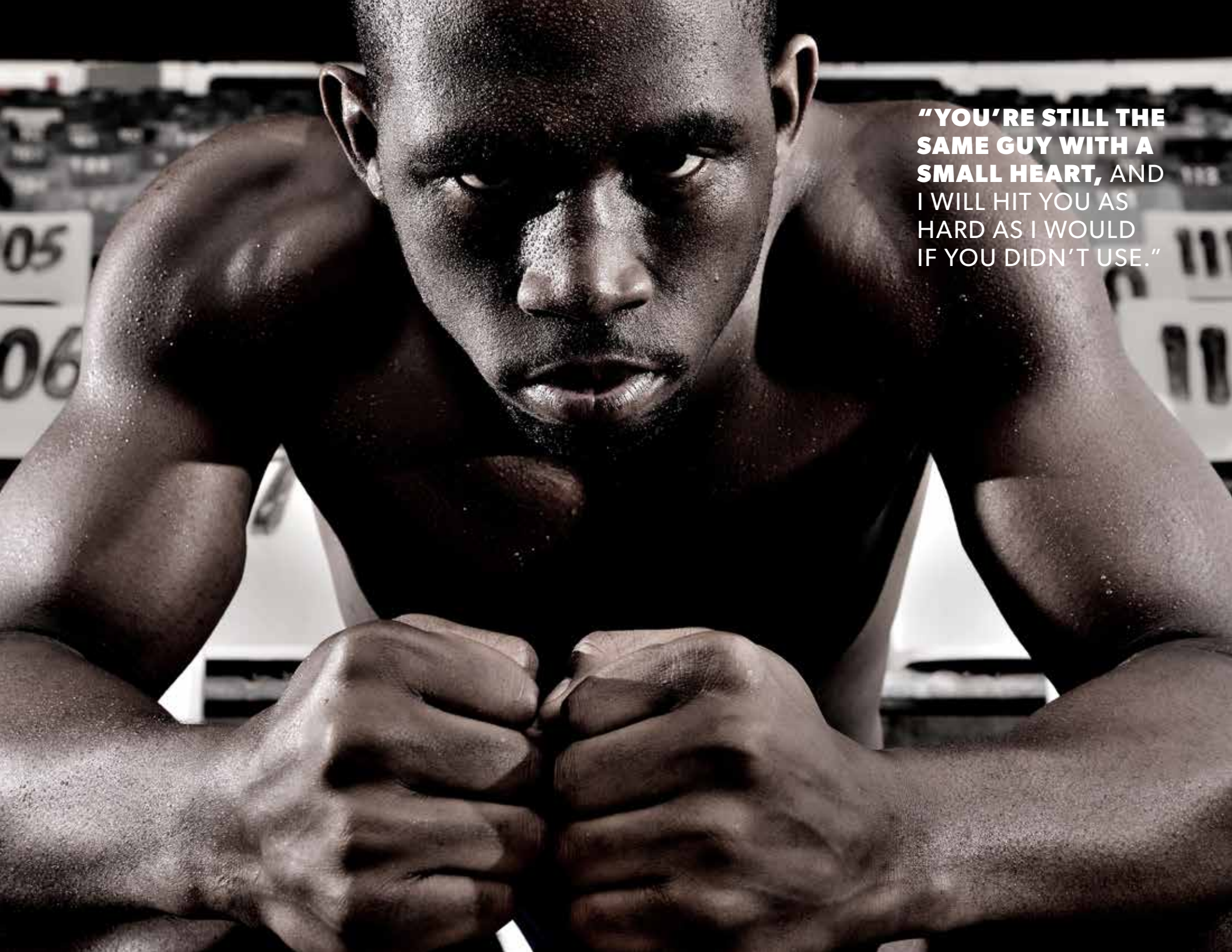
Such is Kolisi's self-control that the only hint of distress is that his words speed up, or that his hands flutter in front of his mouth. He never saw his half-brother and half-sister again after his mother's funeral. Her family gave the children away, once more because they couldn't afford to feed them. By the time he was 16 years old – his mother's age when she gave birth to him – Siya Kolisi had lost more loved ones than he knew how to cry for. Than any 16-year-old could ever cry for.

BY THE TIME HE WAS 16 YEARS OLD, **KOLISI HAD LOST MORE LOVED ONES** THAN HE KNEW HOW TO CRY FOR.

KOLISI KEPT ON KEEPING ON. He put his faith in what rugby had always demanded: discipline, hard work and the steady polishing of talent. By the time he left Grey, he had a prefect's tie, a university exemption and a contract with Western Province in his back pocket. But in 2010, soon after arriving at another new home, the WP Rugby Institute in Stellenbosch, it became obvious how much there still was to learn.

"Township guys don't like tackling," says Kolisi sheepishly. "It's not that we can't, but we just don't like it. I used to *hate* tackling at school. I came to Western Province, and I had to tackle every single day. And I started loving it, especially when I hit someone hard."

The revelations rolled on. At the institute, Kolisi learnt to ride a bicycle, and encountered Afrikaners up close and en masse for the first time. "Their English was very bad, and I couldn't speak a word of Afrikaans. It was pretty funny."



“YOU’RE STILL THE SAME GUY WITH A SMALL HEART, AND I WILL HIT YOU AS HARD AS I WOULD IF YOU DIDN’T USE.”

The cross-cultural dating scene was another eye-opener. "When you're growing up in the township, you say, 'Oh, I'd love to kiss a white girl!' But I was always too scared to try."

And, unlike those who bleat about being in the cultural minority, he couldn't have been less dismayed to find himself in Cape Town. "If I were the only black guy here, I don't care," he says. "I choose to fit in. If you want to fit in somewhere, you've got to do it. I'll be friends with anyone, I really don't mind. I know what I came here to do."

That year Kolisi lifted the Under-19 Currie Cup with Western Province and was selected for the Baby Boks. In 2011, he bypassed the Varsity Cup, went straight into the Vodacom Cup and Baby Bok sides, and only a late-night mugging after a mate's birthday party could derail his scheduled debut for the Stormers in their Super Rugby semifinal against the Crusaders.

"GROWING UP IN THE TOWNSHIP, YOU SAY, **'OH, I'D LOVE TO KISS A WHITE GIRL!'** BUT I WAS ALWAYS TOO SCARED."

Kolisi is no brawler, on or off the pitch, and in the melee he bit his tongue so badly he couldn't eat properly for a week afterwards. He ended up losing 3kg and WP hushed it up, but a few months later they chose their 'Most Promising Senior Player' wisely: in 2012 Kolisi would prove a barnstorming replacement for Schalk Burger, receive a Bok call-up, and help Province win the Currie Cup for the first time in 11 years.

SIX MONTHS BEFORE he made his full Springbok debut, Siya Kolisi became a man. For three weeks, in the bush in the Eastern Cape, he and hundreds of other newly circumcised Xhosa youths slept rough, enduring the

traditional initiation into manhood. "You go through so much there," Kolisi says. "You're alone, you can't sleep, you're sore, and there's nothing you can do about it. You listen to the pain. And you think."

Kolisi wears his scars and wisdom so lightly that it's easy to forget he's just 22. Only when confronted by the short cuts taken by weaker men does his easy-going nature acquire a harder edge. He has no time for racial quotas, nor for common cheating. "Whether you're on steroids or not won't make you a better player," he warns. "It just gives you bigger muscles. You're still the same guy with a small heart, and I will hit you as hard as I would if you didn't use."

Humour and humility make Kolisi a popular teammate, and his single-mindedness has enriched rather than leached away his humanity. "A lot of people have been through much worse than me," he says. "There are people who don't eat every day and who don't have places to sleep. I knew there was nothing I could do about my situation at the time, but I always had it in my mind that I would make it one day, no matter what. I stayed happy, smiled, and when I got the opportunity, I took it. You can't have excuses when you get an opportunity – you have to be ready.

"If people get jealous in the township, what can I do about it? I'm not going to apologise for working hard. Township kids look up to me, and that's important. They must believe they can make it too. You can leave the township, but it will always bring you back. I always miss it. When I go back, I get emotional. It feels good. It makes me happy."

Always the two homes. The suburb and the township. And now, even two household names (Xhosa rugby commentators call him Gqwashu, after his clan). Two homes and two identities, but never one at the expense of the other. And the one word. *Siyamthanda*. A name gifted by a woman who is now blind, but who saw the teenage mother bathe her newborn at the dawn of democracy. *We love you.* ■

AND THE ONE WORD.
SIYAMTHANDA.
WE LOVE YOU.