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WEBBER WENTZEL

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A word of advice to my younger self, Hafiesa Samsodien

Dear Hafiesa,

It must be odd hearing from your older self, since while I am you (a wiser one, I would hope!), we are also different – I've been shaped by the journey you are about to go on. At the outset, be prepared to take a divergent path and be open to new experiences. You have quite a few challenges coming your way, some of which were not of your choosing! What may surprise you is that, sometimes, those around you have a unique perspective of your strengths, and of who you are.

I'm sure, by now, this sounds all so cryptic, and as a cautious person by nature, you must have some doubts, so please let me explain.

You've always wanted to be a fashion designer. You have the touch and care to do delicate work like sewing, knitting and embroidery. Those wedding dresses didn't make themselves. I'm happy to tell you that you did go to design school, but for one year only (many years after you finished matric), and then had to drop out when your first son arrived. Yes, you are married, and a mom to three wonderful boys.

What happened, you may ask? Well, you have always flown under the radar, but did quite well at school. Remember Mr. Matthews, your principal? You are going to need his help in certifying your school results for your application to design school. He will say something along the lines of, "Sure, leave this with me", and help with your application.

What he doesn't tell you is that he has no intention of sending your application to design school, and he is not alone. Your family are in on it and, between them all, they decide that you should, in fact, study law.

"Law?", you say. *It was never a career you considered, but Hafiesa, over the next 25 years, you are going to travel the world, spend most of your career at a single law firm, Webber Wentzel, and work with some wonderful people. Arthur James will interview you, and those 10 minutes will set you on your way.*

He will also speak a lot about shipping. I know it sounds... quite different, but a day will come when Arthur sends you to arrest a ship. Word of advice: if you are going to arrest a ship and need to climb what feels like 10 flights up to the deck on a pilot ladder, don't wear high heels. In fact, it may surprise you how interesting the world of shipping is. Whilst, at some point, you believe you will be a shipping lawyer, you will, in fact, become a corporate lawyer.

You will also spend two years working overseas in London, feeding your desire to travel. The best part is that this two-year break will be sanctioned by the law firm you still work for (they will grant you two years unpaid leave to do this). Compared to where you were before you left South Africa, prepare to be surprised.

You've spent your life in a cocoon, and always had a lot of family and friends around you. Their support has been ever-present for you, even through university and as you embarked on your career in law. But your move to London will take you out of your comfort zone, and will be a shock to the system. It will be the first time you ever live on your own, or do your own washing! And the law firm you work for in London is massive. I mean, huge.

It will be scary at times, and anxiety-inducing, but Hafiesa, you will learn and grow so much. You will persevere and knuckle down, telling yourself: "I need to get used to this change, everything will be fine. It will all work out." And you know what? It all worked out.

You are always worried about showing the people you work with that you don't know the answers to some questions, or that you don't know how to do something. It makes you unsure of yourself. Please, don't be. If I can give you some advice, it is to never be afraid to say, "I don't know, I'll look into it". Ask questions, or ask for help from those around you.

Actually, the partners you will work with see it as their responsibility to help you learn. They know you are finding your way, and will play an important role in shaping you as a legal professional.

To leave you with a final thought, it's as much about the journey as it is about the destination. That journey will shape you into a person that understands the value of teamwork and working with excellent people (you will be heavily involved in a project between Sanlam [yes that one!] and a company called Allianz. It will cover 29 countries and lead to the creation of one of the largest pan-African non-banking financial services companies to operate across Africa).

There is a lot more I can tell you, but by the time you reach the point I am at now, your life will be filled with richness, joy, and compelling work, plus maybe a cat. Also, your passion for the intricacies of fashion will not fade. I'm still working on finding time to go back to design school.

Hafiesa Samsodien