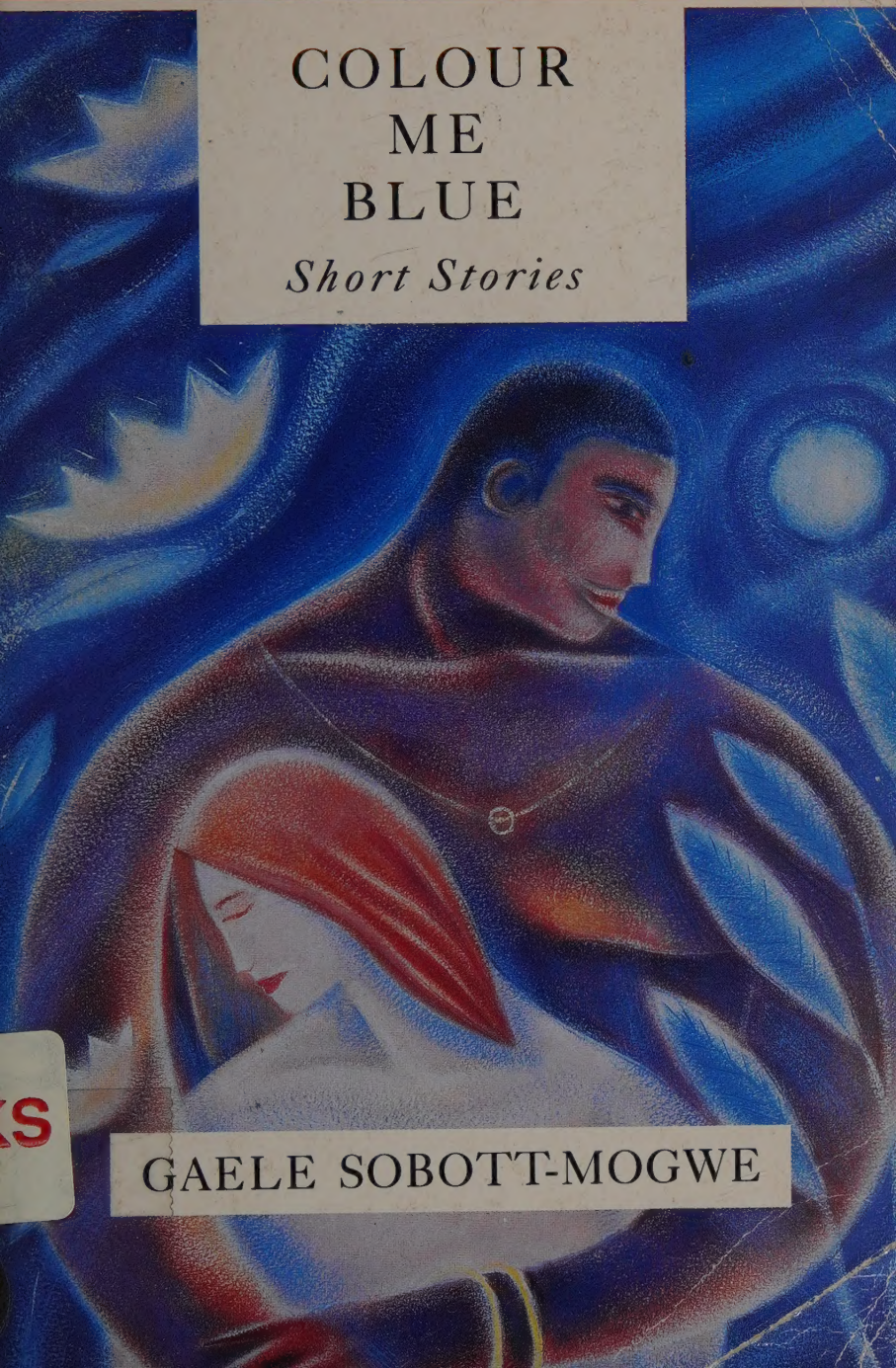
AFRICAN WRITERS SERIES

COLOUR ME BLUE

Short Stories



GAELE SOBOTT-MOGWE

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Gaele Sobott-Mogwe is already established as a successful writer of children's books, having won the 1993 Zimbabwe Literary Award for Children's Literature. *Colour Me Blue* is her first short-story collection, reflecting her deep attachment to her adopted homeland.

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COLOUR ME BLUE



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To my parents, Gladys and Allan; my sister, Cheryl; Hugh; all my friends, especially Kader, Carole, Turkan, Marijke, Motlalepula and Nhlanhla, who have helped me during my stay in England and to my children, Kagiso, Lorato and Thara.

Ke leboga bagaetsho ka ha ba nkagisitseng ka teng bogolo jang ba ba nkamogetseng ke le ngwetsi ya bone.

Telling Stories

◆

When I was a child, I sat with the other children around the fire at night in winter when it was icy cold. The old women would sometimes tell us stories. We huddled together, wrapped in our blankets ready for fantastic journeys and adventures. The moon-tinted clouds sped across the sky. Birds and wild animals called us with their haunted howls and screeches. Darkened, shadowy trees stretched their gnarled limbs, tiptoed and slunk about.

MmaDimo wove the most memorable magic as far as I was concerned. She would sit with a kaross made of finely sewn fox skins around her shoulders. The reddish, gold light of the fire pranced across the soft wrinkles on her neck and face. Dark hollows took form under her eyes and where she sucked her cheeks into the space left by her absent teeth. Her voice mingled with the smoke, feathery light yet sharp, floating and pinching our ears . . .

◆

It is said that there were once two giants who lived in our land – a female giant and a male giant. The male giant was called Kgale. His wife was called Mmapula. Now, Kgale was very bad tempered and cruel. He terrorised the people by roaring loudly, so loudly that they had to cover their ears and run. He squashed their homes under foot and ate their crops and cattle. When he had eaten all the maize and sorghum, the goats, cows and sheep, Kgale began to eat the people themselves. He would pluck them up from their ploughing and stuff them into his mouth. With his cheeks bulging, he would noisily crunch their bones between his enormous teeth. This is why the people were forced to move away from their green fields into the driest parts of the desert.

Now, you might ask what Mmapula was doing all this time. Well, she built a lovely house out of mud and straw. She thatched the roof herself and spent a lot of time moulding the wall around her courtyard and decorating it with beautiful patterns. She grew her own maize and sorghum and kept three goats for milk. Her goats were her friends. She loved to stroke their heads and would talk to them when she was lonely. Mmapula wanted to make friends with the people but whenever they saw her approaching they ran away screaming. She hadn't seen any people for some time and she wondered where they had gone. She also noticed that crops no longer grew on what had been fertile land and that the cows, goats and sheep had all disappeared. The earth was becoming dry and dusty, the wind blew and the rain did not fall. Mmapula began to worry. She worried about her maize and sorghum. She worried about her three goats and she worried how she was going to feed her husband who was getting more and more bad tempered.

Mmapula decided that she would speak to the clouds and ask for their help. The next morning, she got up very early and prepared Kgale's porridge. She pounded a whole field of maize into a fine meal which she then cooked with milk from her three goats. Thinking that she had left him enough to eat she went off to find the clouds. She had been walking for some time when she spotted some small clouds in the distance. She called but they didn't seem to hear her. She gently sucked in the air and drew the clouds towards her.

'Hello,' she said. 'How are you?'

The clouds were a little angry at having been sucked away from what they were doing but they greeted her all the same.

'Hello,' they said. 'We are well and how are you?'

Mmapula told them that she was well but that she did have some problems. She told them about the disappearance of the people, the crops and the animals. She told them about the dry earth and the lack of rain. One of the clouds said, in rather a nasty way, 'Well, you should know why this has happened. It was after all you giants. You ate and destroyed everything. You didn't replace what you took. Of course the people ran away. Wouldn't you?'

Mmapula was shocked to hear this. She pleaded with the clouds to rain on the land so that she could grow more crops and raise more

animals. She wanted to replace what had been taken. The clouds whispered amongst themselves.

'Please help me,' begged Mmapula again. The clouds looked at her.

'We're sorry, we can't help you. We are wind clouds. Now would you mind blowing us back to where we were?'

Well you can imagine how sad Mmapula was. She hung her head and was about to cry when one of the clouds rubbed itself against her cheek.

'I'm sure we'll think of something,' it said softly.

Mmapula ran her hand along the fluffy top of the cloud, stroking it as she did her goats. The cloud smiled, rumbling and purring contentedly. Mmapula continued to stroke it, watching as it turned grey. Then the rain fell. A very light, delicate, rain. The other clouds rushed over and nudged their friend aside. 'Make us rain, make us rain,' they cried excitedly.

Mmapula stroked them in the same way. They smiled as they turned grey and rained a light drizzle on to the earth below them. Mmapula tickled them and they laughed and became much darker in colour. The more Mmapula tickled them, the louder they laughed. The louder they laughed, the heavier it rained. Mmapula was delighted. She knew how to bring the rain. She thanked her friends the clouds. On her way home she picked wild berries and dug up sweet yams for Kgale's lunch.

Now, as Mmapula came closer to her home she heard a loud thundering noise. Brrrrroooo Whheeeoo, Brrrrrooo Whheeeoo, Brrrrooo Whheeeoo, Brrrrrooo Whheeeoo. Cautiously she opened the door to find Kgale stretched out on the floor sound asleep. His belly was like a mountain. His mouth was open and he was snoring. He must have found something to eat, she thought to herself. She looked around the room. Then to her horror she discovered a goat's hoof and horns in the corner. She ran outside calling the names of her beloved goats. They did not appear. She looked high and low for them. They were nowhere to be found. She ran inside and shook her husband awake.

'Did you eat my goats?' she cried.

Kgale snuffled and snorted.

'Of course I ate the goats. I was hungry. If you had been here to

prepare my lunch, things would have been different ... but you weren't, were you?'

He got up and stomped off. The ground shook and Mmapula's pots rattled.

Mmapula spent her time ploughing the earth, planting seeds, weeding and harvesting. She stroked and tickled her friends the clouds when she needed rain. The sun shone and her crops grew. Wonderful and varying shades of green, yellow and white maize, and brown sorghum, stretched across the earth as far as the eye could see. She had not forgotten her goats but what could she do?

We must not forget the people in the desert. They were finding life very hard. They had to struggle to find food and water was very scarce. They could not forget their old home, their land, their farms and cattle. They told stories to their children of the time when food was plentiful and life was good.

Now one little girl took it upon herself to help the people. She left her family without telling them of her plans and went in search of the lost land that the elders always talked about. She walked for days and days. She walked over sand-dunes and stones. She never gave up hope. Then, to her surprise, she saw the vast fields of maize and sorghum. This was the land her parents had told her about. This was the land the elders nurtured and kept alive in their stories. She sang and her voice soared like a lithesome songbird.

Her song echoed across the giants' lands. Mmapula heard the sweet sounds and smiled at their beauty. It somehow reminded her of the people. Kgale, who had just finished his lunch, also heard the singing. He knew very well that one of the people had returned. He got up from the table and took a sack from under the bed. The song brought back delicious memories of mouth-watering morsels.

'Mmapula, my dearest wife,' he said in a rough voice, 'I am going out for a while. I won't be long.'

Mmapula was very suspicious. Kgale never told her where he was going and had never called her 'dearest wife' before. She decided to follow him. He was making so much noise stomping about that it was easy to follow him without being detected. She followed him across a small river and through the fields to the place where the young girl was singing. Mmapula bent down and hid behind the tall stems of her

maize crop. She watched as Kgale plucked the young girl up and popped her into his bag. The girl was screaming. Kgale just laughed, saying 'You, my little songbird, will make a tasty snack.' With that he lay down, for he had eaten a big lunch and felt drowsy.

Very soon the thundering snores of the great giant could be heard across the land. Brrrrroooo Whheeeoo, Brrrrroooo Whheeeoo, Brrrrooo Whheeeoo, Brrrrroooo Whheeeoo. Well, Mmapula felt very sorry for the young girl in the bag. She quietly came out of her hiding place and sneaked over to where her husband lay sleeping. She reached out and grabbed the bag. The young girl started screaming again. Mmapula stood still. Luckily for her, Kgale continued to sleep. Brrrrroooo Whheeeoo, Brrrrroooo Whheeeoo. Mmapula walked quietly back to her hiding place. There she opened the sack and spoke softly to the young girl.

'I am letting you go free. You must trust me. Go back to the people, tell them that they may return to their green lands and bring their goats, sheep and cows. Now run! Run as fast as you can. Oh, I almost forgot, whatever you do, don't sing. Don't sing until you are well away from here.'

The girl thanked Mmapula and ran as fast as she could through the maize fields, through the sorghum fields and across the desert.

Mmapula set to work. She turned up stones, poked into hollow logs and dug her hands into the earth. She collected snakes and scorpions, spiders and biting ants. One by one she dropped them into the bag that had trapped the young girl. She held the bag in her hand, weighing up its contents. Yes, Kgale would never know the difference. She tied the string tightly around the neck of the bag and placed it carefully by her sleeping husband's side. Mmapula then walked back to her hiding place and waited. She must have waited for over an hour, listening to the thunderous snores. Brrrrroooo Whheeeoo, Brrrrroooo Whheeeoo, Brrrrroooo Whheeeoo. Then, Brroo Whhee, Brr Brr, Spuck! He was awake. Mmapula watched. Kgale stood up and stretched his arms out, yawning loudly.

'Now for my tasty little snack,' he muttered as he bent over and grabbed the bag. 'Tasty, tasty.' He flung his head back and opened his mouth wide. He fiddled for a while with the strings and then whoosh, the contents of the bag fell into his mouth and down his throat. He

had already begun to crunch some of the snakes and scorpions between his enormous teeth before he realised that all was not right. He screamed a terrible, blood-curdling scream. He ran around and around in circles pulling at his throat and stomach. He ran to the edge of the fields where he fell down, and I'm afraid to say, he died. He did. He fell on his back and died.

Now Mmapula's friends, the clouds, came and they blew as only they knew how to do. They blew soil on to Kgale's big body. They blew pebbles and small rocks. Grass grew and trees. The people came back gradually for they were still a bit scared. They found Mmapula's wonderful crops and were very happy. Now if you travel into our capital city, you will see the giant's face, covered indeed with soil, grass and trees but still easily recognisable. Yes – Kgale hill; and around the city in the distance you can still see his hips, and his knees and feet.

You, my children, must sleep now and if you do your work and if you don't talk about the tale I have just told you during the daylight hours, I will tell you the story of what happened to Mmapula.

◆

We never did talk about the wonderful stories. It was an unwritten law. We didn't want to go off herding cattle and never return, or lose our sanity. Let me say rather that I never discussed these tales with anybody. I just let them bump around in my head. I never really wondered what might happen to the world if I did speak about these fantastical goings-on either.

Some of us were more conscientious about carrying out our chores than others but that didn't really seem to have much bearing on the story-telling. We would wait for days, months and longer for the next episode. Sometimes it didn't come at all.

Rendering Up the Glebe

◆

They never usually turned up for such presentations unless of course one of them was doing the presenting. Then they would all turn up. Tonight they were all there on time, actually before time. Hair brushed, clean, pressed shirts, shiny faces and smiles. They chatted in a dignified manner until the guest and the vice chancellor arrived and a deliberate but markedly respectable and suitably scholarly hush descended dome-like over the proceedings. Those who attended church regularly found it easy to slip into an 'I am taking communion' pose. The others fidgeted with their pens and wriggled around in their chairs for a while pretending to get comfortable. Gradually their lips formed into a stiff pout, their eyelids drooped slightly, very slightly, wisely owl-like. Their seasoned chins ascended and righteously pointed at the invisible pinnacles of academic consuetude. Throats were cleared and the chairman and his gaudy tie that clashed with any possible sense of understatement, introduced the dapper, little, bespectacled Indian man who sat at his side.

The man stood and waited for the polite applause to subside. He commenced in the subdued tones of his highly polished BBC English to acknowledge the titled presence of those who at least for the evening were considered dignitaries. Finally after carefully stepping down the hierarchical ladder, he arrived at the ladies and gentlemen and expressed his intense gratitude at being invited to address such an audience. Everybody clapped. He continued in the same subdued, almost difficult-to-hear tone to relate an anecdote of great humanist significance. He spoke of the Second World War, the Japanese and the Allies and the cultural differences that should have been taken into account when judging war crimes. It was sufficiently philosophic and necessarily divorced from the emotions and experiences of those who had lived through or died horrible deaths in the War to appeal to the

general anti-colonial, anti-western dominance, liberal ethic that prevailed in the room. Germany wasn't mentioned.

The little man was just coming to the point about mankind and God when the harsh opening sounds of the main door grated a forced pause into his speech. He looked up to see a woman, with a large bag and an armful of papers and books battling to push both against the hydraulic buffer mechanism, which stopped the door from slamming, and a grey cement brick. The brick had originally been placed in front of the door to hold it open. It was now strategically placed behind the door either to prevent entry or on the assumption that latecomers would not have the audacity to enter. The woman looked embarrassed and searched the room for a vacant seat. Exasperated eye messages were quickly passed around the room. The little man continued on from his humanist qualifier to the main body of his speech detailing examples of Indian religious and philosophical influences in the works of T. S. Eliot.

The woman, middle-aged, obviously braless and dressed in jeans and a large tee-shirt managed quietly to manoeuvre herself into a chair. As she put her papers down, her handbag slipped off her shoulder and the contents splashed noisily out across the long table in front of her and on to the floor. The atmosphere of extreme reverence and awe was again shattered. This time the little man ignored her and the audience followed his example. He finished his speech and everyone applauded in a respectable muffled fashion. The chairman stood up with what appeared to be great effort and in heavily accented English thanked the little man on behalf of everyone present. He was sure that such an interesting and scholarly presentation would provoke questions from the floor which of course it did.

The best of brains rose to the occasion with their precisely worded, erudite comments and questions which in no way challenged the basic premise upon which the little man's speech rested or his obvious, barely diluted, idolisation of Eliot. They batted a ball of mutual admiration back and forth, playing a game they all enjoyed and practised regularly.

The woman had had her hand up from the start. She kept it up, supporting her elbow in mid-air with her other hand. A few of her belongings still lay on the floor defiantly calling her to crawl under the

table to reclaim them. A grubby-looking lip moisturiser, a ballpoint pen and a yellow bead sitting cheekily in the no-man's-land that divided the speaker, the chairman and the vice chancellor from the rest of the audience. The chairman announced that there was only time for three more speakers. The little man, whether it was out of curiosity or in keeping with his stated principles, said 'There's a lady over there who I believe has been waiting to ask a question for some time.'

The chairman looked disgruntled. The woman stood up and asked her question. She took her time, as old or rural people often do, filling in the background and then slowly coming round to the question itself. Those who had already asked their questions began to fidget. Some bowed their heads in shame. Some looked at her with expressions of patronising tolerance, others with expressions of hostility and contempt. She asked the speaker how he reconciled Eliot's life with Eliot's writing. She spoke of women writers of the same period whose lives and art were intertwined in honest, often autobiographical fiction. She spoke of women who melded ascetic theory and personal bonding into successful poems. She spoke of Modernism and Imagism that showed the essential roots of the people who created the works, people who lived by the same principles by which they created.

The little man looked perturbed. As far as he was concerned Eliot's life was in keeping with his work. The only disagreement he would have with him, as he had already made clear, was Eliot's search for and reliance on a greater being, a god that would control the destiny of man. The woman was obviously disappointed and sank resigned into her chair.

A young, fresh-faced student stood up and asked if Eliot was not in fact plundering Indian culture in the same way colonial rule had plundered India's resources. The little man answered that no, he thought Eliot was only developing cross-cultural ties. Someone kept up the attack by commenting on Eliot's critical writing, saying that she had always felt that he in fact espoused an exclusivist and very subjective notion of tradition which necessarily denied many cultures, ideologies, religions and the mass of world literature any hope of entry. The little man answered as he had the previous question. The chairman jumped up and pointed to one of his friends who praised the speaker whilst demonstrating his own knowledge of Indian philosophy

and classical literature. The chairman, looking relieved, thanked the speaker profusely and the audience again applauded. The vice chancellor and the speaker left the room with the others following in procession.

The chairman walked towards the woman. 'Are you coming to the reception?' he asked as he crunched the lip moisturiser under his shoe. Her eyes followed the yellow bead's escape. It rolled off and hid under the podium.

'No, thank you. I haven't seen my children today. I must get home.'

He looked her up and down. 'Pity . . . oh well . . .' He scratched the top of his head. 'Don't you think your question was just a little abstruse, Mosu?' He smiled and without waiting for a reply shuffled off.

She waited until the door had closed behind him and sealed his departure with a vigorous 'get stuffed' sign. She climbed over the top of the table and rescued her pen from the floor. She scraped up the shattered lip moisturiser and threw it into the rubbish bin in the far corner. She decided to leave the yellow bead in its hiding place. It would give her something to think about the next time she was asked to attend a similar seminar.

The hot night air hit her with vehement force as if it was punishing her for relaxing for one air-conditioned hour. She suddenly felt exhausted. She had been teaching since seven o'clock that morning. She lit up a cigarette and wondered if her daughters had bothered to cook anything. She didn't feel like doing battle with them. Not tonight.

Mosu thought of her son. Her first born. She had promised to phone him. He needed money. This time she would give it to him but not before she gave him a piece of her mind. She was tired of the selfishness. The never-ending taking. She wanted something back. Some company, trust, genuine conversation, some help. They didn't seem to understand that a relationship should consist of two people giving, building each other. She felt as if the marrow from her bones was being sucked out. That amorphous resource they called the soul, was being depleted. They seemed to think that she owed them. Well in many ways she did owe them. She became pregnant at university in Lesotho. Being brought up in a strictly religious family, she didn't know anything about contraception. Not then. Her father was furious, unbending. He

disowned her. Her mother protected her by sending her off to her aunts in Serowe. She thought back to that time. Her aunts had surrounded her with a warm, all-giving love, treated her with the respect and excited anticipation normally accorded a pregnant woman. She slipped into overdrive and began to glide effortlessly over the terrain of her past. Serowe was one of those thermals she could rely on to pull her from slow descent into depression and send her soaring high above her problems.

She opened the door of her apartment, determined to treat her girls with more understanding. Perhaps she had been too harsh. The hall light was on. Everything else was in darkness. She checked their bedrooms. Nobody home. The kitchen sink was stacked with dirty dishes. Where the hell were they? They had school. What about their homework? This was their last year in secondary school. It was an important year for them. She threw her bag down and searched the fridge for something easy. Eggs. Fine, eggs would do. She scrambled them and made a salad. The semi-darkness of the lounge-cum-dining room offered some kind of solace. She didn't bother switching on the lamp next to her but stretched her legs out across the coffee table and ate using her fingers. She snapped open a can of beer. The cool liquid tasted good.

Yes, she owed them. She thought of her son's father with tenderness. He was South African. They had both been suspended from university for one year. He had been as naive and shortsighted as she, concerning the consequences of what started out as sexual exploration and romance. Mosu went back and completed her degree. She never saw him again. It was only recently that she found out he had been killed in a car accident in Zambia. He had become a political activist of some sort and had been forced to live in exile. She allowed the initial sadness that had greeted the news of his death to seep through and mix with her tiredness. Her son was now ready to meet his father. There was a gap that she couldn't fill.

Mosu finished her beer and closed her eyes. She dwelt on the theme of relationships. Relationships prompted by love, loneliness, sexual needs, experiment. She had been there. She had married in England out of loneliness when she was studying for her Masters. She smiled. He was nice, gentle but vibrant, much younger than her. A Jamaican

fitter and turner, living in London. It was from him that she garnered the basic tenets of black consciousness. When it came time for her to return home to Botswana, her family didn't want anything to do with him. Her father, whom she loved dearly, spoke to his friends in the immigration office who refused to issue him an entry permit. She came alone. The sense of extreme frustration and injustice that she had felt at that time caused her muscles to tighten. Her forehead wrinkled with tension. The image of herself slumped in the clubhouse nudged other memories aside. She saw the man. The man in charge of immigration. He spotted her from afar with his piercing eyes and came over to greet her. He was the man who had prevented her young lover from entering the country.

'Why are you sitting here all alone? It's a nice day, the sun's shining. Go and find yourself a nice Motswana man to marry. There are plenty of them. What do you want with a foreigner, anyway? Eeeh?' He laughed loudly, slapped her on the back and went to join his cronies at the bar.

She left her son in the care of her mother, her aunts, her sisters and went back to England but the marriage didn't last. She liked her Jamaican husband but she had somehow outgrown him. She went on to do her Doctorate in southern African literature. That was when she met James and entered into a relationship that lasted nine years. He was at the same university doing research into cattle vaccines. They had a child together. A girl who was dearly loved by both of them. Mosu didn't need or want marriage. She was happy for a long time. They lived in a big house which they shared with other couples who had children. It worked out nicely. It was more like her home, where sisters and aunts gave their love freely and shared the responsibility of children.

It didn't last with James. She found herself suffocating in his insensitivity. She suffered unbearable humiliation, the arguments, the deep hurt. Her leaving him was an act of self-preservation but so horribly painful. She was on the point of suicide. Her little daughter could not be expected to understand why her mother left her at the age of seven.

She got up from her seat and went into the kitchen. The beer can landed nicely in the bin. Good shot. She began washing the dishes,

almost automatically. 'Why should I?' she yelled to no one but herself and slammed down a saucepan caked with the hardened remains of meat stew. She grabbed another beer from the fridge and sat back down in the lounge.

'Oh, shit, where are they?' She looked at her watch. It was almost midnight. She referred to them as her girls because she loved them equally and treated them both as her natural daughters but Koki was her cousin's daughter. Her cousin was overseas. These wayward girls, bursting out, screaming their defiance. She loved them so intensely but they were breaking her. She couldn't cope with their bitterness, their half-formed and damaged psyches. Yes, she owed them. She was bound by a nagging umbilical cord of guilt and love to see them through somehow. She wanted them to have the inner strength that wasn't there. The sight that extends beyond the self to encompass the rest of the world and its suffering. The ability to give. It didn't have to be her that benefited. She wanted them to go out and open up the world, not to be closed in by it. Tears opened her wounds to the healing balm of release. She had got her daughter back at the age of fifteen. There was a huge gap that she couldn't fill. She couldn't fill Koki's gap either. These were gaps her children would have to fill themselves. She cried as she had cried on her old father's shoulder. He had comforted her. Put his arm around her and hugged her. 'Don't give up, my child,' he said in Setswana. 'You cannot say you have failed until you have given up. Don't give up.'

She was pulled violently from her dreams at five-thirty by loud banging noises. It was the front door. The girls had forgotten their key. Where had they been? It was none of her business. She yelled at them. 'You *are* my business. Until you are able to fend for yourselves and whilst you are living in my house and you are my business!' She started crying again. It was too much. She watched them through a smarting veil of hopelessness as they strutted past her with a haughty air of disdain and advised her to 'chill out'.

Their bedroom door slammed and they giggled. She would have to save what she had to say for later. Perhaps it would give her time to organise her thoughts. She would see her sister and discuss it with her. She missed her friend. She thought of him and the long talks they had had together. If only he was here. She had decided that this would be

the last serious relationship in her life. She was too old to bother. They met six years ago but he lived in America. They only saw each other three or four times a year. She missed him. She missed his warm, secret intimacy. One day they would be together but she was not willing to uproot herself from her career, her country, her people. Not again. Not for a man. He would have to come to her.

She dared not crawl into her neatly made bed. She couldn't trust herself to wake up on time for her nine o'clock meeting with the dean. She showered and put on the dress she had bought in Johannesburg at Christmas. She wanted to arrange a trip to Cape Town to carry out research for a book she was writing. She wanted to know about administrative positions and training for these positions. She knew they didn't take her seriously. She didn't dress to their standards. She didn't do anything to their standards. But then what were their standards anyway? What were they worth? What did they give? No harm in trying.

◆

She left the dean's office. He would let her know. When? Well, in good time. She walked across the dry ground, under the thorn tree and up the stairs to her poetry class. She liked this group. They were hardworking, inquisitive and challenging. Many of them had already spent some time in the workforce. They read through the poem. One woman raised her hand asked 'What is a glebe?' Mosu thought for a while and then answered 'It can refer to a piece of land, especially land for growing things or land that is given to a member of the clergy as part of his income. It is soil, soil which is the source of vegetable products. It is productive. Well that's my association. Look it up. See what you find.'

She looked at the poem for a while. The students were silent.

'You know, actually, let me give you two quotations to think about concerning the glebe. This one is from Catlin's work. I think it's entitled *North American Indians*: "The great family of North American Indians . . . are dying at our hands and rendering up their glebe to our possession." And then there's this one from Hervey: "Meditations." Are you ready?'

The students laughed. She smiled. 'OK. "The frosts mellow the soil . . . the Rains impregnate the Glebe and fit it to become a magazine of plenty."'

She dismissed the class then sauntered out, throwing her poetry book up in the air and letting it fall down from the third floor, down through the twisted maze of thorn-tree branches and fluffy, pale yellow blossom.

Hello, Goodbye . . . Dumelang, ke a Tsamaya

◆

I am MmaMpho. I am the mother of Mpho. She is my eldest child. I am actually the mother of four children. I am fortunate to have two boys and two girls. I know some women who are harassed by their husbands and fathers because they don't have sons. As if it is their fault. One of my friends, MmaSophie, had nine girls before the boy came. So she had ten children. She's gone now. I think she died from hard work and heartbreak. You think of heartbreak as something which is not real. Well, we know the heart doesn't break into pieces but I think sometimes the pain you feel emotionally can cause physical illnesses, heart problems, cancer and all those things. You marry a man and you are really in love. Maybe like a fool but you only find that out later. You love him with everything you've got and you do all kinds of things for him. There is a lot of giving in that love. The first time you find out he's been sleeping with another woman it's such a shock and you really cry. It is also humiliating. You feel that life should stop. The second and third time you realise that your love for him is not the same as his love for you. You become outraged and fed up with the unfairness of everything. There's nowhere to vent your frustration. Then by the end of it all you're trapped and heartbroken. Sometimes he is still your friend but you are hard and scarred inside. Those scars keep oozing and weeping. Just when you think they have completely healed, they open up again. All the innocence and beauty of love drains out of you. It is so disappointing and destructive. I'm feeling so tired. I've been ill for a long time now. I'm waiting to get better.

MmaMpho lay down on her bed. Her head ached and her back and shoulder were very painful. It was such a deep intense pain and very difficult to bear. She moved slowly on to her side. There were so many pills to take. She hated taking them but they made her feel better and

helped her sleep. Sleep was a wonderful escape but she wanted to stay awake and embrace all those things that hadn't seemed important to her before she became ill. She didn't like to close the curtains before the last light had left the day. She wanted to feast her eyes on the grass, the bougainvillaea, the trees and the street with all its passers-by. She loved to talk to her children, their husbands and wives, their children, relatives and friends. She talked about herself and listened. Everyday details were no longer mundane. They had become interesting. Life was coming together as a big ball of brightly-coloured philosophies, opinions, complaints, descriptions, arguments, tears and laughter.

I was talking about children. You know I am very embarrassed about losing so much weight. I used to be very nice. Not too fat and not too thin. My daughter wanted to take a photograph of me the other day. I refused! Imagine taking a photograph of me looking like this, oooffh! I used to dress very smartly. I still have all my clothes, you know, yeees, I look after my things. When I was a young lady, I loved to wear green. They called me the lady in green. I loved that colour so much. I like plump children. It shows that they are healthy. My children, especially the boys, were plump. I love all my children. I know their minds. They are all very different. You could say the youngest one thinks she knows everything. She thinks that we are all ignorant. I hope she will turn out all right. She is my baby. The other one is very loud and often doesn't think before she opens her mouth or acts. Eeeh, that one is a madcap but she is the one who helps me now. Then there's Jo. He is very soft and gentle. He is intelligent that one but he can drink too much. The other one is also intelligent but if he loses his temper there is trouble. I worry for him.

I used to sing. Now I am too weak. When I was young I sang in competitions and won them. Once after one of those competitions, a man came to me and told me that he admired my singing. He said that I had a very good voice. I was teaching then. Three weeks later I received a letter from him. He was offering me a scholarship to go overseas and study. I would have loved to have gone. Imagine what I would be doing now if I had gone. I had too many responsibilities. My parents died when we were all still young. I'm the eldest. I looked after my brothers and sisters. We're very close. All of us. I only got married

when I knew they were all right. I wish my children were as close as I am with my brothers and sisters. They phone me and send me cards. My youngest sister visited me last week. She's not well.

I married a man who lived a long way from where I grew up. It is tradition that the woman leaves her family and goes to the man's home. That is what I did. I was used to a much cooler climate and city life. He took me to the desert, where I met my sisters and brothers and parents-in-law. They had wanted him to marry someone that they had chosen from their area but he insisted on his own choice. I really wasn't used to lizards, snakes and all those rough things. The sun. I don't like the sun. I have tried to look after my skin and cover myself. I had light skin that has just become dark because of this sun. I think it is the sun that has made me ill. No matter what you do, there are people here who after all this time still delight in making me feel like a stranger. I don't care. I know who I am and where I am from. My parents were Bataung. My mother was very proud of her people. Whenever the circus came into town, she would insist that we all go. She would dress us all up and laughingly tell us that when the lions came out they would become excited and greet us all with pride because we were Bataung. She said the whole audience would look at us with envy.

I didn't speak my husband's language when I first came here. We spoke in Afrikaans or English to each other. I understood quite a lot of Setswana. My husband understood Sesotho and spoke some. Sesotho is my first language. I remember the time I went to a meeting in the north. I became involved in building childcare centres and places that would help women. I spoke. I was busy talking when I heard grumbling from some of the old men so I stopped. They told the chairman of the meeting that they hadn't come to listen to Sesotho and broken Setswana. The funny thing was that I thought I was speaking Setswana. I have a soft spot in my heart for that chairman. He has since passed away. He told them that everyone at the meeting could understand what was being said so everyone at the meeting was to stay and listen.

Why is there so much pain in the world? Everywhere I look there is pain. At the beginning there is pain. In between there is pain and at the end there is pain. I don't know why there is so much pain. I am

very happy my parents were God-fearing people. They, especially my father, were very strict. We used to sing hymns at home. They taught me about God. God is always with me, especially now. The priest comes to visit me and prays for me. You don't know how much comfort that gives me. It makes me feel better.

These days you must really look after your children. Especially young girls. You must have your eyes on them the whole time. I was a slave to my children. I used to be a teacher . . . I told you. When I had children I had to stop to look after them. I loved teaching. It's a satisfying profession. Once you are qualified as a teacher, you can be independent. You can always get a job because you can teach all your life. Some of my students come to see me. Some of them have died already. We had good relationships with our students then. They respected us. Not like today.

I have been very lucky. I travelled. I was invited to conferences all over the world. I couldn't travel as much as I would have liked because of my children. You know I was a real slave. I sometimes wonder if people realise these things about wives and mothers. My husband travels a lot. It is me who has always been tied to the home.

I was given chocolates yesterday. The box is very pretty with a ribbon tied around it. There are flowers all over the room. I like sweet things. I used to hide them in the bedroom so the children couldn't steal them. Now I don't care. I enjoy watching them eat. I don't always feel like eating the things I used to like. Flowers make me feel happy. I sit here looking at them and dreaming. I used to garden a lot. Vegetables and flowers, and I used to bake chocolate cakes and cook, then I lost interest. I love it when my children and friends come to visit me.

I was just thinking. I am MmaMpho. I was given my father's surname at birth. When I married I became my husband's wife. My name is actually Teboho.

◆

Crowds of people came to the funeral. They filled her church and sang their favourite hymns. They thronged to the graveyard to pay their last respects to a woman they would miss. Her children and her husband

stood at the head of the grave as the coffin was being lowered in. They covered their faces and bent their heads and wept as they clung to each other for comfort. Salty tears ran down cheeks. Some were wiped away. Some fell to the ground to make small impressions in the dust. They cried for a life that had belonged to them and was now gone. The mourners sang. The song floated above their heads and wove its way through the trees towards the bright blue sky. Dumelang, dumelang ke a tsamaya . . .

Jomo

◆

I

'I fell from heaven and landed on my arse here on the street. Boomph! That's how I got here.' Jomo chuckled and eyed the policeman.

Thomas couldn't resist. He stepped forward, giggling softly, swinging his arm.

'Yeah, like me, a meteor from out of space. I came hurtling through the sky and made a great, huge hole in the car park. That's where I live.'

Lucky was the youngest. He said he was fourteen. He was grinning, looking up at the older boys. 'I was wrapped up in newspaper and dumped near these rubbish bins. I must have cried or something because someone found me and took me to the hospital.'

'Aah, shut up Lucky!' Mosimanegape hit him. Jomo sauntered off to ask a passer-by for a cigarette. Thomas focused his attention on something in the distance, fidgeting with the broken zip on his jacket.

The policeman leant back, his hands rested on the rim of a forty-four gallon drum filled with wrappers, beer cartons and the remains of greasy, take-away food. Mosimanegape smiled at Lucky's hoarse protests.

'Yeah, Lucky's just returning to his birthplace. He can't stay away. You know what my name means . . . Mosimanegape . . . another boy . . . that's what I am . . . a boy again, just another boy. I've got six brothers and one sister. One brother is late. He was stabbed. Maybe you know about him? His name was Lesedi. He was eighteeen. His killer was eighteen, too. You people caught him. He's in jail now. When I think about it, I get sad. I don't know what I can do. I'm scared of that guy who knifed him. My brother was walking in the

African Mall by himself. He was coming from a shebeen when it happened.'

Jomo came back smoking his cigarette. The policeman studied their faces. Faces that were still soft with youth. Lucky had a dark scar near his right eye. Jomo's eyes were red.

'That's why we stick together. Look after each other.' Jomo said loudly. He looked at the policeman accusingly. 'No one else will look after us. The police don't, do they? All you people can do is tell us that we're uneducated and dirty.'

The policeman had come across each one of them before. Beaten up, accused of theft, vagrancy, drunk and disorderly. It was time for ridding the car parks of these kids again. It happened every now and then that the order came down from above. Get them out of town. They were not to be seen. Invisible. There were various groups who made a big noise and said they were doing something about street kids but nothing was changing.

He pushed himself away from the rubbish bins and started dusting off his grey uniform which was in any case clean. His belt buckle sparkled in the sun as he straightened his back. Jomo jumped to attention and saluted. Mosimanegape did the same yelling out 'Sir!' Jomo began marching up and down. 'I'm Jomo, the football star. A great, great football player. The best!'

The policeman smiled. 'Where do you play?'

It was Lucky who answered. 'He plays for the swallows. He's their best striker.' Jomo flicked an empty Coke can up off the asphalt surface of the car park with his foot. Barely looking, he bounced it off his thigh, then off his shin off his thigh and over his shoulder. The can was met on its downward journey by Jomo's heel which shot it up in the air again. He headed it in the policeman's direction. 'I just might play for a South African team, if they can afford me.'

The policeman let the can clatter to the ground. 'I want you boys out of here. If I find you hanging around the car park annoying respectable people, I'm taking you in.'

Jomo walked off as if he hadn't heard. Thomas was the only one to speak. 'Come on, it's Friday, our best day. People want their cars washed on a Friday. We're helping them out. You know it's not us who steal cars. You know it.'

The policeman nodded. 'You heard me. I'll be back. I don't want to find you here!'

Mosimanegape followed behind the policeman mimicking the walk of authority. Without looking back the policeman curled one side of his lip up into a sneer. 'Ya, Mosimane, remember the last time we took you in you were crying like a girl. Ha! mosimane gape!'

Thomas took up his bucket of water and finished washing the white Toyota Corolla. He lifted the windscreen wipers and carefully cleaned the windscreen. Jomo ambled across looking pensive. 'Thomas, I hate these names "street kids", "boys" and all that. I'm just me – Jomo. Jomo the football player.'

Thomas kept on rubbing the cloth across the glass. 'Ya, man. They think we want to be here or something. Tomorrow I'm looking for a gardening job. I wish I could learn mechanics. I'd like that . . . to be a mechanic and get married, have a family.'

Mosimanegape joined in. 'I want to be a bricklayer.'

'I just want to go to school,' said Lucky quietly.

Jomo laughed. 'It takes something to go to school. You've got to go every day, do homework and all that. Sit at a desk the whole day.'

'I could do it. I just want to go to school. That social worker said I have to go back home and apply. So here I am. Home.'

The white woman owner of the Toyota Corolla came across, carrying her shopping. She held her car keys in her hand. Thomas sidled up to her.

'Three pula, Madam. Your car's nice and clean. See.'

The woman eyed her car critically. 'Oh, all right, here's two pula.'

Thomas took the money. 'No, Madam, three pula. You said three pula.'

The woman shot a glance over at a man walking between the cars opposite and then looked back at Thomas. 'I thought we had agreed on two pula.'

Someone yelled out, 'Go and wash monna. Go and wash yourself, sis!'

Thomas turned his head in the direction of the voice. The woman jumped into her car, locked the door and drove off with her windscreen wipers still sticking up in the air. Thomas kicked the bucket of water

over. He yelled out 'Your mother!' to no one in particular but hoped whoever had told them to go and wash would feel the scorn intended.

'Let's get out of here.'

Jomo eyed Lucky and Mosimanegape. 'Yeah, let's go.'

The four went to the public toilets. They slept there at night. Washed there. In the morning one of them climbed up on the roof and stashed their belongings. The grey British Airways blanket and the clothes. They rolled them up in plastic bags. They sat with their backs against the outside wall and counted their takings. It had been a good day. Twenty-five pula. They had been putting money aside to buy Lucky a pair of shoes. Thomas was in charge of the bank. 'Twenty-five and it's Friday. Do we put five aside or divide the whole lot up?'

Jomo was thinking of his girlfriend. There was an all-night disco in Naledi at the hall, starting at nine and finishing at six the next morning. They could braai meat, plenty of booze, pay the man to sing their favourite songs.

'Divide it all. There's the disco.'

Mosimanegape agreed. 'Yeah, the disco.'

'What about Van Damne at the Capitol Cinema?' Lucky stood up and kicked his leg out karate-style.

'What's happened to Gloria? Is she cheating on you or something?' Jomo asked slyly.

'*Voetsek*, Jomo. I was reminding you that the film's on. Yeah, divide the money. I need six pula for the shoe glue from Explosion.'

Jomo took his hat off and scratched his head. 'I thought you were off that stuff. It's not worth it. Six pula for one packet. Come on Lucky, you're mad. You only get a ten-minute buzz. You walk from here to the Mall and you're back down.'

'That old guy, you know the one. He told me it destroys your nose and lungs. That's why I went off it,' added Thomas.

'OK, OK . . . I still want to buy a packet.' Lucky stood up and walked off kicking an apple core through the dust. 'I'm hungry.'

Mosimanegape slowly pushed himself up using the toilet block wall. 'Come on. Let's go and buy the whisky. Two bottles.'

They walked off laughing, teasing, fighting. Jomo leant over and nudged Lucky.

'Is she on the pill, Lucky? You've got to make sure they're on the pill. You don't want kids.'

Lucky sucked air in through his teeth to make an insulting noise and pushed him. 'Your balls!' Jomo stumbled a few paces and kept talking.

'My mother couldn't look after me. She sent me to my father. His wife beat the shit out of me. So I ran away.'

Mosimanegape moved closer to Jomo. 'Like my uncle. He took me from my mother because she couldn't feed me. He told her he'd look after me. It was OK but one day he got this new job in Lobatse and just told me he didn't want me to come with him.'

Thomas cleaned the dirt out from under his nail with a pin he had picked up from the concrete floor of the toilets. He spoke softly. 'Get a job. A mechanic. Get a small house. Then have kids. That's what I'm going to do.'

II

I was fifteen when I met Jomo's father. My grandmother was trying to look after me the best she could. My mother had brought me to her when I was a baby. I didn't really know my mother very well before she died. My grandmother would tell me about her and really I think that is how I got to know my mother – through my grandmother's stories.

We lived together near the lands of some people Granny knew. The old lady worked for them. *Majako*. She worked the land in return for some of the produce. That's how we survived. I did the same. We planted the seed. We weeded. We scared the birds away from the growing heads of grain. We harvested and ploughed. I carried water from the bore hole and collected firewood. Granny did washing for other people. She made traditional beer. I was supposed to go to school but I didn't. There was too much work to be done. Sometimes we were given meat or beans.

Granny was old. Her knees hurt and she was going blind. I did my best to keep our house clean and in good repair but it wasn't easy. It

was because the roof was falling apart. That's why Granny sent me to the place where there was long grass. To get to that place I had to pass by the house of the man who owned the lands. It was a nice house. A modern, square house built of cement and bricks. It had glass windows and a tin roof. I was surprised to see a car parked in the yard. The man who owned the lands didn't stay in the house very often. He lived in the city in another house and only came some weekends or at Christmas.

I remember I noticed the car was in the yard but I kept on walking. I wanted to gather the grass and get back before darkness came. It was on the way back. I was carrying the bundles of grass on my head. The man came out of the house and called me. At first I pretended I didn't hear because I was shy. He called again. He told me to put my load of grass down and come inside. Now, of course, I would know what to do but then I was young and I didn't know the world as I do today. I had a lean tight body like a gazelle. My breasts were still not fully grown. They were rounded, and pointed upwards towards the sun. No man's fingers had touched them. No babies had hung from them. I had been watching their progress since about the age of twelve and I can say that I was proud of them.

He gave me a sweet orange drink which I liked a great deal and some biscuits. Then when I was still enjoying the biscuits he started talking about my breasts. I didn't mind too much. He was complimenting me. Telling me what nice breasts I had. I thought I had nice breasts too. He stood close to me and I could feel his breath on my head. He touched my breasts as if he were touching something very expensive. He asked me if I would like to play a game with him. He ran his hands over my whole body. I was wearing a dress that my granny had been given by another family. The buttons were missing at the back. He rubbed the inside of my back and his hands went right down over my buttocks pushing my panties down in a roll. He was kissing me. I just stood there because I didn't really know what to do. He sat on the chair near the table and was fiddling with the front of his pants. He was undoing his pants but his hands were shaking and he was somehow clumsy. I had seen boys without their clothes on. I wasn't really shocked but I was a bit surprised. He made me sit on his lap and was pushing. Pushing this hard, big thing underneath me and

puffing and moving his hands around so it wasn't very comfortable and it hurt a bit. I started getting off his lap and he held me with one hand and then moaned and closed his eyes. There was warm sticky stuff on my dress and skin. I rolled my panties on properly and wanted to go. He wasn't very nice after that. He just kept saying that I mustn't tell my granny or anyone else. That he would deny it and I would get into a lot of trouble. As I said, I was young. If only I had the brain I have now.

I went home with my bundles of grass. It was dark. Granny was sitting near the fire and was happy to see that I was back. I felt guilty as if I had done my dear grandmother a great wrong. I felt dirty and I cried while I washed my body and my clothes. I heated the water on the fire and washed myself over and over until the water was cold and I was shivering. I don't think about that time because I don't want to. It makes me feel bad.

Granny noticed. She noticed that I wasn't feeling well. I was vomiting in the mornings. My breasts were sore and growing. My stomach began to swell. Granny knew and asked me lots of questions. She knew what had happened so all her questions were aimed at finding out how, who, when. There was no room for lying and when I told her she cried. She didn't make any noise when she cried. The tears just came streaming out of her cloudy eyes and rolled down her face. She turned her head away from me and her body shook. I sat and waited for her to say something to me. I waited for a long time, then Granny got up very slowly and painfully. She rested her old hand on my head and said in a voice that was tired, 'Don't worry; we will manage somehow. Together and with the help of God, we will manage.'

I gave birth to Jomo at the clinic near the lands. He came earlier than was expected. Granny arranged for a man to take me there in his trailer behind the tractor. I remember lying there in the trailer next to a slaughtered goat covered in a hessian bag, thinking that I was going to die. Granny sat in the trailer with me. She sat with her doek tied around her grey head and a blanket over her shoulders. My head rested on her lap and her hands rubbed my back. The nurses said I nearly died and that it was a miracle that Jomo survived. He was so small and yellow. We were later taken to the big hospital in a white

van and Jomo was kept in another room. I don't remember that much. I slept a lot.

Granny came to collect me from the hospital. She held Jomo all the way home except when he was put on my breast to suck. She asked me if I had thought of a name for him. I hadn't thought about a name at all. Granny said she would like to name him Moeteledipele. She said he would be a leader. He would lead the children who came after him. I agreed to that name. It was when he was older that he came to me and told me that I should call him Jomo.

I was treated like a real *motsetse*. Granny cooked porridge for me and fed me until I became fat. I stayed inside for three months. Some other old women came to help Granny cook and wash. I soon got back into doing my chores. I carried Jomo everywhere on my back. For four years life went on as normal. We struggled to feed ourselves. One day Granny called me to sit down. She spoke to me about our life. She said that I must prepare myself for the time when she would no longer be one of the living. She was worried about Jomo and said that she wanted him to have an education. It came as a shock to me when she told me that she had arranged for Jomo to go and live with his father. I cried at the thought of being separated from the boy. Granny said that it was selfish to cry. That I should think of the boy. He would be fed well, clothed and sent to school which was more than I would ever be able to do. She said that the father would love him as he was his only son.

The father came to our house. He drove up in his car and led little Jomo by the hand out of the yard. He didn't look at me. It was as though I were not there. Granny cried her silent tears again. Jomo looked around at me. He didn't know what was happening.

Granny died soon after Jomo left. I can say that she is the one person, other than my children, I have ever loved. I left for the city to look for work. I roamed the streets, going from door to door asking for a job. I came across huge houses and gardens for the first time. Dogs would rush up to the fences, barking and showing their teeth.

I was lucky. One woman who knew Granny told me of a job. She took me to the house of some white people. They wanted me to clean their house, wash and iron their clothes, look after their children and cook. They gave me a room in their servants' quarters and I started

the next day. I was really scared because I only knew how to cook very simple Setswana food. I didn't know the ways of white people. I had never seen some of the electrical things. I didn't know how to use a washing machine or a steam iron. The stove was so complicated.

As I said, I was lucky. The woman was patient and taught me these things. I am grateful to that woman, even though the work was hard and the day was long. She gave me a start. I know girls who cannot find work. I have worked as a housemaid for twelve years now, in different houses. It doesn't pay much and sometimes I come home and cry because you are not treated as if you are a human. Sometimes they think you have no life, no history that has made you and they treat you as a thing. I have four children but do not want any more. I go to the clinic to get pills. My last two children have the same father who is still my lover. Sometimes he gives me money for the children. I don't think he is married but he will not marry me. I don't think any man will marry me now. I am building a small house on a self-help plot. That is where I live with my children. When the house is finished I hope Moeteledipele will come and live with me.

III

Well, you can imagine how I felt when my husband came home and told me he had a son. I was absolutely devastated. I thought about leaving him to his son and his bush whore. I thought about what my friends would say. I would become the talk of the town, that was for sure. They would all start gossiping about poor me but then they can't escape their own stories. They all have skeletons of some sort locked away in their closets. I do have an education. I'm a teacher. I can always get a job at one of the secondary schools around here or anywhere for that matter. But I wouldn't be as comfortable as I am now. I decided it would be better for everyone concerned, especially my daughters and my own peace of mind if I didn't rock the boat. Then my husband asked me to take in the child. Can you imagine? Look after someone else's brat! He was four or five at the time.

Straight from the lands. A snotty-nosed raw kid and I was expected to dose out motherly love to him as if it can be turned on like a tap.

I decided to play along. We have four daughters. The eldest was nineteen. The youngest was six. I got the maid to bath him and dress him. I made sure he ate in the kitchen most of the time. Unless his father was around and wanted a family affair. He does that on rare occasions. Wants all the family together. Most of the time we're all just left to get on with our lives which we do.

My husband assured me the fling with the mother had been a one-off thing. He had no attachments to her. You know how men are. Why the hell he'd decided to take the son in, I don't know. I think there was some old lady, one of his workers, involved. They're a conniving bunch. Sometimes men can be so easily manipulated. Soft in the head. You've got to watch over your possessions. I certainly wasn't going to have some male child coming into my home and usurping my daughters' rights to their inheritance. And what gave him any authority over my daughters? You may well ask? Well you know as well as I do. It's that silly, seemingly all important, part of the male anatomy that dangles between his legs. Every man longs for a male offspring. Yes, I agreed to let him live amongst us. I knew I would be able to figure something out given time.

He was at first so frightened of everything and everyone. He was easy to control. One day he brushed against one of my vases from China and broke it. It fell to the floor and shattered everywhere. I had every right to beat him and I did. I waited that evening to see if he would tell his father. He didn't. That's when I knew I would be able to drive him out of the house and make it look like he was an ungrateful little sod. Which he was. My husband insisted that he go to school. At least I was able to convince him to send the boy to an ordinary school, not a private school. He did well at school which surprised me. I often hid the teachers' reports. My husband never went to the open evenings or anything like that. Instead he relied on me to let him know what was happening. I suggested in many subtle little ways that the boy was not bright. I never once stated such a thing outright of course. I made him work around the yard. He actually came in quite useful. I was able to sack the gardener who was only interested in screwing the maid anyway.

Well, basically that's how I got rid of him. Oh God, yes, I forgot he was good at football. That was another thing that pleased my husband who went out and bought him expensive football boots. They nicknamed him Jomo at school. Can you imagine? Yes, I can honestly say that I made the kid's life so miserable that he ran away. He never told the father. Neat, hey? I've stuck with my husband through thick and thin. I wasn't going to ruin everything for the sake of some upstart kid. Fortunately, I didn't say anything about him to anyone. Some women like to make themselves look philanthropic when their husbands decide to admit to a child, claim it as theirs. They announce it to the world and try to make themselves look like the ever-forgiving, it's only a child and all children are precious, motherly types. Well that's always an option. I kept quiet. Nobody knows. What's mine is mine. What is the girls', is the girls'. My husband thinks the kid is an ungrateful, bad-mannered and disrespectful thug. What more could I ask for?

Five To One

◆

The Village, now a suburb of the rapidly expanding city, was the old camping place of Her Majesty's representatives. Our house was typical of the era, with its large verandah and cool, shady garden. Guava and other fruit trees grew as though they had never heard of drought. Huge jacarandas, syringas and eucalyptus trees stretched their gnarled old boughs to greet guests as they entered the gate. It was rumoured that the area was haunted by ghosts of the old colonials, so far away from their homes. On occasions, I couldn't help myself imagining a shadowy figure in the uniform of the British Empire or a distraught young woman floating through the house in a mist of light chiffon.

My brother had slaughtered a cow and invited friends over for the afternoon. The old women sat on the cleanly swept, hard dirt surface of the courtyard, surveying the scene before them. They greeted me, slowly studying my face, their legs stretched straight out in front of them. I answered their ritual questions politely, waiting for their silence which would mean I could excuse myself from their careful scrutiny.

I wondered what they would prescribe for my ghosts.

Suddenly, our attention was diverted by a heavy drunk reeling firstly towards us, and then at right angles away from us. He was laughing crudely and teasing a woman who stood under a tree in the shade.

'Don't you know that there are five women to every man in this country? I've got four more to choose from if I don't want you!'

The woman appeared to ignore him. She leant against the tree quietly feeling the rough bark trunk with her long fingers. The strap of her dress had slipped carelessly off her shoulder. Then abruptly she laughed loudly and coarsely. She lurched forward towards a group of younger women, flung out her hand in a wide semi-circle encompassing them all.

'Shut up!' she roared at the top of her slightly hoarse voice. 'You're all bitches anyway!'

The words glued to the air as if she had said them in slow motion. Some of the women giggled nervously. Others grinned. They may or may not have been gossiping about her. I didn't care. I didn't care that the old women were glaring at her with piercing disdain. I despised her. Why should she have come here uninvited in the first place?

There she stood, rubbing her breasts as if she were in private, looking at me with her wilted face. I stood my ground staring back at her, hoping the agony I felt in my heart would not show. My face betrayed no other emotion than the hatred I wished to display.

She turned away and walked over to the side of the house, obviously alone and isolated.

I had to retreat. She couldn't see me now. I walked purposefully into the house as if I had something to do in the kitchen and then made a quick detour to our bedroom. Locking the door, I breathed in deeply, relaxing in the solitude, controlling my tears. I had recently lost my friend. I wanted to blame this woman. Her presence dug deeply into my grief. The last time I had come anywhere near to feeling this anguish, this physical hurt cutting into my chest, was when my grandmother died. It was different then, I was young and she was old. I hadn't experienced any of the pain of her illness.

I lay down, pulling a blanket free from the tightly made-up bed. It was cold inside, the sunlight that streamed in through the lace curtain only served to highlight the small specks of dust floating crazily in the air. My friend had been killed, she didn't die. People don't seem to like to use the term murder when a husband kills a wife.

The last time I saw Thandi, she lay in a coffin, her slender body surrounded by pink stain. I refelt the shock of the fly walking irreverently over her once beautiful face, while her hands lay at her side unable to defend her from this last humiliation. I knew her unhappiness and her dreams as she knew mine and I loved her.

Thandi and Willy were the ideal couple. I think initially they were very happy together. She fell in love with him and viewed life from that perspective for a long time. She developed an incredible patience and largeness of spirit, taking almost total responsibility for the rearing of their three children and looking after their home. She continued

working but it was difficult to reconcile this woman with the fiercely independent Thandi I had known before she got married.

Willy, I'm sure, also fell in love, but his lifestyle didn't change. He supported the family financially with Thandi's help but that was all he gave. He spent all his leisure time away from home and wherever that was, he drank. Thandi had been told a woman never asks where a man is or has been, and she abided by that unwritten law without really thinking about it.

During her last pregnancy she was hospitalised due to exhaustion. Willy came home to find her gone and her mother looking after the children. He didn't visit her and when she came out he did nothing to help her. Thandi's mother stayed until three months after the baby was born.

It was the son Willy had been waiting for. They called him Boitumelo. Willy was happy.

After Boitumelo's birth, Thandi began talking to me of her frustration and loneliness. She felt the need to develop her potential which had been dormant for too long and enrolled in a course to study occupational health. She became involved in groups concerned with the lack of labour laws in the factory and place of work. I could see she was getting more satisfaction out of life but she was suffering at home. While she was used to Willy coming home late, now he frequently didn't come home at all. He was often drunk and aggressive and began harassing her over the smallest details. He enjoyed belittling her in front of people. She learnt to avoid confrontation with him for her own peace of mind and for the sake of the children. She diligently did everything he demanded of her, but he continued and the emotional harassment she was suffering became almost unbearable.

I sat in the church at her funeral service and listened to the various tributes that people paid her. The bass tones of the men's voices combined with the higher tones of the women's and rose in sad harmony. My gaze wandered from the floral wreaths on top of her coffin to the dry yellow grass outside. A young woman walked slowly by in the bright sun. I watched her from my shadowy hiding place as she drank guava juice from a hole she had chewed in the bottom of the plastic container. A thought raced through my brain. My husband could be having an affair with her. I turned my head away from the

long glass windows, disgusted with myself. Did all women think this way and view each other as potential threats? Did we all live with this terrible suspicion gnawing away at our very being? Thandi didn't. She had confidence in herself and she never thought of questioning Willy's fidelity despite his behaviour. She believed his stories of falling asleep at parties. When he did come home after his nights out he always smelt of beer as if he had been drinking heavily. She had seen him fall into a drunken stupor resembling unconsciousness many times before and in the oddest places.

She came to visit me one afternoon. She stood outside listening to my husband and me arguing, not knowing whether to knock or to run away. Neither of us heard her arrive. We were too busy screaming at each other. She was still riveted to the front doorstep when Harold, unable to contain his fury with me, roared out the door bumping into her. He greeted her as best he could and departed in a cloud of dust and forced acceleration.

She entered meekly.

'Why didn't you tell me you were having problems?' I asked, feeling embarrassed. We had hinted to each other about the marriage difficulties we were having, but had never really discussed our relationships openly until that day.

'You know, everybody thinks we're the perfect couple,' she started '. . . but I've just discovered that Willy's been having an affair. She came to our house last night. His mistress came to my house. She yelled at me, telling me to let go of him, that he loved her. She began to sob . . . and the children were there. I hugged her not knowing what to do or say.'

Perhaps we thought that the problems would somehow solve themselves. I think we were afraid of allowing the outside world to see the cracks in our relationships for fear of gossip or criticism. The cockroaches would crawl in as soon as they saw something to feed on. We laughed, cried and talked. We felt resentful as the realities of our suffering unravelled. We blamed men as we discussed the similarities in our experiences. They were afraid of our independence. We didn't discuss what we could do to change the situation other than running away from it.

Thandi felt angry and betrayed. She thought of how she had been a

fool all those years to accept passively the life he had expected her to live. She told me how she had sat there listening to Willy's varied confessions, quietly hating him.

'He said he loved me and I was his whole world. He thought I was listening to him but I was silently swearing at him inside my head. I was calling him names I would never call him to his face. I imagined him kissing other women, caressing their bodies, their breasts and touching them where men like to touch women.' She continued sobbing. 'I have provided him with a home, a stop-over point, a base. I've cooked his meals, looked after his children. He always had me there to parade in public when he needed a wife. I have always been there for sex when he wanted it. I have been a fool for twelve years. A real fool. I hate him! I can't live with him any more.'

Despite everything I was surprised by her resolution. She was determined to go through with divorce. She spoke in a very calm and serious voice.

'I have lived alone with my children. Yes, they love him, but he is almost a figment of their imaginations. They don't know him. I'm the one who has looked after them all these years. Do you think they will be any less happy? Besides, do you really expect me to sacrifice the next thirty years of my life to almost certain misery? I have a chance to make a fresh start and I'm going to take it.'

We discussed the children and both sets of parents in detail. She refused to discuss the matter any further with his parents, convinced that they only thought of how it would appear socially. Her mind was made up. All her parents could do was to try to comfort her.

'His parents say a few words to him, but in their hearts they think that he is right and I am wrong. Why should I ask judgement from the very people who perpetuate this tradition? Our fathers and mothers live that way. *Monna ke phafana, o a amogelwana. Monna ke thotse, o a nama.* Men have girlfriends and wives are expected to ignore it. I'm not going to fight the heavyweight of tradition on this one. I've been the meek and mild wife for ten years. No more!'

I couldn't help agreeing with her. She didn't think of giving Willy a chance to change by talking to him about the problems in their relationship. Neither did I.

One month later, they separated. Willy went to live with his mistress.

Thandi lived in their house with the children for almost two years until Willy sold it without consulting her. The divorce was granted. She was awarded maintenance for the upkeep of the children and half the proceeds on the sale of the house. Moving to a flat didn't bother her. She was happy just to be free.

Six weeks after the divorce had been granted, Willy phoned Thandi at work to ask if she could pass by his house that evening to talk about maintenance. She agreed. She never suspected that he would not be able to cope without her.

They had lived apart for two years but the legal finality of divorce affected Willy mentally. He snapped like a brittle twig. I don't know what was on his mind when he killed her. Perhaps it was that if he couldn't have her, nobody else should.

He stabbed her many times, but he didn't touch her face. I saw holes in her body, small dark holes. There was one in the side of her left breast. Maybe that was the wound which killed her or maybe she bled to death. I don't know.

My eyes began to refocus on the lace curtain and a deep sadness filled me as I got up from the bed. It was painful to think of her two daughters and son left to grow up without her love. I was touched as if waking up from a nightmare.

There was a soft weeping coming from outside. I had completely forgotten about the woman. Willy's mistress standing hunched between the fence and the side of the house. The hot day was cooling off in the haze of dusk. Most of the guests had left. I walked towards her and put my arms around her trembling shoulders, pulling her dress strap back into place. I hoped that the poor tormented ghost of my dear friend Thandi would not pay me a visit.

Motho Fela

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You're asking me who my friends are. Friends? Heehh, meh bra, I don't have friends. No. I don't have any. You know the problem is trust. Some, when they get an education, or make money, fok man, they look down on people like me. They forget very quickly. I'm not interested in friends. Money. Some have it. Some don't. You know how it is. Yeah you know. Eeeh, Sani, money talks. That's what they say. Ya, cheen'. When we were kids our main chomi was the guy with a steady flow of bucks, smegga. We were not equal at school. Some kids got more pocket money for buying lunch than others. Some didn't get any. I depended on my mother. The old lady always made sure I had something. Yes, I went to school. Well I was supposed to go to school. I left home every morning to go to school. We would buy benzine and sniff it. Just walking around the streets, under bridges, vacant land, an old car. We would just sit and talk. There was this tree. We would mix it with manure, donkey shit, roll it in brown paper and smoke it. It makes noise. Pow, pow pow po po po pop. It's a tree man, a smallanyana tree called mariwan' . . . yeah something like that. I don't know the name in English . . . marujuwaana, ya.

Playing, well sometimes we would play with girls. Black Mampatile and Mantlonyane. I didn't mind that. You know, someone would be the father, a girl would be the mother. We did what mothers and fathers do. That's how you learn, neh? Our fathers who art in heaven . . . some kids would rush to meet their fathers at the station after work. Some fathers would bring things like sweets and things for their kids. Yeah my father did but some kids didn't get anything from their old man . . . some kids didn't have fathers. I suppose I was lucky. Mine taught me how to repair things. Toasters, radios, irons, electrical things. I enjoy it. I'm going to do a course at the technical college, neh vaar! Neighbours would bring them. He worked for a factory that

made sewing machines. He worked there until he died. Hit by a car. Hit and run. We got a telephone call at two in the morning. My mother was crying . . . Ya, anyway, you were asking me about playing, neh? We played soccer, eech, I could dribble. They called me Masterpieces. I had style heeeh. An artist. I'm flexible here, swivel hips, uya bon'? I was good. That's where mothers could be embarrassing. Aach, they could just come to the ground and call you off like that. To go and scrub something, wash dishes. Fraa, yeah that was frustrating. Your mother coming to the ground, no man! I have a sister and there's this family favouritism. She's the favourite. She was always my father's favourite. That's how fathers are with girls. Daughters can do nothing wrong . . . yes, I washed up. I would do the dishes one night. She would do the dishes the next night. That was supposed to be the arrangement, ya. But then she would just go to bed and I found myself doing dishes when it wasn't my turn. She's younger than me. Make beds, sweep and stuff. What can you do?

Yes I was good at soccer for sure. No no noooo, not me. Some guys make careers but look what happens to them. Naah, Jomo's medium. Ace Ntsoelengoe yah, he was my hero. Ace, he's a true sportsman . . . but where is he now? It's not worth it. These guys get exploited and there's jealousy. I didn't want to end up a cripple with my fokking legs broken.

Church? You really asking questions eeh? Listen bra, you not going to print this in a newspaper? I'm not interested in seeing myself in newspapers. Deadman, no thanks. Church. Well my mother likes church. I was a server in the church when I was twelve or somewhere there. I was a server so I could steal wine. Aaah man, it's hypocritical stuff. They say one thing and do another thing. Those priests are supposed to be examples. I've seen what they do. Well there are some who do some community spirit stuff maybe. I haven't seen them. They are just like Johannesburg City Council – you can't fokking trust them. I used to believe in God . . . I don't know any more.

No I'm not political. I never join political groups. I was born in Orlando West Shanty town. I didn't get any birth certificate. Who cared about blacks being born? My birth in a shanty town clinic wasn't registered. Who am I? I think I was sixteen when I had worries about this thing because I had to have a dompass, an identity book.

But I didn't have a birth certificate so they didn't believe I was born in Orlando West. Orlando West, who wants to be born in Orlando West anyway? No electricity, no sanitation, no facilities, just mud or dust – depends on the weather. I had to get an oath, an affidavit before I could get my certificate 101A or something like that. I was happy to finally get my dompass. Oh yeah heppy, heppy, heppy. Can you jive? Heppy, heppy, heppy. Clap your hands. The beat, the beat, heeppy, heeeppy, heeeepy! A dompass meant that you didn't get hassled by the police. Students didn't have to pay. I was a student. We would go every month to the pass office for a stamp. That stamp is inside of me. Stamped into my heart. It is there. I've never been interested in working for a white man. I decided a long time ago . . . no thanks. My father did that. It's not for me. I survive. That's how I live. I'm a survivor. I survived '76. Maybe you can say I'm black consciousness but I never joined any political groups. My teachers made me think of black history and black culture. SASO and Biko. You know Tiro. The teachers talked to us about being proud. Turfloop and graduation ceremonies and things. The teachers taught us about Biko. Then one day students marched. I don't know if they were marching to our school or to the stadium. I didn't know what was happening. I only found out later that it was about Afrikaans. Students were marching from all the colleges. I was in class and the police closed the gates. It was confusion. I wanted to run home but all the ways were blocked. Yeah, I was scared. I dodged. Uncle Tom's Hall and ZKs. Everything was burning. I got home late that night. My mum was worried but I was OK. That's when they killed Hector Peterson. Did you see the stone, like brown marble or something, a tombstone on that corner block? There's some kind of a big advertising board there. Ya, that's in memory of Hector Peterson. Mandela came. They're going to put a bigger monument there later. Did you see Mandela's house? His first one . . . ANC colours on the garage door . . . and the one on the hill? He lives in town now.

My life is surviving. I'm still surviving. I don't like violence. I don't like confrontation . . . but don't take me for a bari. I don't want shit. That's how I survive by living in smart street. See these eyes: I keep them open. If I see trouble I turn the other way and move. If I see the

impis I dodge. The O Jays, the day I get caught by those boys is the day I die . . . you can say goodbye. Slaughterhouse five.

I survive . . . that's why I don't have friends . . . that's why I don't have a wife. I was married to a nice-looking woman. You see how black I am. Well she was blacker and that's what I call beautiful. I didn't mind cooking, or ironing or anything like that because I've always done those things. She was killing me on the sly. Unfaithful. She had a boyfriend. So I left her in our flat. I didn't want her. I just left her to it and she got married again to some educated guy. But she kept the lover, the boyfriend. She had this boyfriend before she met me. It was two months ago that her new husband came home when she wasn't expecting him. He found her in bed with her lover and he killed him. Shit. She ran away and she's still hiding. That's why I say she's a fokking killer. If I don't think about it maybe I will find a wife but I don't know. I don't want finding a wife to worry me. Otherwise I'll go crazy.

I go to shebeens. I enjoy drinking . . . it's simple and there's company. Sometimes I wish I didn't like it but what can you do? There is this AA for alcoholics but to stop you need a family or someone to support you. It's heavy. Music, women. I go to the spots I know. The mama gives me a case on credit then I pay her when I get money. She knows me. I know the poeple who drink there. It's OK. I find a woman. When I spend money on a mshoza she understands. If I spend money on her then she's mine for the night. I don't go to shebeens where you can pay one hundred rand on a woman and then when it's time she says, 'You take me cheap.' I go where I'm known. Well AIDS is a problem, Mzi, but I haven't seen anybody buried in the townships who had died of AIDS. I go to funerals . . . I haven't seen it yet. Yes, I know it's there but I haven't seen it. The problem with condoms was that it was white policy, you know? It was whites who gave us condoms and said that Africans must stop making babies. Fok!

New South Africa . . . do you think I'm going to get a job? Well I'm waiting to see, maybe. I think children should go to school. Education is important. We should boycott rent payments because the council does nothing. Look at the increase in train prices, shit for what? Pay more to travel on the trains and get killed by these death squads. There is no difference so far. I can't see anything new. I'm South African.

Just South African. I don't want to know this Zulu, Xhosa, Tswana business. My father was from one place, my mother from another. Who cares? I can speak six South African languages. I'm South African. Maybe if all the political groups come together, then it will be OK for this New South Africa. Political groups . . . we are watching them now they're driving big cars and living in big houses. Expectations are high neh? And these freedom fighters are coming home and boozing. Chasing after chicks. Divorcing their wives they married in boAngola, Zambia and places. They feel they are big men. *Nna ke motho fela, umuntu.* I'm just a person. I was born off the record. Keep me off the record. I'm just a survivor for now . . . that's all I know how to be. Yeah I miss my father. Ya, *ons vaai.* Let's go.

The Road Ahead

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Thoughts, memories, emotions wriggled, interacting, twittering, squirming, rebelling against her imposed expressionless calm. Audrey turned up the radio. Tina Turner. She tapped her foot and allowed her neck and shoulders to relax, move to the beat. The girls were asleep on the back seat. There was no one else on the road. Not at this time. Not here. She checked the speedometer. Cattle sometimes wandered on to the road. The headlights lit up a small arc of sand and desert bush. Other than that, nothing. Just her. It felt as though she was alone in a huge theatre. The sole member of the audience. The spotlight focusing on a past she had long shelved. There it was. She sat in the darkness and out they all came. Insisting, parading shamelessly before her.

It was Miss Leach. That was the teacher's name. She came to this beastly, fly-ridden colony to enlighten the native inhabitants. A great believer in preservation of the British Empire and all that. She was from Kent and proudly claimed that she hadn't been any further north than London. At that time Audrey and her classmates had seriously doubted the validity of Miss Leach's teachings on all things English – English literature, language and geography. But it wasn't that so much. It was the incident with the dog-eared book. *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, covered in newspaper, passed quietly from one eager hand to the next and read by candlelight. Miss Leach hadn't asked Audrey what she was reading or why she was reading in the bush. Instead she had grabbed her roughly by the arm and dragged her towards the head-master's office.

Audrey accelerated, feeling the same frustration she had felt back then. She slowed down again. She must keep an eye out for donkeys and cows and whatever else might decide it had a right to the road.

Miss Leach had swooped down upon her with gnarled claw-like

hands and had grabbed her arm. She remembered it very clearly. When it came to her person, her body, no one had the right to decide. No one. It had always been that way. She had wrenched her arm away so violently that Miss Leach had fallen over. Audrey, in her rage, then threw the book at the ungainly muddle of a human that lay sprawled out in front of her. Grey skirt, petticoat, thick-stockinged legs, arms and greyish brown wispy hair. She had to take three weeks' lessons in the sick bay for that and wasn't allowed to talk to the other pupils. The sick bay had a picture on the wall of a boy lying on his back on a green hill. The sky was blue grey. She thought the boy was dead. The isolation was unbearable. The room next door was a staff bathroom, she could hear the teachers going to the toilet. She hated the sick bay. That was when she learnt about bending, giving in. She didn't mean a word she said when she apologised to Miss Leach. The teacher half smiled and said something like, 'Well, I think you have learnt a lesson, young lady. You may take your lessons with the other children.' She hated apologising but it was better than the sick bay.

Audrey wondered why people liked exercising authority the way they did. Where the hell did they get the right? She moved the rear-view mirror and looked at the peaceful sleeping faces of her daughters. Well, yeah, she was guilty sometimes. She had to check herself on occasions. Like the time she forced her oldest daughter, Michelle, to get her an orange. She was closer to the fruit bowl than Michelle. Control. It was about control. The dominant control the dominated, keeping them weak. That's how she had always experienced it. She looked at her daughters. Tears filled her eyes. No, not now. Her chest heaved. She sang loudly. That song must have come out about ten years ago . . . no, longer . . . maybe fifteen . . . lyrical, smooth, it had ripened with time.

Authority – policemen, post office clerks and nightclub bouncers . . . the way they strutted around the club like cartoon roosters. Doctors were the worst. That's where her body came into it again. She thought of the doctor who had answered her queries with 'Who's the doctor here, you or me?' She was pregnant with her first child. She never went back to him. And the one who wouldn't talk to her, let her know what he was doing. She went in for swollen lumpy breasts and he did an internal on her. Charged her a fortune and prescribed stuff for a

vaginal infection, which she threw away. She had been angry for more than a week after that visit. A deep volcanic anger that never escaped.

She read now. She read everything she could find, on women's problems, natural remedies, homeopathy, medicines. She knew what to get. She read about things that affected her and her daughters, what could affect them later, teenage problems, menopause and osteoporosis. It was great at least to begin to understand your body . . . and choose your doctor carefully. How sweet it is to be loved by you. How sweet it is to understand your own body . . . oh yeah. She continued to sing.

Having kids hadn't been too bad in the end. There was a young, newly trained woman doctor for the first one and midwives for the second. The doctor was excited by it all. Talking, laughing, explaining. There was no anaesthetic, no drugs. Audrey didn't yell or scream because there were all these women around talking to her and to each other. Perhaps she had grunted pretty loudly but somehow she had floated over the pain. She thought of the nurses teaching her how to express milk from her overfilled breasts. The premature babies needed it.

She braked to a standstill. There was a dazzled hare squatting in the middle of the road staring glassy-eyed at the car. Tinky sat up.

'What's wrong Mama?'

'Don't worry, Baby, it's a hare. You see it sitting there in the middle of the road?'

Tinky made the appropriate 'Ohh, isn't it cute?' noises and went back to sleep. Michelle stirred and mumbled something. The hare hopped nonchalantly off into the darkness. The last thing Audrey wanted was to squash some poor animal's life out of it. She thought of the time she had run over a skunk. She hadn't seen it. She had felt the tyres thud over something and viewed its flattened, striped remains in the rear-view mirror. It had shaken her and made her feel terrible.

She had learnt to curb her temper with Rick. It was easier somehow that way. Find a way around rather than confront. Flying off the handle didn't really achieve much more than a migraine headache or spastic colon. But there had to be more to marriage than straight out acceptance of your lot and playing dodgem cars with your emotions. There had to be some space. Whoops, he's drunk . . . close all systems

down. Passivity at all times . . . quiet. The kids . . . think of the kids. He's broken another promise . . . you didn't want to go to that film anyway . . . not really. Push it all in. He wants to take something out on me. He's provoking me. Keep quiet. Keep quiet. No answer. He wants an answer of some sort. Make it the right one. Think your own thoughts, great, but don't let him know.

He had come home very late . . . it was this night. This very night. It seemed like last night now, or the night before. He didn't care how she was feeling. He didn't give a second thought to how tired she was. Exhausted, not tired. She had been working at that wedding just like him. The difference was that he'd decided to go to a nightclub with his friends. She had taken the children and gone home to bed. She hadn't slept the night before because of all the preparations. It was his cousin's wedding.

She didn't know what time it was. He woke her by turning on the light. Oh hell, did he have to do that? He threw his shoe across the room. He didn't take his clothes off. She couldn't believe it when he lay across the bed with his legs draped over her stomach. Audrey pushed him. He spoke to someone, not her. She was so tired she felt like screaming. Screaming until it all came to an end. She had to leave. Go somewhere where she could sleep. He could stay with the kids. She pulled on some clothes, grabbed her car keys and ran outside. He'd parked behind her car. Where were his keys? Where? She ran inside again. Where? Kitchen, bathroom, bedroom? There in his pocket. She carefully slipped them out. He snorted and turned. They jangled as she pulled them across the bed. She kept still. Waited. Her hand clasped the keyring.

'What do you want with my keys?' he drawled.

She tried to keep calm. 'I'm tired. I've got to find somewhere to sleep.'

He groaned. 'Don't be stupid.'

'No, no,' she stammered desperately. 'I want to go and sleep at my mother's. I've just got to sleep.'

She took the keys and headed for the door. He followed her. 'What the hell are you doing, Audrey?'

She turned to face him, tears welling up. 'Listen, Rick, please move your car, I've got to get out of here.' She ran outside, sobbing. 'Oh,

God I'm tired. I'm just too tired. Please move your car. I don't want to be here with you.'

He ripped the keys from her hand. 'You're not going anywhere.'

'Move your car,' she screamed. 'You bastard. Move your car!'

He stood there swaying back and forth and looking smug.

'No . . . and Audrey . . . give a thought to the neighbours.'

She ran out of the gate. She would walk. No, it was scary. Anything could happen to her walking by herself at this time. She had to get a grip on herself. She was trapped. She went back into the yard.

'Pleeeeease,' she was crying. 'Please Rick move your car. I'll be back after I've had a rest. I just need some sleep.'

He refused, pulling her by the sleeve.

'You are sleeping here, my dear, whether you like it or not.'

The old familiar fury gurgled deep within her, stimulating unknown quantities of adrenalin. It came fast and furious. An earthquake blasting through the Richter Scale. Hurricane Audrey. No warning. She picked him up. She actually picked him up and hurled him against the tree. She stood there looking at him in wonderment. What was she going to do now? She felt drained. The consequences. Now she would have to face the consequences. Rick was stunned. He got up. Pushed her violently against the car. She lay across the bonnet looking at him. She felt like a little dog, rolling over on its back, in the face of a snarling bull mastiff . . . strategic retreat. She looked up at him thinking now I've really done it. Prepare yourself. He held a fist up, his elbow bent back. Then his arm dropped, flaccid against his side.

'I don't know about you but I'm going to bed.'

He walked off holding his keys. Audrey lay there sobbing. She fought for breath and cried some more. The frustration gave way to cool, calculating night-air thoughts. She would wait until he fell asleep and try again. Wait until he was in a deep, drunken slumber. His mouth open, snoring. She waited. The keys had fallen from his hand when he went in. They were on the floor. She reversed his car and parked it where it should have been parked in the first place. She drove her car outside the gate. She sneaked back inside, put his keys back on the floor and bundled up the children. She would explain later. They were going to see granny.

Audrey drove through the serenity of the desert. The sun infused the

night's darkness with a warm, pink morning glow that filled her body with pleasure. Tears flowed from her eyes. Not tears of frustration but rain tears that covered the parched earth with a carpet of profuse flowers. She switched off the headlights. She could see the road ahead.

*Bahumagading**

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With thanks to Mohumagadi Victoria Mogatsakgari Gomolemo Namane who helped me find the way to Bahumagading

I was wandering in a strange wilderness. It was supposedly familiar but I felt lost. I stumbled over a gnarled root emerging from the smooth, foot-beaten earth. The heat was oppressive. I was thirsty. My mouth and lips were dry. The path that lay behind me and before me had been traditionally hewn, cut with the masculine force and verve of explorers and pangas wielded with great strength above the head. There was no shade.

On a sudden impulse I veered off the beaten path. Thorns snatched tufts of hair from my scalp and tore at my dress. Drops of blood gathered in protest. I stopped, panting heavily. Then I noticed the tracks – I wasn't expecting winding, delicate tracks. I walked on. A little hesitant. The sun cast playful, dappled shadow patterns over the scene. Flowers daubed the brownish olive tones of the undergrowth with defiant blotches of red, white, blue, orange, and deep black centres. A warthog trotted through the grass, followed by four babies. They grunted and squeaked, their tails stuck up in the air.

The sound of trickling water drew me to a spring. I knelt down and tried to scoop the liquid into my mouth. I pulled my dress up over my head and quietly stepped into the pool. Immersing nakedness, I floated lazily on my back, and I stared at the blue sky studded with white fluffy clouds. Then it struck me. I had heard vague rumours of

* Bahumagading is a Setswana construction meaning the place where one finds women of importance, women of stature. This story is based on the life of Mohumagadi Gagoangwe Sechele Motswasele.

Bahumagading – this had to be the place. I got out and put my clothes on without drying myself, eager to explore.

At last the sun relented, stretching out across the twilight sky. The clouds, the brilliant golds, reds and pinks revelled in their own wonderful dynamics, intermingling, forming different hues and shapes which defied permanent classification. Chatter, barking dogs, smoke from wood fires appeared to absorb and magnify the fading intensity of the horizon. Women and girls walked ahead of me carrying pots of water on their heads. Green leaves on thin branches bobbed and peaked over the rims of the pots, preventing the water from splashing out to the joyful rythym of hips, thighs and feet in motion.

It was a large, bustling village. Twisted and weathered, the grey wood of a kgotla fence stood to one side as I approached a tin-roofed, colonial-style house with a verandah. The courtyard wall displayed the proud marks of women's art. Ochre scallops contrasted with grey clay finger squiggles and triangular designs. A tall, statuesque woman approached me, smiling. She held out her hand as I greeted her. Her left eye was closed, the other sparkled with wit and intelligence. She invited me inside, where we sat on carved wooden chairs with woven leather seats. Her name was Gagoangwe. Another larger woman wearing a blue headscarf and a shawl carried in a tray with tea and homemade biscuits. She greeted me and explained that she lived close by and that I could stay the night in her house if I wanted to. I was relieved to have somewhere to stay, although for some reason, I hadn't even thought about where I was going to sleep. She said I should call her Kerise. I related the events of my day to them. They looked at each other and laughed.

'Most of us find ourselves lost, my dear,' said Gagoangwe in a soft voice.

Kerise nodded her agreement and added, 'And when we find each other, we often find ourselves.'

They laughed again. Gagoangwe looked at Kerise. Her voice trembled from age or emotion as she spoke.

'It was during my first marriage that I think I really felt lost. My father was Sechele, Chief of the Bakwena. He arranged my marriage to Pilane, Chief of the Bakgatla ba ga Mmanaana in Moshupa. At first I was happy in my new home. I bore my husband five children, three

girls and two boys. I cannot speak ill of Pilane for he was a kind person at heart but he was not sensitive to my loneliness, to my needs. I was often alone in my house, a mohumagadi with her servants. He would go out drinking. This drinking got worse after our third child. He was captured by this alcoholic beverage the white people call kaffir beer. I was really suffering. I was being eaten by loneliness and by the changes in Pilane. Do you know the problems, the demons that ride on the back of a man who succumbs to the temptation of alcohol?'

I nodded my head and answered yes. I knew the problems only too well and fought to supress a surge of emotion that was pushing its way upwards into my chest. Gagoangwe had been studying my face intently as if she were seeking a more detailed answer to her question.

'Well, Pilane's cousin was Bathoeng, Chief of the Bangwaketse. They were friends and Bathoeng would always visit. Now Bathoeng noticed Pilane's absence from the home. He began to feel sorry for me. We would spend long hours talking together. It was when my fifth child, Mmaserame, was still a baby that we realised we loved each other, Bathoeng and I. He came to me one day with the suggestion that I should elope with him. I was frightened by the idea at first. I was frightened by the thought of what Pilane's people would do if they caught us and what my father's people would do. Even if we survived, could you imagine living with the stigma, the gossip?'

Kerise laughed. 'You should have seen her. She rode it out with her head held high, or should I say higher than usual. I don't think anyone would have dared say anything. Anyway many women secretly admired and envied you.'

Gagoangwe placed her hand on Kerise's arm. 'I can only thank my friends. You who stood steadfastly by me.'

She paused for a while and then continued. 'So you see I left with Bathoeng. We arranged a day. We knew Pilane would be out. I was scared and excited when I awoke. I tried very hard to act as normal. I was waiting for the signal. It came. I gathered some dresses, gathered Mmaserame's things. I told Nisa, the young woman who was looking after Mmaserame, to collect her belongings and prepare for the journey. Bathoeng came rushing in. The horse and cart were waiting for us behind the hill. He was pushing me, telling me to hurry. We ran across the courtyard. Bathoeng held my hand. Nisa held Mmaserame

in a tightly-wrapped bundle. We ran towards the hill. My heart leapt. I heard people yelling. Yelling, screaming, 'Bathoeng is stealing our queen. Bathoeng is stealing Pilane's wife.'

There were men forming groups. They were carrying assegais and clubs. We were in the cart. The driver whipped the horses. I was so frightened. I thought the men would kill us. We were galloping in the cart over a rocky, bumpy road. Men on horseback could easily still catch us. Bathoeng had both arms around me. Nisa's body formed a protective cushion around Mmaserame. I was very tired when I arrived in Kanye. We were hustled into a hut. I could barely see. We washed and ate. I fell into a deep sleep.'

Gagoangwe looked tired. The effort of recollection appeared to have exhausted her. She sipped her tea and ate one of the biscuits. Kerise glanced over at her friend and decided to fill the silence with her perspective on the unfolding story.

'Some of us knew what was happening. We were very nervous but respected the wishes of our chief. We heard the next day that Pilane's tribesmen had not been able immediately to give chase to their runaway queen and her abductor because they could not find their chief. When they did find Pilane he told them not to pursue Gagoangwe. He said that by running away she was showing him that she did not love him. We were relieved and grateful to hear that this was his response.'

'Pilane went to Gagoangwe's father in Molepolole. He said, "Look what has happened to the gift you gave me in front of your mother, in front of the whole tribe. It has run away."

'Sechele was furious with Gagoangwe. He wanted to send a band of men to collect her by force but again Pilane said, "No, if she runs away, she doesn't love me. If you bring her back using force, you will bring her back in body only. Her heart will remain with Bathoeng." Pilane married again. A woman from the Bangwato royal family. He married for a third time after that, didn't he?'

The question caught Gagoangwe with her mouth full of biscuit. She nodded and mumbled. We waited.

'Yes, he married Mmutlenyane after that. It was arranged that my children should live with my parents, their grandparents. Baitirile, my eldest son, took over as chief after Pilane's death. When everything

had settled down they came to visit me regularly in Kanye. Baitirile was good friends with Seepapitso.'

Gagoangwe continued. 'Bathoeng wanted sons. I bore him two sons and three daughters. Ohh my boys . . . Seepapitso and the youngest one, Moeapitso . . . my boys.'

I could see tears welling up in her eyes. Her face muscles stiffened as her skin seemed to suck some sort of deep interior pain up to the surface.

'As parents we do not hope or expect to survive our children. When a child dies it is as if an invisible, nasty claw-like hand constricts the womb in its grip. As you pull away it rips and scratches long-nailed, indelible furrows into whatever organs fall within its reach. The wounds fester and the poison spreads through the arteries and veins, throbbing into the brain's unfathomable realms.'

Kerise stood up and collected the tea cups. 'You don't have to talk about it. Why don't you rest?' She walked off very slowly, carrying the tray. The floral teapot teetered unsteadily, tapping its coded message against the sugar bowl.

'Bathoeng died. I'm truly thankful he didn't see the death of his sons.' Gagoangwe shook her head and repeated her husband's name. She had taken the tie of her German print dress and was twisting it. 'He had a temperature and was vomiting dark, dark blood. I remember, Seepapitso sent for Dr Hayes in Lobatse. It was a cold winter's night in July.'

Kerise came back in and sat down saying, 'I remember that cold. That was one of our coldest winters, 1910. The kind of cold that goes into your bones.'

'Yes,' Gagoangwe said in agreement. 'That was the year our eldest son, Seepapitso, became chief. He had been trained to succeed his father. He was trained for chiefdomship. He went to school and served for a long time as an apprentice to his father. I was proud of him. He was a kind, wise young man.'

'We were all proud of him,' Kerise added. 'He helped us Bangwaketse with development. He had dams built and bore-holes. We drew our water from standpipes. He kept records of everything. He was against alcoholic beverages, wasn't he, heee? He treated people with respect and consulted the elders and the headmen. He was popular.

That is why it came as such a shock to us when he was murdered. Murdered by his own brother, Moeapitso, in the very place he was made chief. It was such a terrible shock.'

A young woman entered the room. I judged her to be in her early twenties. She greeted us and kissed Gagoangwe who took her by the hand.

'This is my granddaughter, Victoria. She is Mmaserame's daughter.' Victoria went into the kitchen and returned with a small stool which she sat on.

Gagoangwe shifted her body into a more comfortable position. She looked at Kerise. 'Did it really come as a shock? No, no, it didn't come as a shock to me. I had seen Moeapitso changing. He was a kind, open boy but he changed. Jealousy ate his heart. I don't know how it happens. You bring your children up with the same love but one can just turn bitter like that. As Moeapitso grew older he became more bad tempered. He always spoke roughly to Seepapitso. He accused Seepapitso and his uncles of not dividing the inheritance fairly. He fought with them over his marriage plans. Some people said he wanted to be chief. Those who did not want Seepapitso as chief encouraged Moeapitso to act against him. I really don't know. It was so painful for me to see Moeapitso become twisted inside, to watch him turn to alcohol. I loved him. He was the baby of the family. You know he tried to shoot Seepapitso once before? I think it was three years after Seepapitso became chief. Moeapitso took a revolver and pointed it at him. He was yelling let me shoot him, let me shoot him. I took the gun from him and Seepapitso ran and hid.'

Gagoangwe looked at me. 'I'm sure you must be hungry.' My rumbling stomach acknowledged the statement before I could formulate a polite reply.

She smiled. 'What is it that speaks louder than words? Let me see what there is to eat.' She left the room calling someone. A timid, youthful reply came from behind the house.

Kerise spoke to me in a subdued tone. 'You know, I was there the night Seepapitso was killed. He had just returned from Mafikeng that day. He went to church and then in the evening he came home to change and went to the kgotla. He wore a coat and a waistcoat. He was such a handsome man, always well dressed. It was just after sunset

and Moeapitso was there in the kgotla. When Seepapitso entered, Moeapitso didn't greet him. He just left without a word.'

Gagoangwe returned and stood in the doorway, holding on to the door handle. She bent her head for a while and then spoke. 'Kebuitse came to the house. Seepapitso sent him to ask Victoria to make him tea. It was then that we heard the shot. I knew what had happened but I didn't want to know. I asked Kebuitse what that noise could be. He ran outside and they carried Seepapitso into the house. There was a small hole under his left arm and a much bigger hole on his right side. My son died. The men told me he had called out in disbelief "But why is Moeapitso killing me?" '

'I remember it very clearly, Granny,' Victoria added. 'I was making the tea when I heard the shot. I knew Moeapitso had killed Seepapitso. Moeapitso had always spoken very loudly in front of us children. We pretended we didn't hear but we heard. We knew what was happening. I took Bathoeng's hand. The little boy didn't know what was happening. I called to you, Granny. We ran into the orchard to hide. I was so frightened.'

Gagoangwe looked very sad. 'Bathoeng is my grandson, Seepapitso's son, named after his grandfather. It is he who will be the next chief, when he is old enough. I want him to finish his education like his father.'

Kerise's eyes were red. She rubbed them gently. 'I saw Moeapitso running from the kgotla. He came from the women's walk and he had no reason to be there. It is not for men. Many people saw him. They found the rifle that he had used and his glasses. He normally wore his glasses but he had left them hanging on the poles of the kgotla. He had taken them off to aim. He denied killing the Chief. He said he had taken the rifle to the kgotla to fire a shot to announce that he had killed a leopard. Everyone knew he was not telling the truth.'

Gagoangwe now spoke with a strong, steady voice. 'The English came to tell me that their court had found Moeapitso guilty. They asked me what they should do with him. I spoke to them in a calm voice which hid cutting inner turbulence. I told them that I lost the sight of my eye by the same justice that I must apply to my son. I told them that he must die. They hung my son in Gaborone. I had already had one breast cut off, it was time to cut off the other one.'

Her head was held high as it must have been when she spoke to the magistrate. My curiosity was aroused: I wanted to ask what had caused her to lose the sight of one eye. What was unwinding before me was the kind of tragedy we attribute to the ancient Greeks or Shakespeare. I wasn't at all sure of my ability to probe further without offending or unwittingly trampling on the feelings of the women involved.

A delicate, light-skinned girl appeared. She set the table and ran back and forth carrying food like an ant. Victoria stood up and helped her. The girl approached me carrying a big dish full of water and a white starched hand towel over her arm. I washed and dried my hands whilst she held the bowl. Gagoangwe and Kerise sat at the table and beckoned me to join them. Victoria took on the task of serving out the food. My plate was piled high with spiced meat, spinach, carrots and my favourite corn and bean mix. Gagoangwe didn't eat much. The young, light-skinned girl came in and cleared the dishes. Victoria brought in a cake. 'Granny, MmaSeanego asked me to give you this cake. She baked this and some bread and more biscuits.'

Gagoangwe was obviously thrilled. 'MmaSeanego comes from a gentle, Christian family,' she explained. 'I give them flour and they bake for me. They really are good friends of mine. I seem to have lost my appetite for meat these days but I still have a great liking for cakes.'

We drank tea again and ate the cake. Gagoangwe was tired. She asked if I would come to see her in the morning. I readily agreed. We said goodnight and left. Kerise took me to her house. Victoria accompanied us halfway. The night air was refreshingly crisp and the stars were bright in the cloudless sky.

I was woken by Kerise the next morning, very early by my standards but not by hers. It must have been about six o'clock. She had heated two pitchers of water which I carried to the bathroom. It was difficult to see as the sun was still coming up and the bathroom had a very small window. I washed and was still dressing when Kerise called softly.

'I have prepared soft porridge. Would you like some?'

I am not one of these people who have difficulty eating in the morning. I was delighted by the prospect of steamy motogo, fresh creamy milk and sugar. We ate together and Kerise told me of the

problems experienced by the tribe after Seepapitso's death. She spoke of the chiefs who succeeded Seepapitso. Kgosimotse and Malope had held office for short periods due to health problems. Chief Tshosa had also suffered from ill health. Kerise felt that his illness had affected his mind. She said that he often made decisions that angered Bangwaketse as a majority. She referred to them as weak chiefs who only brought about fragmentation of the tribe and eroded the progress made by Seepapitso.

She stacked the porridge bowls and noisily pushed her chair out from the table.

'The tribe was drifting apart, tribal funds had disappeared. That is why Gagoangwe took over. She has been ruling the tribe now for almost eight months and things have improved. She has managed to unite us. She is fair and very knowledgeable. She gets things done. I really cannot imagine myself coping with the sneaky ways of some of those wily headmen. She does. She deals with them.'

I helped clear the table and followed Kerise to the kitchen. 'My son built this kitchen and the bathroom for me. The house was smaller before. You know the chief's house, Gagoangwe's house? Bathoeng had that built the year he returned from England. He got a white man from South Africa to build it. It's a beautiful house, isn't it?'

I agreed that it was indeed an impressive house. It appeared to be a very well built, solid house. It was definitely very pleasing to the eye.

Kerise had some church matters to attend to and asked if I would mind walking across to see Gagoangwe by myself. We agreed to meet before lunch. Gagoangwe looked drawn and pale. I sat down with her on the verandah.

'You see this eye?' She pointed to her closed lid. 'This eye has ruled over my life. I will tell you the story. When I was a young girl I was very proud of my status as a chief's daughter. I thought it gave me power over others. I felt more important than other children. One day I was playing with some children in the village. I became angry with one girl from the Kgalagadi. I was so angry, I deliberately poked my finger into her eye so that she would see my point of view. She screamed and ran away crying very loudly.

Later that day my father called me. The parents of the girl took their child to my father to show him her damaged eye. Both my mother and

my father were Christians. My father was a very strict man. I stood in front of him.

"Is this not God's person like you?" he asked and pointed to the girl. "Was she not made by the same God who made you?"

I answered yes almost as if I was whispering. He asked me to speak up. I did. Then he suddenly grabbed me and pushed his finger into my eye. He kept pressing my eye with his finger so hard. I screamed as the girl had screamed. I remember my mother crying out, "Oh, no RraOpe, Oh no." People from the kgotla tried to stop him. He spoke loudly. "I am feeling the same pain these parents feel for their daughter who has suffered the same violence my daughter must suffer."

I was taken by my mother and traditional doctors came for a long time after that. They treated me and they treated the girl.'

I felt uneasy, a queasy feeling invaded my stomach. Gagoangwe continued, 'So I am the daughter, mother, wife, and sister of chiefs. I am now Chieftainess of the Bangwaketse, regent queen. In my lifetime I have tried to apply justice, to be fair to both myself and others. I am ill and I know I do not have long to live. I am arranging for my eldest daughter, Ntebogang, to take over the ruling of the tribe from me. I have great faith in her and know she will do well. Many of the headmen are against a woman ruling the tribe. She will not find it easy. They say that it requires a man to drive a wagon, especially when the wagon is not in good condition. I have proved them wrong.

They tried their tricks with me. They tried to disregard kgotla meetings and other tribal meetings. When I brought this to their attention they began to hold meetings without informing me. At one such meeting Tshosa told the men that if they met a woman on a path they were not to make way for her even if the woman was carrying a pot of water on her head. I was furious when I heard this. I called him and asked him why he had decided to set aside Seepapitso's law which stated that women should be treated with due respect. Seepapitso said that it must be recognised that women had various duties to fulfil and that the days when women were looked upon as nothing were over. I asked Tshosa why he had decided to replace this law with his own. He told me that he had forgotten the law. I told him that I thought he was purposely forgetting because I was a woman. These are the problems I know Ntebogang will face.'

She looked at me for a short while and took hold of my hand.

'I lost the sight of one eye but I began to develop a sharper, more important sight. Yes it is important. I see you are also developing this sight. That is why you are here. It is the sight that comes when we begin searching for the unseen, the hidden, the peripheral, the unnoticed, the unstated. It is a sight which comes from a caring heart. It is only this sight that can lead us to true justice.'

I kissed Gagoangwe and said goodbye to her. I felt intense joy because of the sense of personal fulfilment and hope that accompanied my discoveries and at the same time I felt like crying. Kerise and Victoria walked with me to the edge of the village. They both hugged me. Victoria gave me some biscuits wrapped in a bright, coloured cloth. I walked into the bush with the confidence of a woman who knows her mother's mothers, their sisters and friends have been there before her.

In Confinement

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Mooketsa had been called to the kgotla, along with others from his regiment, to listen to the white trader. The man said he had just arrived from the City of Gold. He was to tell them of cattle with full udders that were just waiting to be milked.

'Yes, my friends, you are sitting here wondering how you are going to pay this hut tax . . .' He bent over and scratched his dry legs whilst giving the man who was translating the English into Sestwana a chance to finish his sentence. 'Well we will pay it for you, and we will give you maize to feed your family. The Company will pay you 3/- to 12/- a day, depending on how strong you are. You, my friends, all look very strong, eeh?'

The man half laughed and half coughed. Mooketsa laughed together with his age mates.

'Gone are the days when your fathers had to walk the dangerous road to the mines; we will pay your railway fares. If you get sick, we have agreed with the compound managers that the Company will pay your fare home. My friends, come to me and I will help you milk that cow!'

The chief spoke next, urging the young men to go to the mines and bring back money to support their wives, children and parents. He criticised them for not having paid their taxes. He told them that now was the best time to sign the contracts because there was an officer of the British Government there to act as a witness and see that everything was fair.

Mooketsa's cousin, Gare, pushed him gently from behind. '*Tlaa o saene monna, re tla bona madi a mantsi.*'

Mooketsa smiled but did he not share Gare's enthusiasm, nor did he fully believe the trader's promises of money. The thought of having to leave his wife and family did not appeal to him but times were hard.

Only yesterday his father had complained to his sons of the lack of rain, failing crops, a disease that was killing the cattle and the terrible difficulties created by the continual demand for money to pay for taxes.

Mooketsa put his thumb into the purplish ink and forced the contours of a signature on to the paper. The officer scrawled his approval across the page with imperious dignity and the trader smiled. The contract, they said, was for twelve months. A medical examination would be arranged and they would leave from the railway station in five days' time. Mooketsa waited for Gare and the two walked with some of their friends to a house renowned for its beer brewing.

That night in bed he told his wife, Koketso, that he would be leaving. She kept quiet but didn't pull away from him. He told her that she would remain to look after his parents, and the home.

'When I return, I will be able to buy cattle,' he said as he stroked her head. Their baby girl moved restlessly next to them. 'Yes, little one, I will see you in twelve months,' he whispered.

The five days passed quickly, too quickly. Mooketsa carried his possessions wrapped in a blanket, a stick, and a hat that he had bought some time ago from the same trader who had spoken to them in the kgotla. That was when he had grain to sell. Now there was barely enough to feed his family. The sun was just appearing above the horizon. The reddish glow of the early morning sky provided a fiery background to the silhouette of the sleepy village. Thorn trees and thatched roofs etched their outlines into his mind. A dog stirred and some goats began to bleat.

'Gare!' he called, as he saw his cousin approaching from the right. '*O tsogile jang?*'

Gare smiled. '*Ke tsogile, ntsalake, o kae?*' Before Mooketsa could answer, Gare continued, 'When I get back I'll be bringing money for bogadi!'

Mooketsa laughed. 'What do you mean? Do you have somebody in mind? You never told me!'

They joked about Gare's long overdue marriage until they reached the railway station. There were many men from other areas of the reserve. They were talking to each other and milling around in nervous agitation. The trader sat on a bench talking to a small weasle-like

white man. The distant rumblings of the train caused the trader to rise from his seated position. He indicated that he wanted the men to form a line and began calling names from a pile of books he held. As each man responded to his name, he was given one of the books.

'These are for you, boys. Keep them on you at all times,' the trader said. 'And we don't want to see any of you running away now. You Bechuanas are lucky the mine bosses are kind enough to give you work!'

Mooketsa was surprised to see that the train was already full of men, some of them hanging precariously out of the windows to get a good view of the newcomers. They spoke languages he hadn't heard before. Gare pushed him up on to the metal steps and someone else grabbed his hand to pull him into the stuffy box they called a carriage. They politely wove their way through the smell of bodies that hadn't been washed for some time to find a place for themselves. Gare looked at him and raised his eyebrows, '*Re a tsamaya . . .*'

The train, in its effort to continue its tedious journey, lurched forward, throwing them against the hard metal walls and against each other. Mooketsa eventually fell asleep, only to wake up when the train screeched to a halt in Mafeking, or as the uniformed white man on the platform yelled, 'Mafeeeking'. His head ached from bumping against the wall of the train and his neck was stiff. They all waited for what seemed like half a day, then the weasle-like man slid into the carriage.

'You see my friends, your fathers would have got off here and walked to Krugersdorp and then to Germiston. You are lucky there is a new railway line which is taking you right to where you want to go.'

He sprang back on to the platform and began talking to the man in the uniform. The rest of the journey was a blur to Mooketsa. Mooketsa had long finished the rations given to him for the journey and was not only suffering from hunger but from extreme boredom. Gare had left him to play cards in another carriage.

When eventually they arrived in the Rand, his interest was at least captured by the mosaic of city life which flashed before him. Buildings, so many big buildings, shops and people crowding in the streets. There were horse-drawn carts, bullock carts, men on bicycles and women selling flowers.

One of the men sitting next to him mumbled, 'Enjoy it while you

can, my brother. You have to get a special pass from the boss to come here.'

Mooketsa nodded and smiled, not wishing to show his ignorance. The train pulled to a sudden halt and those who knew, began to disembark. Weasle ran past the windows yelling that they should all get out. Mooketsa felt as if all his muscles had seized up. He could barely bring himself to climb down the metal steps. He squinted and his forehead wrinkled into a frown, as he attempted to make out what was happening in the sudden brightness of the harsh sunlight. White hands pushed him into a room.

'All the Tswanas in here,' sing-songed its way around his ears. 'In here, boy!' shrieked knife-like into his dazed thoughts.

He looked around the room for Gare but couldn't see him. They were all told, old men and young men alike, to take their clothes off and parade past a medical officer. Some were told to stay behind. They dressed quickly and a man talked to them about their contracts. Men in dark uniforms pushed them, yelling as if in a desperate hurry. 'We are walking to the mine, let's go, let's go!'

They walked towards a big tower with wheels at the top and some tall chimneys, puffing out grimy black smoke. They kept walking, past the towers and the office buildings, through the haze of grey dust, to a massive conglomeration of wood and iron. This apparently was where they were to live. They were shoved and pushed into single file, and their names were read out loud. A man wrote something in a big book and asked each man for his travelling pass. Mooketsa reached into his pocket and pulled out the book he had been given at the beginning of the journey. He then allowed the flow of human bodies to bustle him into another room where, facing the wall with their hands up in the air, they were made to stand naked for the second time. After this, their third medical examination, they were given their books and again told to carry them at all times. A black man dressed in a uniform and wearing a strange, circular brimless hat, led them to their rooms. Mooketsa greeted him politely but the man looked at the others in the room, scowled and muttered, '*Angibulisi izinja!*'

Mooketsa didn't understand the reason for this apparent animosity, but his eyes began to provide him with more detail on the dark forms that surrounded him. Men lay quietly on concrete beds as if they were

stacked on shelves. There were no windows and the room smelt stale and of mould. Somebody called out from the darkness.

'They stuff us in here like animals. They don't even give us beds. You have to sleep on that rotten, stinking, broken wood they call a floor. Dogs are better off.'

There was a sudden confusion as the man wearing the uniform and the strange hat lunged forward, wielding his knobkerry. Three other men wearing the same uniform and speaking the same language burst into the room. They dragged a man out of the door, which didn't deter him from screaming insults at them. He was thrown into the dust where they kicked and beat his writhing, swearing torso. Mooketsa's attention was diverted as a huge giant of a man emerged from the back. He calmly introduced himself as Dumba.

'That's Thabo,' he said, looking out of the door. 'He'll never learn. One of you can take his place in the corner bed. He won't be back for a while. You see they're putting the handcuffs on him now. They'll take him to the detention room and then maybe to the compound hospital.' He put his hands on his hips. 'I'm in charge here. I'll show you around and teach you the ropes. Each of you will be given certain duties and if you have any problems, you come to me, right?'

They made themselves as comfortable as possible. Dumba showed them the toilets which consisted of a long bench with twenty or so holes in it. The shower room was just as public. They sat outside around a fire where they were given their evening meal. Dumba explained that today they didn't have meal tickets because they were new but tomorrow they would need a stamped ticket to show that they had done their assigned load of work. Mooketsa surveyed his plate of discoloured mealies and slowly turned his eyes to the man sitting next to him, whom he recognised from the train.

'I'm sure this maize is as rotten as the floorboards,' the man whispered. 'It smells bad and I am sure those little dark things there are weevils.' He reached across to shake Mooketsa's hand and said, 'They call me Skilpad.'

The two men exchanged information as to where they were from. Mooketsa started to tell Skilpad about his family. He felt an intense longing which turned to pain at the thought of his comfortable, clean, private home. He changed the subject.

'Dumba says that the guards are on the gate to stop us leaving the compound. They'll only let you out if you have a special pass from the mine manager.' Skilpad just nodded. They stood up and made their way to the room.

Mooketsa hardly slept that night. The floor was uneven and insects bit him. Men were coughing, spluttering and groaning. The air was rancid with illness. He thought of running away but couldn't imagine how he would get out or where he would go. The disgrace of returning home empty-handed evoked a deep and steely courage within him. He forced a separation between his mind and his emotions. He had to find Gare.

The compound police came very early, bashing loudly on the door. It was 5 o'clock. They were pushed into queues for the washroom and then into queues for the kitchen where they were given tin mugs full of coffee. The next queue packed them into a small cage. Skilpad took hold of Mooketsa's arm. Bodies were squashed tightly, one against the other. The metal dug into their skin. The cage rattled and suddenly plunged into complete darkness. Mooketsa felt like vomiting with fear. They hurtled past a tunnel with men in it, then back into darkness. It jerked to a standstill. The door squealed as the boss boy kicked it open.

'Get the tools ready! Quick, quick! Sibonda show your new roommates how to fill in the dynamite holes.'

The dark hole was hot and airless. Mooketsa felt dizzy. He wanted to smash his way out of this claustrophobic hell. Skilpad held his arm again.

'Are you all right? Heeech, look at this slime everywhere. Be careful how you move in here.'

Dumba called them and began explaining the work. They followed him deeper into the rocky tunnel. Their five senses rebelled against the torturous onslaught of a vile unfamiliarity. This was a living nightmare. They couldn't escape by simply waking up.

Thunder exploded around their ears as a voice bounced off the rock walls and resounded. 'You boys will buy boots with your first pay. You hear me?' They nodded dumbfounded. Dumba continued working. 'And you will be paid 1/6- for the first thirty days. You should be paying us. We are the educators, the teachers. I will teach you how to

make yourselves useful, and you will be grateful, nee?' He prodded Skilpad with a long stick he was carrying. 'Nee?'

Skilpad flinched and grit his teeth. The muscles in his jaw tightened and the sinews in his neck stood out in defiance. The man was big. His face turned a darker shade of red as he sneered, 'Oh, yes, I almost forgot to tell you. You boys must watch the Zulus and Kozas. They don't take any shit from the Suthos and you fellows. But if I'm around you'll be all right. I carry this little baby wherever I go.' He unbuttoned his shirt to reveal a small pistol. 'Time you boys learnt about lashing and tramming!'

They followed him to where men were shovelling broken rock into trucks. The boss boy ran towards them carrying two shovels, grinning broadly from a face caked in dirt and sweat. After what seemed like a back-breaking eternity, the other workers began to hammer deep holes into the rock. Dumba explained that they were the hammer boys and that dynamite fuses were to be inserted into the holes. The white man put the fuses in.

'Ok,' he chirped, 'now you will learn about blasting. I'm going up for a food break, fresh air and sunlight.' Mooketsa and Skilpad were weak with hunger and exhaustion. Dumba produced some meat and began to eat. He looked at them from the corner of his eye and spoke angrily with his mouth full.

'If you want to eat you have to buy food with your own money, man!'

He threw them what he had left and stormed off. By the time they found themselves rattling back up to the surface, they had been in the mine for over ten hours. The stench of sweat and the heat of the miners' bodies were abruptly released as the cage reached ground level. It was cold. They were swept into queues to collect their tickets, to show that they had finished their shift. Mooketsa turned to see Gare making up part of the human centipede that was pushing into the cage. He called out but the door was closed and the cage disappeared before Gare could answer. His mournful eyes were indication enough that he had fared no better than Mooketsa.

They ate the same rotten mealies they had eaten the night before and drank coffee. Skaalpad talked of his wife and children. They

chatted with the other men in the room. They didn't have time to wash their clothes.

The days were repetitive. The month came to an end. Mooketsa was able to speak to his cousin but only briefly. Gare was on the night shift. He knew someone who could organise a forged pass. He had his money and he was going. He felt sure he could find a job in the city with better pay and better conditions. Skilpad was sick with a stomach problem in the hospital. They said it was an intestinal infection.

Having collected his wage, Mooketsa plunged from disappointment into severe depression. He couldn't bring himself to smile any more. He lay on a blanket on the damp floor and stared at the pitted corrugated iron roof. Rays of sunshine negotiated with the jagged holes to pierce the darkness with thin slivers of winter light. His thoughts faded with the sun into a deep sleep. A hand gently shook his shoulder.

'*Tsoga monna.*' It was Gare. 'I'm leaving you now,' he whispered. The two cousins hugged each other and Gare evaporated into the vast, forbidden unknown beyond the compound walls. Mooketsa curled up into a tight ball with his hands clutching his head. They had deducted the hut tax, the maize for his family, and the train fare, and he didn't even understand what else from his wage. He couldn't pay for the boots and buy food to supplement the food they gave him. It was impossible to work like an elephant and eat like a mouse.

Repetitive days became repetitive months. Mooketsa was able to buy traditional beer to drown his sorrows. Other forms of alcohol were banned. He was now on the loafer ticket system. At the end of each day he had to show that he had drilled at least thirty inches of rock. Only after collecting thirty tickets was he entitled to his monthly wage. He had to do the normal lashing and tramming as well. If he didn't manage to drill the thirty inches he was given a loafer's ticket and wasn't paid for the shift.

A skeletal shadow of the old Skilpad emerged from the hospital. He spoke to Mooketsa in an excited almost breathless manner about unions and workers organising to go on strike.

'The man next to me was a Zulu from here, you know . . . and his brother is an organiser, so he knows a lot about these things.' He almost fell on to Mooketsa's bed in an attempt to sit down. 'This is

the only way to get the mine owners to improve conditions, Mooketsa. We protest by deserting or boycotting the compound stores. Now we can refuse to work. All of us at once, not just Basotho or Batswana but all of us together. It's the mine owners who divide us you know. What could they do then? They would have to listen, wouldn't they?'

Mooketsa nodded his head and murmured sounds of agreement. He had managed to get himself a Special and was going beyond the walls. He was too busy oiling his skin and combing his hair to listen properly to what Skilpad was saying. With money in his pocket and his shoes polished, he was ready to enjoy the night.

'Skilpad, rest brother. I'm just going to visit a friend in town.' He clapped his hand on to Skilpad's bony shoulder and swaggered off into the darkness.

The night air felt good. Home was far from his thoughts. He passed men playing a game of dice. He looked at the signs. The dentist practised above the Elite Boot Store and the jewellery shop. The grocery store sign, with its peeling paint, asked him to Drink Nectar Tea. At the saddlery, he quietly slipped down a side alley, trying to avoid patches of mud. Mud was going to be a problem if it rained any more. Many of the compound huts had earthen floors which turned to slush. Even his room with its broken wooden boards didn't escape the mud.

The tree was in front of him. He put his hands on the rough bark of its lowest bough and swung himself over the fence. He bent over for a time, listening. All was quiet. He pulled a piece of cloth from his pocket and polished his shoes. Treading softly, he made his way over to a small window and tapped lightly.

'Millie,' he whispered. 'Millie, open up.'

There was a rustling inside the room followed by the squeak of door hinges. He took her rounded body roughly into his arms and kissed her on the face. She wore a long cotton nightdress, with pink ribbon across the bodice. He carelessly tugged the ribbon for a moment and then pulled a small bottle of whisky from his pocket.

'Look what I got,' he said proudly. He had organised it through one of the boss boys.

'And look what I've got,' she replied pulling her nightdress out and spinning around. 'Madam gave it to me. She must be getting too fat.'

He took a swig from the bottle and spread his body across her bed. It was a big, lumpy mattress placed on boxes. She sat down next to him and took the bottle from his hand. Tilting her head right back, she let the tawny liquid pour into her mouth. She shuddered slightly and laughed raucously.

'It's really hot, this stuff, eeh?'

Mooketsa drew her towards him, loosening the pink ribbon on her nightdress. He pulled the garment over her head and threw it on to the cement floor. She pressed her large breasts against his chest and moved her lips softly over his neck. The mine was another world.

A silent-early morning world surrounded Mooketsa as he walked back to the mine. He had to be there in time for the day shift. Mud splashed up on to his trousers as he approached the compound gates. He brushed past the guards and ran towards his room. Skilpad was still asleep. Mooketsa hurriedly undid the buttons on his shirt and trousers. As he pulled the shirt off, his trousers fell to the floor. He folded his clothes and placed them carefully in a cardboard carton under the bed. Reaching towards the roof, he grabbed his soiled, ragged shorts and pulled them on. The compound police came just as he was putting on his new boots. One of them kicked Skilpad.

'Come on you bastard, you're not in hospital now!'

Mooketsa helped him up from the floor. 'You better stick with me today,' he said quietly. 'You're still not well.'

They went down the shaft, together with Dumba. The boss boy told them to get out at level ten where they were to help build a partition. A white miner carried the bratticing poles and kept shouting out instructions. Mooketsa began placing the upright poles into position and securing them. The white man steadied the poles while Mooketsa hammered the wedges in. Suddenly the man began screaming, 'Come on kaffir, you can do it quicker than that!'

Dumba looked up as the man grabbed the hammer from Mooketsa and went to hit the wedge with all his might. As he struck, his boots slipped on the slime underneath. He hit the main supporting pole with the full force of his body. Rock came crashing down before any of them could run. The noise was deafening. Mooketsa managed to prise his left foot out from under the debris. It was twisted and there was a bone protruding from the skin. He dragged himself over to where

Dumba was. He was still alive but the rock had fallen on his head. His skull was broken revealing a red mass which could have easily been his brain. Mooketsa reeled back in horror. The white man lay under a mass of rock. His eyes stared straight ahead, unseeing. Mooketsa looked around in vain for Skilpad. He felt so agonisingly alone. He uttered his wife's name and thought of his mother. The pain was excruciating. He found it difficult to breath.

'Don't worry, Dumba,' he said quietly. 'We'll be out of here soon.'

The sound of shouting was distant but comforting. Men were trying desperately to clear away the rock that had blocked the tunnel. At least he could hear them. A rush of air and noise indicated that they had broken through. He felt hands all over his body and saw Skilpad's worried face.

Dumba was dead by the time they got to the surface. Mooketsa was taken to hospital. He spoke to Skilpad the next day and thanked him for getting help so quickly. Skilpad bent over the bed and handed him a letter saying softly, 'My real name is Thuto.'

It was the first letter Mooketsa had received since leaving home. Koketso had asked the schoolteacher to write it for her. She spoke of the poor soil and crop yields. His mother was ill and his father needed help with the ploughing. She finished by saying that they all missed him and needed him at home. Mooketsa couldn't make himself feel strong. Tears filled his eyes and flowed freely down his cheeks. He thought of the suffering of his people. He thought of Dumba. It was through Dumba that he had met Millie. The big man had taken him to town and they had passed by a European house. Millie was standing at the door with a broom. She had insulted both of them for walking where she was sweeping. She had been wearing a white doek, a white blouse and a long brown skirt. A floral apron was pulled tightly around her waist. Mooketsa was attracted by her bright smile and brazen manner.

The twelve months written into the contract expired while he was still in hospital. His leg healed enough to return to work. His thoughts were occupied with returning home but twelve months became eighteen months. They said he had to work thirty shifts to get his monthly wage but it took longer than a month to work thirty shifts. The loafer

tickets and his time in hospital put him right back. Frustration and bitterness became a part of his existence.

Mooketsa finally told Millie that he was going home but that he would probably be coming back. The Company gave him his rail ticket as promised. He limped into the arms of his mother and hugged her now frail body. His older brother put an arm around his shoulder. The pain of denying his inner humanity was let loose in joyous laughter and the words, '*Ke motho gape!*'

He stopped for a moment and punctuating his sentence with uncontrollable coughing, he asked for Koketso. His mother lowered her voice to answer, '*Ke motsetsi, Rra . . .*'.

Mooketsa's spirits sank into the warm earth below his feet. His mother's whispered words wormed their way into his ears and his brain. His shoulders sagged. Koketso was in confinement and he had a new baby boy.

Hide Them Under the Bed

◆

Lying in semi-darkness, the night cold and quiet, when most people sleep, she was tense and angry. Angry at him and angry that he was able to provoke such frustration. If she tried to discuss the problem, there would definitely be an argument. She would somehow end up guilty. His defence was always attack.

No, it was best to maintain her harsh silence, that silence which ate away at her being, her identity and independence of spirit. It was a silence that caused introversion, an ice cover that only she could feel. This was a deception that nobody condemned. For the sake of uncertain peace she was prepared to contain feelings of incredible intensity. He had the perfect freedom. As long as dinner was kept warm in the oven, life was fine. If he went out, there was no time limit. A quick drink with some friends, ten minutes, five hours, so what?

She kicked all the blankets off the bed in a sudden burst of fury. It was being taken for granted that she detested. The underlying assumption that she would always be there; that she would naturally come home from work and deal with the meals, the children, the home in general. She swore out loud at him and their friendship. It was freezing and her feet felt numb. Muttering to herself she grudgingly re-made the bed, remembering to tuck enough sheet in on his side so that he wouldn't complain. And just in time; she heard the front door unlock and swing open. In bed more quickly than she thought possible, her heart beating rapidly, her body still. He wouldn't notice.

He undressed in the front room so as not to wake her. Whether it was out of consideration for her or so that she wouldn't look at the clock, she didn't know. Anyway, she had long given up looking at the time on these occasions – it no longer had any relevance. After all the evening's cans of beer had made their way into the toilet he crawled in

beside her, not even suspecting that she might be awake. A heavy leg and arm wrapped her into a tight parcel sealed with a kiss. The next minute he was snoring, not to be woken until the late morning or lunchtime.

She lay for a while, more relaxed, slipping off into the darkness. Whether she had been asleep or not, she couldn't tell.

Suddenly she heard gunfire, rapid popping noises. Then she saw flashes of light which she assumed to be grenades from their small compact explosions. She had never experienced these before, but she knew. She nudged him.

'They're invading! Bobby! What are we going to do?'

They were both up. Stunned. Listening. The noise surrounded them.

'Don't turn any lights on,' Bobby managed to say as he ran to phone the police. He lay on the floor dialling in the dark. The window shattered.

She looked out from the corner of the kitchen window. She could see them running, crouched with guns. some were getting into a white Kombi.

'Get down!' yelled Bobby. 'Stay on the floor . . . the police say we must wait, that this is not the only incident.' She heard his disappointment.

Then they were deafened by a loud ear-splitting explosion. The horror and fear on their faces were frozen in the bright light of the blast.

Tshidi heard her own scream well after it had escaped. More windows shattered. She felt the glass as she half crawled towards the children's bedroom.

'The kids, Bobby!' She screeched, tormented by feelings of impotence. 'What about the kids?'

Rushing into the small bedroom, she couldn't help sobbing. The youngest was still asleep despite the commotion. The eldest looked at her in astonishment, wondering more than anything why he was being wrenched from his bed.

'Is it soldiers, Mummy?' his sleepy voice questioned. She pushed them both under the bed.

'It's OK, it's OK,' she reassured, covering them with her body and stroking their small heads. Thoughts raced madly inside her brain.

'Listen, Binks,' she said to the eldest, hugging him tightly, 'I want you to look after your little sister, and whatever you do, stay here.'

She wrapped them in a blanket and left the room. In the hallway, Bobby held her close to him.

'I've put them under the bed next to the wall,' she whispered.

'Yes, good, hide them under the bed.' His words slid with his warm breath on to her cheek.

They stood together, waiting. Then he made a move towards the larger window.

Her voice trailed him anxiously, 'Please don't go out! They might still be there.'

'I think they split before the last explosion,' he answered, looking at her standing in front of him, hugging her arms close to her body. The back of her nightdress hung limply around her legs. He noticed for the first time that somehow, amidst all the confusion, she had managed to pull on a pair of jeans underneath.

Not even a dog barked in the suddenly silent neighbourhood.

Bobby spoke. 'Tshidi, maybe somebody out there needs help.'

Footsteps grated on the gravel across the concrete entrance. Their hearts were gripped with fear. There was a soft knock.

Bobby started towards the door then stopped.

'*Ke mang*?' he asked cautiously.

'*Ke Mogomotsi*,' came the urgent reply.

Tshidi felt like laughing. They had assumed the worst.

'Mogomotsi, come in Rra.'

The man's face was bleeding. His pants were torn.

'It's nothing,' he declared dismissively. 'I rolled out of the car into the ditch on the side of the road.Thank God there's no street lighting there. I hid in a culvert while they blasted the car to pieces. Hey, it's heavy, Bobby! We were coming from Dee's place . . .'

He looked at Tshidi. Taking her hand he started walking towards a chair.

'Howzit, Tshizizi? How are the kids?'

After he had been sufficiently reassured that everyone was OK, he continued. '*Ke ne ke ba floppa*. I was scared, I really thought it was the end.'

Tshidi felt fear creeping back into her bones and went to lock the door.

'Don't bother, they've gone,' Mogomotsi was shaking, apparently in a state of shock. 'I saw them, twelve Kombis full, yelling and hooting their victory all the way along the road. You know, this is real intimidation. International rules and regulations don't matter to them. Territorial integrity, sovereign rights, they're desperate, they're hitting out. Just like the neighbourhood bully picking on a small quiet kid. It's intimidation . . .'

He was interrupted by the next-door neighbours, Billy and his wife Mavis, carrying their two boys and a bottle of whisky. Binks came out of his hiding place, excited at the chance to play with his friends at such an odd hour. Tshidi took her daughter on to her lap and sent the boys to play in the bedroom.

'I think we'd better go and check out there, somebody may need help,' Bobby said looking around uneasily at them. Mogomotsi nodded in agreement. Billy, who had selected the most comfortable chair, looked at them both in amazement.

'Nn-n-n-o-o, no thanks, Jack. I'm staying right here,' he stammered.

Tshidi smiled. That was Billy Bird all right. They had privately nicknamed him Billy Bird because of his sharp pointed nose and thin lips. His eyes were small and close together and he stuttered badly. Bobby's intense dark eyes caught Tshidi's and softened into a smile. He knew what she was thinking. Billy Bird had every right to sit there if he so chose. It was not necessarily cowardly. Who could tell if there were more of them around or not? Perhaps there were snipers waiting for fools to venture forth from their houses.

Mogomotsi jumped up from his chair, gave Billy Bird a look of disgust and went outside with Bobby. Mavis and Tshidi followed leaving Billy inside with the children. It was icy cold outside. Another neighbour, a Norwegian man, joined them. Mavis was either suffering from the cold or from guilt about leaving Billy. She went inside saying she was going to make tea.

They stood for some time not really knowing what to do. Then, as Tshidi's eyes grew accustomed to the dark, she caught her breath. She saw a leg, a perfect sculpture of a human leg. The small foot, the delicate calf bending at the knee to form the thigh.

Bobby stared at the sight with her. They all did. She didn't feel sick. She didn't experience horror. She felt anger surging up within her. A deep hot anger. It wasn't possible! She went inside. Bobby, Mogomotsi and the neighbour stood in silence, looking. They were overcome by a feeling of uselessness and vulnerability. The Norwegian broke the silence.

'I think we'd better wait until the police come. They know how to deal with this kind of thing. There might be unexploded bombs amongst the rubble.'

Zombie-like they went inside. The room was warm. They cracked open the whisky bottle. Mavis and Tshidi drank tea. Mogomotsi, glass in hand, was pacing up and down the room.

'Come on, guy, sit down,' Bobby implored.

They talked of death, of what they had witnessed. Their descriptions were minute in every detail. Billy Bird, as always, managed somehow to make them laugh. A scar on his right temple was a reminder that not everyone appreciated his wry sense of humour.

'They were innocent!' Tshidi said too loudly.

Mogomotsi gazed at her for some time and then spoke with intensity.

'You know, Tshidi, innocence doesn't count. They are innocent in terms of what? In terms of their killers' criteria of guilt? They are going to justify this raid and we are all going to say 'But those girls weren't any part of that kind of thing.' That's what we mean by their innocence. Innocence is relative to guilt. But do we agree with their definition of guilt in the first place? Do you see what I mean, Tshidi?'

She nodded, looking down at the floor.

Mogomotsi continued. 'We think of innocence because we have basic human rights here. Innocence has a place but what does the word mean if you don't have those rights? Innocence . . .'

'OK,' Bobby interrupted. 'We see your point.'

Tshidi and Mavis got up and started clearing up the cups and emptying the ashtrays. They went to the bedroom to try to persuade the children to sleep. Sitting next to Tshidi on the edge of the double bed, Mavis told her about her first reaction to the noise and how scared she had been. They spoke softly until the children had dozed

off and then the women tiptoed out, closing the door quietly behind them.

The whisky had seeped into the conversation which had become repetitive. Nobody wanted to sleep, nobody could sleep. The phone rang with various concerned relatives and friends checking that all was well and reporting on other incidents. They all needed each other's company.

In the early hours of the morning they listened to the first news broadcast on the radio. Their fears were confirmed. Rumours heard over the phone were turning into truths. Tshidi made coffee; four cups, strong with lots of sugar. By seven they were ready for work. Mogomotsi had washed himself and polished his shoes to their usual shiny state. He put his arm around Bobby's shoulder and they left together talking of some plan for the day. Mavis and Billy Bird left their children to sleep and went home.

It was quiet again. Tshidi was alone with the shattered glass. She gazed at it for some time before collecting the broom and sweeping it up. The small pieces tinkled into heaps which she scooped up and threw into the bin. She pulled open the curtains allowing the fresh cool air from the broken windows to intermingle with the stale cigarette smoke that still filled the room.

The children were waking. They hadn't slept for long. She began to prepare porridge.

'Mummy, why did the soldiers break our windows?' asked Binks indignantly. Tshidi looked at her son, her mind turning, lost for words.

'It was their guns that did it,' answered Mavis's son, walking into the kitchen.

Before long the children sat down to their breakfast.

They didn't want to go to school but she hurriedly washed and dressed them and sent them off all the same. The two youngest ones continued sleeping.

There was space. Time free. She sank into a chair closing her eyes. She wasn't going to work. It was nice being alone, her body began to relax. The news again . . . sixteen dead, so far no names – but they already knew. Friends of friends, neighbours of friends, the phone had provided them with the details. The news-reader's voice was dulled by his attempt to hide emotion.

'One of the victims of the raid was a five-year-old boy. He gave himself away to the attackers when he called to his mother from his hiding place under the bed. They pumped round after round of automatic gunfire into his small body . . .'

Tshidi began to shake, her whole body trembling, completely out of control. The numbness of her mind broke in a flood of tears. Grief, shock, disgust, anger . . . the tears released a million emotions that had welled up, locked away from her conscious mind for the past eight hours. Words escaped through her sobs.

'Yes, hide them under the bed. Hide them under the bed.'

The Battle of Jericho

◆

He was called Jericho. Actually, originally he was called the blind man of Jericho. He always had sore eyes. I don't know if there is a blind man of Jericho in the Bible. That wasn't important to us. We learnt about blind men, lepers, cripples, beggars, greedy men and prostitutes whose problems were usually solved by divine intervention, and about a place called Jericho that was attacked by Joshua. Our teacher was a big, pink, doughy woman from England who seemed to have some difficulty breathing. She was called Deaconess.

When she was happy with our work she would tell us to sing the songs that she had taught us, like 'Joshua fit the Battle of Jericho' and 'Michael Row the Boat Ashore'. We would clap our hands and sing harmony. She said this was the African way of singing praise to God. Sometimes she even let Lagoon play the drums. She told us that in the olden days people used to say 'fit' instead of 'fought'. Who were we to argue? We liked singing the songs. We liked watching her huge breasts labour to the rhythm and her face become red and sweaty. This was as rewarding as watching her gasp for breath when she was angry. Deaconess backed the church car into a tree. Jericho, Thebe and I watched her puffing and snorting as she turned her head and reversed at high speed. I don't think she'd seen the tree. She was in bed for three days after that. Then she left. Mothusi said she wasn't popular. If nothing else she had fired our imaginations with the rich conglomeration of biblical myth and history that engendered Jericho's name.

We created a kind of camaraderie by rechristening the members of our group. As a matter of principle we discarded the names given to us by our parents and wore our new identities like gleaming chrysalises. Nicknames had the uncomfortable tendency of drawing attention to embarrassing physical or personality defects. Some of us were quick to rechristen ourselves and make it look like a group effort. The only

problem with the glamorous, impostor titles – Lover Boy, Lumumba, Mohammed Ali – was that they were soon forgotten and we ended up being called by our real names.

Lagoon got his name from Red's comic books. Red was white but could speak Setswana as well as any of us. He couldn't stay in the sun for long. He would turn bright red. Sometimes his skin would get big blisters where he had been burnt. He was always asking us to scratch his back and shoulders. We even peeled strips of skin off like flaking paint. My sister thought it was disgusting. We learnt to rub mud on Red's face, especially his nose which was closest to the sun. We made him keep his shirt on if we went swimming in the river. That way his mother didn't yell and scream as if we were all part of a conspiracy to roast her son in the sun.

Lagoon was much bigger than the rest of us. His arms seemed to stretch down to his feet and hung like a baboon's. He wasn't nasty or anything but he was different. Yeah, we called him the Creature from the Black Lagoon from one of Red's comic books. We were looking at the comic books down by the river. In those days the river had water in it. There was a picture of a huge beast with rounded shoulders, no neck, long arms and weeds dripping off its body. So the Creature from the Black Lagoon was a good name we thought. Lagoon's a lawyer now. We're all doing different things in different places. Pidipidi stays at his cattle post most of the time. He used to waddle when he walked because he was fat. His fingers looked like they'd been hit on the ends with a hammer. His toes were the same. His resemblance to a duck didn't go unnoticed. We still call him Pidi.

We used to hunt pigeons with catapults. Pidi was a good shot despite the shape of his fingers. My father had told me that there was nothing wrong with hunting as long as the hunter ate the meat. This was a principle we all steadfastly and proudly abided by. We carried matches when we went pigeon hunting. We would make a small fire, skewer the bird on a stick and roast it. Usually it wasn't very well cooked but that didn't worry us. We ate with gusto, enjoying the fruits of our labour. The girls hated pigeon hunting. They didn't like seeing things killed. We didn't want them to come with us anyway. Sometimes we would tell them we were going pigeon hunting just to get rid of them.

Ivan was a newcomer to our group. He came from Meadowlands in Soweto. He killed a snake and tied the skin to one of the belt loops on his shorts to ward off evil spirits. Funnily enough my sister liked Ivan. It was Ivan who taught us the pleasures of rolling our own tobacco and smoking it down by the river. He stole the papers and tobacco from his father. We kept this contraband in a rat-skin pouch, hidden in an abandoned woodpecker's hole. I found a packet of cigarettes in a pot plant on the front porch. I knew that they belonged to Uncle Jack who had left that morning for Francistown. I took them to the river and was received like a victorious warrior returning with the spoils of war. We smoked three of them and put the rest in the hole in the tree.

When I got home I found Uncle Jack, my mother and my father all waiting for me. Uncle Jack had turned back when he realised he had forgotten his cigarettes. Imagine turning back for a packet of cigarettes! My heart sank to my feet. My mouth went dry. I tried lying. I pretended I hadn't even seen the cigarettes but the woman who was helping my mother look after our baby sister had seen me take them. That night I was whipped. I resented that woman for a long time after. Uncle Jack stayed the night and left for Francistown the next morning.

Punishment seemed a natural consequence of our most entertaining exploits. Red was grounded for six months for throwing stones at the church window. We weren't trying to break the window. We were having an aiming competition where we had to hit the different coloured squares in a certain sequence. We were just on the blue when Red got over-excited and threw a big, knobbly piece of concrete that burst through Jesus and knocked over the candles in the church. Mothusi said the priest nearly had a heart attack. Mothusi's mother was very involved in church matters. Red's parents paid for a new window. Then there was the time Pidi wore his new school shoes down to our make-do soccer pitch. He was really proud of the shiny black Bata Toughies. We all had a turn at playing in them. By the time we had finished, you can imagine the state of Pidi's new shoes. We congratulated him on their toughness. He got into deep mathata that night and was banned from playing football.

Now Jericho was kind of strange but we were used to him. Sometimes he would start crying for nothing. Other times he would

get really agitated or emotional about small things. There was a time when my cousin came to visit us from Johannesburg. Jericho fell in love. He didn't fall in love from a distance like the rest of us did when we fell in love. He was all over my cousin and she didn't like it. When we tried to get him to leave her alone, he flipped. He started taunting us and swearing. We wanted to hit him but we couldn't catch him. Someone got fed up with him and threw a rock at his head. I remember the blood gushing down his face. He ran off howling. His mother made him go to the mother of whoever threw the rock and ask her to clean up the blood and mess. Well our mothers got together after that and put a stop to all group activities for a long time.

Jericho was OK. He went through secondary school. He wanted to study agricultural science and won a scholarship to the United States. Life isn't the same there as it is here. I suppose what would be pretty severe stresses on us were magnified one hundred times for Jericho. He came back before completing his studies. He was wearing a big cowboy hat, high-heel boots and one of those string tie things with a silver and turquoise clasp. He said he was going to be a range rancher. The last time I saw him he was telling me that he wanted to get married and asked me if I would help at his wedding. He wasn't too coherent. He talked about a big house that he was building and a cattle ranch that he was going to buy.

My wife was very sad when Jericho died. Jericho hanged himself. My wife said he was a gentle person who always had time for others. She said she had always appreciated his friendliness and the little chats they used to have whenever they met.

I think of the song and of Jericho, '. . . and the walls came tumbling down . . .' and I battle with my own conscience because it was me. I was the one who had thrown the rock that split open Jericho's head.

Colour Me Blue

◆

Oh colour me do
Colour me true
And when you colour me, oooh oooh ooooh
Colour me blue

'Great song,'

'That's how I feel. I'm feeling blue, oooh oooh oooh oooh.'

'What's wrong?'

'It's this colour thing. Love and the colour of the skin. I'm really sick of it. I feel like writing some kind of story about it.'

'Well, go ahead, write.'

'I don't know. The trouble is there are so many of these racial stereotypes . . . lying around like landmines. How do you find your path? To tell a story about black and white lovers, you've got to be Houdini or someone . . . and you might successfully tell the story from your point of view but what about the readers' standpoint? What about that? They might just put their own racist interpretations on what wasn't racist in the first place.'

'Mmmm.'

'For a start, how do you describe the lovers? Mixed couples – that's a good one; sounds like you're playing a tennis match. Next you'll want to talk about the score. Deuce and wow, look at that – a mixed race baby. A coloured child – makes you think of a kid's painting. Somehow if it wasn't so sad it would be funny.'

'Yeah, a kid's painting with all those wonderful bright colours. I suppose you've heard the one about who's coloured? About the white man with the blue or is it black eye? And those bruises that turn from dark blue to purple to green and yellow. White as a ghost when they're sick.'

'Don't forget green with envy and cowardly yellow!'

'I think that applies to us all, doesn't it?'

'Well, if you're speaking English . . . and coloured here doesn't have the same meaning as in England or the States . . . All right. So let's forget the coloured bit. What about half-caste? As if it went wrong in the mould. You know half black and whoops! half white. Touch of the tar brush maybe or no, heeh, what about all those, I think they're West Indian terms or just good old slave-day words? Well the French use them still. You know métis, mulatto, quadroons, ohh shit, something like that!'

'Why don't you start off with a real romantic sexy scene? How they meet and all that. The colour bit can just come in as description, nothing else?'

'That sounds OK. They meet and the colour thing just isn't part of what's happening between them. That could happen here. There's a black guy and a white woman. They're with their friends and they meet at a party. They are attracted to each other. I'll describe the zingy electricity or is it chemistry?'

'Keep going.'

'Yeah, so they're introduced to each other by mutual friends. It's a party so they drink and joke with each other. They dance. They move their bodies closer and feel the warmth and movement of each other's limbs. They fall in love. It is an act of falling. Falling out of their partly unformed selves into each other.'

'Come to think of it, the books I've read on black/white relationships have all been pretty terrible. African culture versus western culture. The characters are always somehow saddled with colonial legacies. The male characters always suffer from huge inferiority complexes and the females go for the exotic black prince, sexual luggage included. What happens next is violent, sick stuff. It's so depressing. Yuk! Ghastly.'

'You said it yourself. At this point colour isn't an issue with these two. They are in love. I know love carries all kinds of cultural and social pressures along with it. Look, at first I just deal with the male/female attraction bit. I think I have to approach it from her point of view because I really don't know how men feel when they fall in love. I suppose I'm going to have to ask a few men and hope for honest

answers. So days pass and this woman can't stop thinking of the man. She reconstructs his body, his voice, his laughter in her mind. They go to a disco with the same group of friends. She drinks alcohol like everyone else. It makes talking easier. He is wearing a cap which tilts over his eyes. He's taller than her and broad across the shoulders. That was the night that he wrapped her up in his body and kissed her. They go on a picnic, walk in the bush and sand, holding hands. The trees rustle through their laughter. Huge rocks nestled together in comfortable sculptures made for them to lie on. The earth browns and olive greens dapple across their nakedness as they make love.'

'Too flowery. You've got to be more explicit and I don't know about this making love . . . I suppose fucking makes it sound crude but that's what they're doing, isn't it?'

'I don't think I could write like that. I'm too scared of what people would think.'

'You have to. Show the passion. I mean they fall for each other at a dizzying rate. They don't think about colour or society or any of that, right? They like each other's bodies, minds and souls. They stimulate each other in all spheres. Intellectually, physically. There is an explosion, exploration and growth. There's a fusion. You've got to show that. If they don't have that then they won't make it out there in the cruel world. They won't have a hope.'

'OK, so I describe the sex act. The way they touch each other's bodies all over with their fingertips, the shape of the buttocks, the hips, the breasts. Their mouths, how they move their lips up a leg or around an elbow, shoulder, neck, ear. Exploring and expressing love.'

'Don't forget the penis. What's wrong with you? You say you're writing from the woman's point of view. Well? Isn't that one of the parts of the body that women touch? Come on!'

'Well, I don't know. You've just reminded me of something I read. I mean I really found this sensuous.'

'What?'

'Maxine Hong Kingston wrote about this woman and a man making love. I suppose she's writing about colour and culture too . . . anyway the woman likes the man's soft penis. She thinks the soft penis is one of the nicest things in the world to touch. You know, you can bundle it up in your hands and stroke its softness. And the testicles. I like the

texture and the way they are fragile, vulnerable and responsive. Sometimes they curl up tight and others times they're loose and warm.'

'I'm looking forward to reading this story of yours.'

'Well they fall in love. They establish a sexual-friendship base. Let's say they marry. But they're not on a desert island. They have to face the colour-culture question and all the social pressures that affect any couple.'

'OK, let's make it that the woman is from England or Canada, Australia, America. Maybe she's born here. Well, anyway, she meets the man here in southern Africa. She's young. They're both young, so they're flexible. They're open. He doesn't have a problem with so-called western culture. He's been brought up that way. He's at home with a cultural mix. She has to learn. She learns because she's young and also because she is married to the man and in the final analysis, the society accepts her as a daughter-in-law. That's part of the culture. When a man marries, the woman goes to his home and becomes part of his family, his culture. That helps her settle. She could also learn the language. That would help.'

'That sounds a bit too idealistic. She has to have some problems. Maybe she feels alone. She wants to be with the husband but he's off with the men, she has to sit with the old women. Things like that. He lives in a male culture. He goes off drinking, to the football, to the cattle post and leaves her by herself at home. Listen, I think we should both write this story, right? Yeah, so sometimes they are made to feel their colour. She knows the language well enough to understand when someone says something insulting about her being white.'

'He hears these things as well. They also get it from white people. Maybe they travel and really feel that they're odd or something when they get to Europe. I know how it is in Europe. They exaggerate colour differences. You are made to feel your colour. You are conscious of your colour. Can you envisage that? Walking around being conscious of your colour all the time. It's really stressful and a waste of good thinking time.'

'Yeah, Europe's one place where they would really feel out. There they would be made conscious of colour for sure. But they fight it. They stick together. Maybe they explode occasionally but that is where

their sexual-friendship base comes in. They can pull through that kind of thing.'

'So it's not much of a story so far, is it?'

'OK, OK . . . listen. It's not a story about colour, right? It's about two people of different colour, overlapping cultures who fall in love. So it's really about female/male relationships and culture. She starts to feel alone. I think that has to be the big conflict area. Not that he runs off and has a secret second wife and his mother helps him. No. It has to be more intricate. More human.'

'We could look at male love here. What does love mean to a man? All the men I know have affairs. Some of them love their wives but still have to have a fling or two or three.'

'That means I definitely have to talk to some men. Find out what love is to them. Have you ever had an affair?'

'Yeah, I have actually. Twice.'

'I haven't. I think I'm too scared of being caught, or used; you know, degraded.'

'You don't do it on your front doorstep. As far as I'm concerned you use each other and it's fun. You stay married. It just adds spice.'

'OK . . . he has affairs. She rants and raves. She struggles to find her identity. She develops a certain strength and individuality which may threaten the relationship. She strengthens her friendships with other people. She starts turning off. Protecting herself. She develops a hard shell.'

'Doesn't this happen to us all, my sweet? So does she have affairs in revenge?'

'No, I don't think so. She has matured during all this. She doesn't need to have affairs. Not out of spite. Not for revenge. Maybe later for some other reason.'

'What about kids?'

'Yeah, they have kids. They are really excited when she gets pregnant. He is there in the room when she gives birth. He defies the nurses who tell him he might faint at the sight. He helps. He talks to his lover. Holds her hand. He tries to remember the stuff about breathing. He watches as the baby pushes out. It is a moving experience for him. He sees that her vulva is torn and watches her being stitched up. He kisses her sweaty forehead.'

'I suppose the kids could help to keep them together through the rough patches.'

'Yeah. They love their kids and are sensitive to racism when it comes to their lives. They want their kids to be strong and proud. They do everything they can to help them to be open-minded, aware, sensitive. They want to give them the ability to fight back and they want to protect them.'

'It's not bad for kids here. It doesn't matter so much about colour. They grow up with a nationality which is theirs. Language, friends . . . roots. None of that is denied them. They won't get asked where they come from because their skin's lighter. OK, you get the odd insult, *lekhalate*, *lekutwane*!'

'*Ngwana o tshwana lekhalate . . . tswang tswang tswang . . . da da dee.*'

'That song's been changed by the people, for the people.'

'I know, *Ngwana o tshwana le naledi.* The bride resembles a shining star now, not a coloured person, right?'

'Much better.'

'OK, getting back to our man. He has affairs. He's selfish but not consciously selfish. He's possessive because he is scared. He doesn't want to lose her. He restricts her and holds her too tight. Sometimes I think men are hard on their daughters, wives, sisters because they think the females in their lives are doing what they do . . . thinking like they think.'

'Or maybe they think daughters, wives and sisters are passive recipients of men's roving desire. They know what they have done to women and think that other men could do the same to "their" women.'

'Now she has a hard shell around her. She doesn't really care what he does any more. She is starting to think of ways to escape him. But at the same time, they have this deep undeniable friendship. They know each other. They have a great cord of shared life which binds them but they are not really communicating. There's a block. It is also the time when they discover that their parents are old. Adulthood, when we come of age never again to be whole. A piece is missing. The final separation through death. She comforts him when his mother dies. His mother who loved him unconditionally. He cries alone and

he cries with her. He cries while she holds him and kisses him. They talk long into the night lying next to each other. He only has her now. He is still wounded, grieving and very afraid of losing her, his only real companion.'

'She is thinking of leaving him as the children are now old enough to cope, although she doesn't want to hurt them. She could have an affair with someone who demonstrates love and selflessness.'

'This is it. They are at the point where they have to open out like huge yellow-pink water lilies. They have to allow each other to float peacefully down the river and enjoy each other's beauty apart but in communicative symmetry.'

'What shall we call it, the story?'

'What do you think?'

'Water Lilies.'

'I like – Colour Me Blue; I'm feeling sad. Aren't you?'

'Yeah.'

Mare

◆

I was a child skipping through the seas of other people's lives. My hair was plaited and tied with blue velvet ribbons and they named me after my father's grandmother. I was named after an old woman with milky white eyes and sore knees. I skipped across the shimmering sands in slow motion and they didn't notice me because I was a child not yet born when my great-grandmother was named. She was born in 1900 when Namibians were crossing the desert. Hundreds of Namibians were coming into the land we call ours when my great-grandmother was born so she was named after these strangers. She was called Mare which means strangers and it also means sticks. The missionaries called her Mary.

When I was born, she held me in her arms and chuckled. She rocked me against her bosom and whispered to me in Setswana. My mother and father and aunts and uncles were talking and laughing. They didn't notice that she was studying the palms of my hands. She looked for traces of my father's family and when she was satisfied she spoke loudly and my mother and father and aunts and uncles were quiet. She told them that my name was Mare.

My great-grandmother grew from roots of tangled lace, patterned deep as cool aquifers, and deeper still as royal, molten cores of kings and queens. She was born a crocodile from the small bushes and trees, from the grass, clay and rocks but married into the hyenas. She told me she was an old crocodile and I looked for bumpy skin. I ran a small hand over her back in my secret search for crocodile bumps and peered into her mouth when she laughed, expecting to find needle-sharp teeth. She said it was in her blood. I thought maybe there were lots of baby crocodiles, like me, swimming in her blood stream and I asked her. She told me I wasn't a baby crocodile, I was a hyena, like my father and his father and his father and I felt rejected because I wanted to be a crocodile like my great-grandmother.

My great-grandmother was born when many strangers came into this land we call ours. She showed me a river with muddy banks and long, green grass which rustled in a gentle breeze. She said, 'You see this grass. This is the crocodile's pillow. This is where the crocodile sleeps.'

'My grandmother married the son of my great-grandmother. I have heard people call my grandmother a stranger. She came from outside; from the south. They call her Motswakwa. My grandmother married a hyena but she tells me she is a lion. She was born a lion. When I asked my grandmother if I could be a lion she said no, that I am a hyena like my father and my father's father. She said she would like to show me the faraway place where the lion roams but she died. My mother is a stranger to this land too. They call her Motswana wa pampiri. She tells me that I am a hyena like my father.

I skip through the seas of people's lives. My hair is plaited and tied with blue velvet ribbons. The ancestors dance in slow motion and sometimes I see wisps of their laughter and shadows of their desire. I skipped across the shimmering sands and nobody noticed me until I was born and my great-grandmother called me Mare.

I had a dream that I cannot forget. I was in a large house. It wasn't my house but it was. It was built of wood with winding passages and staircases. I was in this house with an old lady. I was with the old lady, holding her hand and she was talking to me. Then suddenly she disappeared. I ran all over the house looking for her. I was frightened and I wanted her. I looked in dark corners, in cupboards and rooms that I had never seen before. I was calling her name and crying. There was a door at the end of a long hall. It was a white door. I walked up the hall and it took a long time. I seemed to get smaller and the door grew bigger. I stood, dwarfed by the door which slowly creaked open. I was so scared but I couldn't run away. A bright light was coming from the room, almost blinding me. I was squinting into the light when a huge, shiny, electric-blue spirit-woman spoke to me. I don't know what she said because I screamed and the door slammed shut.

My mother came to me through the darkness that night. She sat on my bed and stroked my head. She held my hand and told me that my great-grandmother had died in the hospital. Something inside me felt as though it was swelling up like a sneeze ready to burst from my chest

or my throat. I wanted to cry. My mother hugged me close and tight, and we rocked together from side to side as if we were on the sea in the moonlight.

I often see my great-grandmother; my father's grandmother; the old woman with her milky white eyes and sore knees. My fingertips fondle the small string of grey and pink seed beads that she tied around my baby waist. From each bead comes a thought, sometimes from the past, sometimes from I don't know where, and I talk to her quietly in my mind and she talks to me. She slips gently through the seas of other people's lives. She slips gently through me; Mare, named after strangers.

Smile of Fortune

◆

His parents had long passed away. Khumo had friends in high places who made sure he qualified in England. They arranged the scholarship and he came home with an MSc. in Economics. He was a happy, friendly type. Always willing to please. If he did disagree with the opinions of his superiors or elders, he never showed his opposition. He would politely murmur or loudly voice his agreement with the viewpoints of those who mattered. He laughed boisterously at their jokes and dressed for the occasion. Dinner parties, cocktails, roof wettings, turning the sod, sports and charity events – he could be seen, a beer in hand, chatting to the right people, smiling amicably.

He married the daughter of a wealthy farmer, an established family. His friends in high places suggested the match. Khumo didn't mind. She was beautiful, quiet, suitably subservient, sweet – his idea of an ideal wife. The wedding was all that could be expected of a society affair. The yellow and white striped marquees stood fresh and crisp against the manicured green of the lawns. Children, dressed as miniature adults, pastel frills, high-heeled patent leather shoes and three-piece suits, wove excited patterns through the guests. The guests, all relieved to have received their gold embossed invitation cards, exchanged niceties and switched on standard facial expressions. Their senses worked with keen simultaneity through strained ears and corners of eyes, sieving vital tidbits peripheral to their conversations. Fiercely fashion-conscious, money-conscious appraisals were hidden behind polite geniality. Who was talking to whom? Saying what? Matching hats and shoes competed with the colourful extravagance of expensive dresses, lavish hairstyles, suits and ties.

Men congregated around the bar. Some people filed past the VIP tent, bending respectfully, silently clapping their hands in greeting. Aunts, uncles, first, second and third cousins giggled, gossiped and

worked to make the day a success. They had slaughtered beasts, prepared food and made ginger beer. Some took the wedding presents and put them in a safe place. The array of duties stretched into exhausting infinity.

Six white Mercedes carried the wedding party to and from the church. The bride and groom looked cheerfully self-conscious as their arrival at the house was announced by loud ululations. The guests rallied around the beaming couple and their entourage of bridesmaids and attendants. They took a closer look at the bride's dress, the fine satin, the trillions of sequins hand-sewn into flower shapes and the lace. Women began to ululate again and dance. Some stooped, pretending to sweep the path. Some carried straw brooms. Men and children joined the women. Bodies swung and shook to the songs, to the joyous beat of stamping feet and clapping, as the procession meandered around the yard, through the trees, tables and chairs to the main table where the bride and groom finally sat down.

One by one the guests approached the couple, shaking their hands, kissing them, whispering, joking and congratulating them. Queues of people wound their way towards the long food tables. They helped themselves to large portions of seswaa, chicken curry, bogobe, samp and salads. Women wearing aprons ran from table to table carrying champagne and clearing away the empty glasses and dirty plates.

◆

Khumo kept a picture of his wife on his office desk. He studied her smooth, dark brown skin. Her shiny, black hair was pulled back into a tight knot. Her mouth turned up cheekily on one side in a secret, Mona Lisa half smile. He tried to remember who had taken the photo. It wasn't him. He didn't know one end of a camera from the other. He had never loved her. He had collected her in the same way he collected cars and houses. She was a status symbol, an organiser, a hostess. She should have been a mother. The mother of his children. The mother of his son. They had been married six years now and he resented the fact that she hadn't produced an heir. He ran his finger over the grain of his antique oak desk. The secretary interrupted his thoughts.

'I'm sorry, Sir, but Mr Smith is here to see you.'

Khumo felt a little annoyed that Mr Smith hadn't bothered to make an appointment.

'Give me five minutes, then show him in,' he said brusquely and breathed in the movement of the secretary's plumpish buttocks as she walked towards the door. His personal assistant was on maternity leave. She would have put Mr Smith in his place. She was expecting Khumo's child. He paid. He always did. He looked after his children financially and kept their mothers happy. It was tidier that way. Mr Smith was here about the tannery project. He checked through the list of contenders. Smith's company didn't really qualify. He would probably put it to the board next week.

The secretary escorted the grey-haired, slightly balding Englishman into the room. Khumo rose from his seat to shake the limp hand that was offered to him. His eyes slipped down the secretary's skirt to the soft, inside thigh that showed just above her knees and quickly back to Mr Smith who was apologising for not having made an appointment. The Englishman lisped as he spoke.

'Actually, thith ith jutht a courtethy call and I would like to take the oppportunity to invite you and your lovely wife out for dinner thith evening, that ith, if you are free.'

Khumo stood up and walked slowly to the window. He studied the view for a moment, his hands in his pockets and his back to Mr Smith.

'Yes, dinner would be nice.'

Mr Smith jumped up from his seat. 'Good, good, shall we thay theven at the Peacock Lounge?'

They shook hands again and the Englishman left.

Sitting in his leather chair, Khumo spun round slowly, looking at the ceiling. The phone rang. It was his politician friend.

'Listen, I want to talk to you about United. I think they're the best people for the job. I'll see you at five at home.'

Khumo fiddled with the telephone cord. Obviously Smith's company had more going for it than he had been able to assess. It did not have a good reputation for keeping to schedules and it was the most expensive. It would be one of those deals. Khumo smiled. His friend the politician filled him in. There was nothing more to be said. It wouldn't go to the board after all. Not this time.

Khumo argued with his wife that evening. She said she didn't feel

well. That was another thing that frustrated him lately. She was always finding reasons not to accompany him to dinners and parties. He sat through the dinner with Mr Smith who talked about his days in the British Army in Kenya and the 'Mau Mau'. He claimed to have spent most of his life in Africa and to identify with the continent more than he did with his own Britain. He placed his thin hands on the white tablecloth and said in a whiny voice, 'But between you and me thingth have really gone to the dogth.'

Khumo smiled and nodded. He thought of the holiday he had been offered in London. He might just take that secretary along. He thought of his percentage.

One per cent of total contract price amounted to a lot of money. He had collected on some hefty projects. That was after his friends had taken their share. It was a network of influence. It wouldn't work without trust and reward. It was still a lot of money. He had to put it somewhere. Do something with it. The excitement of holidays had long worn thin. He had to spend some time in the office. Wine and women, shopping, nightclubs were fine in small doses. He wanted property. Solid assets. He bought more houses, land. State of the art stereo equipment, television sets, furniture for the mothers of his children, for his women. Swimming pools, BMWs and a Range Rover. Life was good. He put money in foreign bank accounts, started up new companies and bought houses in his wife's name. What did she know? She just signed obediently on the dotted line. She had to be good for something. She was obviously incapable of continuing his family line. He had been through the pros and cons of divorce with his lawyers. It was still a possibility.

His wife was in bed asleep when he got home. He poured a whisky, put a jazz fusion CD in the system and lay on the couch. He thought of the secretary. It would probably be the first time she had travelled overseas. The dogs started barking. He ignored them. The front gate bell rang. He didn't move, hoping whoever it was would just go away. The bell rang again. He swore. The bell rang for the third time.

'All right, all right, I'm coming. I'm coming,' he muttered.

Three of his friends were at the gate. These were men who had helped him in life. His friends in high places. Police, army, politics, the church. He had friends where it mattered. It was a network and a

good one. He poured them drinks. They asked how his wife was and discussed the weather. They jokingly remarked that he was putting on weight.

'Life must be treating you well, Khumo. You've got a public opinion.'

Khumo laughed and patted his stomach proudly. 'I'm playing squash these days, gents. Trying to keep fit.'

The politician stood near the fireplace and fiddled with the ornaments on the mantelpiece.

'Talking of public opinion, Khumo, there's a problem.'

Khumo waited. His friend, the policeman continued, 'It's the journalists. Some bleeding heart, do-gooder journalist has got hold of the Intercity Consultants story. It will be out in tomorrow's newspapers. They don't know much but they know enough. We've got to have a fall guy. A kind of red herring that will divert the whole thing. You know we can't afford an investigation.'

Khumo remained silent, a powerful sense of dread growing within him. They explained the principle of the domino effect to him. They didn't want the main players unmasked. They didn't want the other deals exposed. There was that recently signed contract worth millions to all of them. They could not afford protracted public scrutiny, not at this point. The politician patted him on the back.

'I know you won't allow that to happen will you, brother?'

Khumo tried to smile. He didn't want to take the rap. He had to find a way out. They promised him money. They talked of sacrifice. How it was a vital component of life. How sacrifices were made to the ancestors to ensure that families now living on earth received protection, bountiful harvests, good rains. The healthier those on earth, the more children there would be. The larger and happier the population, the more the living would worship those who had passed before them and eventually when it came to dying, add to the ancestor pool. It was a replenishing, reciprocating and everlasting circle. Khumo suddenly saw himself as a tiny thread in an invisible, suffocating web. He had to shoulder the blame, absorb and deflect the heat. He had to sacrifice. He had to be the sacrifice.

They left. Khumo locked the gate, went back inside and slumped on to the couch. He couldn't do it. Almost a year had gone by since he

had awarded Intercity Consultants the pipeline. He had put it before the board and as Intercity was the cheapest, it hadn't been difficult to convince them. Their price was low. Everybody was happy. Nobody suspected anything. The network had siphoned off millions in false claims over and above the original price. It wasn't the consultants' fault that the contractors didn't turn up on time. It was only fair that the company charge standby time and that the client pay.

Then there were the extensions. What was initially a thirty million job ended up at sixty million. It was Khumo who approved the claims and the requests for extensions. It was a lucrative set-up. He sighed. He was in a tight spot. He wondered how much the journalists knew. Surely they couldn't have traced the link between the consultants and the contractors?

There was something else bothering him. It had been nagging him the whole day but he hadn't been able to put his finger on it. That South African company. The one he had given the infrastructure contract to. They had paid him handsomely. Now they wanted the northern road job. They were insistent. He wasn't sure if he could swing it. One of the directors had phoned him that morning. He reflected for a while over what the man had said. He hadn't realised it at the time but it was clear now that he had been issued with a subtle threat. He held his head in his hands, thinking, looking for a way out. It was too much. He was scared.

Sun was streaming in through the window when he woke. His neck was stiff. He had fallen asleep in an awkward position. Fear ate at his being like some kind of persistent hangover. There was a note in the kitchen from his wife. She had gone to her parents for the weekend. The dogs barked and the front gate bell rang. He stumbled out. His friends were already in the yard.

'You look terrible, Khumo man,' the politician laughed. 'What did you get up to after we left last night?'

His squash partner was with them.

'Remember you promised me a game this weekend.'

Khumo couldn't remember but went and changed into his track suit all the same. They played squash and had a few drinks at the clubhouse. They showered and changed, finished the beers in Khumo's refrigerator and drove to a wedding just out of town.

The wedding was just what he needed. The secretary was there. He danced with her, pulling her close for the slow songs. She didn't seem to mind. It was three o'clock in the morning. His friends persuaded him to go home. The secretary had already left. Khumo got into his car. He felt alone. The monotony of the road encouraged him to increase his speed. The headlights flickered through the dry grass and illuminated the occasional thorn tree that fringed the road. There were two ghostly donkeys grazing. Dangerous these beasts. He had to keep an eye out for them.

A car pulled out in front of him. He almost welcomed the relief this brought to his loneliness. If he sat behind this car he wouldn't have to concentrate so hard. Let someone else look out for cattle. He laughed to himself. Blinding lights penetrated the muscles behind his eyes. His reflexes reacted, knocking the offending rear-view mirror into crooked submission.

The car in front was slow. Too slow. It rose from the road like some ominous, hunchbacked animal. He slammed his foot down on the brake. His neck snapped forward. His head hurtled towards the windscreen. Grinding teeth gnashed the back of his vehicle. He tried to straighten his neck. He tried to accelerate. The engine roared with pain, caught in the vice-like grip of two metallic maniacs. They let up for a while and then pounced with renewed fury. The car behind began to overtake. It bashed into the side of his car. Again. Again. Again. Pulverising, grating. He howled in terror. Searing, tearing, hot spasms ripped through his shoulder as he lost control. Thick, white iridescent rails loomed ahead. Noise. So much harsh, jarring noise. The car was rolling. It felt like eight or ten times. He tasted sand and blood. Grit coated his hair and skin. He crawled. Dragging himself over shattered glass like a newborn puppy. Twitching. Heavy footsteps registered somewhere in his conscious mind. The cold steel barrel sucked in his taut temple and released it in a brutal explosion.

'Ya, my brother,' the knife bent over his already lifeless throat. It couldn't resist. 'This is the last time you will smile.' They were laughing as they drove off.

It was an accident they said. A tragic accident. He was driving home late at night and lost control. He had been drinking. Some suggested suicide. There was that scandal in the newspapers. They went to

prayers at his house. They went to the vigil and burial. They paid for a magnificent, ornate coffin. His wife behaved in the dignified manner expected of her. No vulgar public displays of grief at the funeral, her face hidden behind dark sunglasses and a veil.

She bore her widowhood bravely, mourning the full year, celibate, attired in traditional black. Her aunts and other female relatives were there at the end of the one-year term, by her side for the ritual discarding of the black clothing. They admired her strength and composure.

There was no one with her when she went to the doctor to have the small, copper tee removed from the mouth of her womb. It didn't hurt. She booked first class for her trip overseas. She carried a briefcase full of documents with her signature on them. As the plane took off she smiled, a secret, Mona Lisa half smile.

Another Little Peace of Our Hearts

◆

Thank you to the women of Hurry on the Machines

The voices weave webs in the corners of my existence so I brush them away. There is space, my space alone, in exile, but the voices make me lonely so I brush them away. They keep coming back, the voices of pain and love. I catch a big, black London taxi and the driver asks me about AIDS in Africa after I tell him where I'm from. He tells me blacks are fighting blacks in South Africa. He's sure I miss the warm weather.

I get out in Oxford Street and walk. My eyes are greedy for clothes and shoes. I see a purple dress with swirling, silky folds. I see myself pirouetting; the glossy fabric forms a spinning circle, spinning high above my thighs. I want the dress. I spin around and around in my dancing desire for the dress.

'Heeh, Noni! Heeh, Noni weeh! I'm a one-eyed giantess; a woman warrior; Queen of the Batlokwa. I feed my troops with the milk from my breasts. I feed my people, refugees of hunger. I do not cry. Do you hear me cry? Hahahahaaaa . . . I'm MaNthatisi.'

I brush her away and continue spinning reflections of glass windows and me into grey London air. Thinking of the purple dress on my body.

'Noni, Heeh Noni!' A woman is walking next to herds of fat-tailed sheep and long-horned cattle. 'Noni, Noni!' she calls. I see her, a delicate, light-skinned woman, moaning softly, walking across expanses of grazing land where the wind blows the grass. She is dwarfed by the dark garrison that blocks the sun. I hear her, oh God, weeping, holding a baby with smallpox. She cries and the stock are driven away and the men are killed fighting for what is theirs. The earth disappears

from under her feet. She is quiet at last wearing a white apron and a bonnet, standing in a whitewashed, Dutchman's house.

I walk again on grey London pavements, amongst London people in overcoats. The purple dress is so beautiful. I must have it. Coffee first and perhaps some cake. I should also look around a bit more I suppose; see if there's anything else I like. This is nice . . . pastries . . . wow . . . don't think of putting on weight . . . just sit down and enjoy mounds of brown chocolate cake with layers of cream and cherries.

'I'll have a cappuccino, please.'

I smile at the waitress and think in tune to the smell of ground coffee and the warmth of the little shop, yeah, life isn't that bad . . . My cappuccino is placed gently in front of me with the bill. I throw sugar in and dip my lips into the white froth on top. It's too hot to drink. My home is Jo'burg . . . I couldn't sit like this in a coffee shop drinking cappuccino. Not then. They say you can now. I wonder. Can you really? City Johannesburg. Ugly city of knives and guns. Yes Baas City. Has it changed? I sip my coffee, hot and bitter-sweet.

'The Union Jack, Noni, fluttering in our breeze. Gad sav ah greshus kin, ah nobble kin. They hunted Bambata down like an animal, Noni. We walk with what is left of our resistance. Our bodies are all we have. Our lives are left to sell to the mines, to the towns. In the freezing cold of winter our children are dying and we cannot bury them. We don't have land to bury our children. We are walking; wandering lost. Noni. Sen heem viktoryus, Happi an gilory-us, Lon' to ren over us.'

Mama, I'm thinking of you. Working for so many years cleaning, making tea and coffee and running messages for people in offices in Commissioner Street. At fifty-nine they called you the tea girl or Florence.

'Florence be a good girl and buy me a chocolate bar . . . a Mars Bar, Florence.'

'Tell the tea girl Mr Williams wants another cup of coffee.'

I heard them when I was in the kitchen with you. Mamma I love you. I told you I was leaving. You just hugged me silently for a long time. That was in 1976. I never saw you again. You died and I couldn't return for the funeral. My dear mother, your name was Xoliswa.

'They are threatened by our young people, Noni. Our children are resisting. They are crossing the borders for training. So they tortured

him until he was nearly dead but he was alive. It was cold again; the middle of winter and they threw his naked, battered body in the back of a van. You know the vans, Noni, with the corrugations? They say the blood washes out easier with corrugations. Throw buckets of water on or hose it and the blood flows down the iron channels. He was naked, in the middle of winter, in the back of a van and they took the worst roads to Pretoria. His head was swollen, Noni. You couldn't see his eyes any more. Puffed up and bleeding. His head bounced, hitting hard against the cold metal van and they took the worst roads.'

This coffee is sweeter at the bottom where the sugar's left behind. Do I tip the waitress? I suppose so. I feel like sitting in here longer. It's warm. I'd better check if they have the dress in my size. Try it on. See if it suits me. Bundled up in my coat and scarf. I hope it doesn't rain. Spring they call it now with daffodils but it's still cold. It's lighter that's all. It gets dark later. I never knew it could get dark at three-thirty in the afternoon. That's what's really depressing about winter in London. It's so dark and then in summer the light stretches on forever. It's not the weather so much. I write letters to you my brother in Soweto telling you about London. My young brother. I worry for you; that you will be stabbed one dark night or shot; burnt in your bed. I hear you are on the street committee. Ouma told me.

'Heeh Sis Noni, let me tell you about the big women in our factory. We had this white supervisor called Elsie. She was always saying, "Shesha, work, work! *Die swart mense, hulle maak my mors*" and swearing at us and saying we were lazy and slow. So the big women said, "Now we will fix her up for this racism." You know what they did? One day we were making skirts and tops. There was a lot of work to do . . . maybe 150 garments to match. Elsie's job was to match the skirts with the tops. We passed the garments to her. She's still complaining about us, saying, "These swart people this and these swart people that." While she was busy complaining, we kept quiet and worked faster. We gave her four skirts and four tops. She tried to match them. We carried on working. She was looking for the skirts to match the tops but it was all coming too fast. She couldn't keep up. Skirts and tops were piling up all over the place and she's not the last one on the line. Other women were waiting for her to pass the garments on to them. They were getting impatient and started shouting

at her. "Work Elsie! Work! Shesha Elsie, Shesha!" Then she started crying, "*Ek kan nie so werk nie.*"

'We taught her a good lesson. Heeh Sis Noni, I wish you could have seen us. We have given her a new name. We call her "Crying Time". We work together. We call it "saamtrek" – we all pull together. The supervisors are learning to respect us. They know that the factories are working through us, Noni, not them.'

Which floor? Women's clothing . . . second floor . . . watch the escalator. Now . . . the dress. Can't see any dresses. Designer labels . . . very nice. They definitely wouldn't suit me. Doubt I could get them on. Don't like this seventies stuff much . . . not the flares. Dresses. That's OK but not worth it. One hundred and twenty pounds for a blouse! Where are the dresses?

The girl is crying.

'I was with my father, Noni. I saw everything. I saw them murder my father. My father said he would give his life for peace. When will we find peace?'

They're being followed by a white car and a red car. She is talking to her father and laughing. The white car passes and the driver waves to them. The girl waves back but she doesn't know the man.

'The bodyguard had taken the morning off, Noni. My father got out to open the gate. The red car came behind us. A white man got out. He pointed the gun at my father. I was screaming. "Papa, Papa!" He fell to the ground, he was telling me to get down with his hands and his eyes and his mouth and blood all over his face.'

The girl is screaming and screaming. The white man walks over and jams the barrel of the gun against her father's head. He pulls the trigger two more times in Boksburg, in Johannesburg.

My heart is aching. There's pain in my heart. I can see the dresses. The purple dress. Size 10 . . . I hope they have my size. Size 16 . . . too big. Size 14 . . . let me try it. I feel the glossy folds of fabric, looking for the dressing rooms. There with grey curtains.

'Just one?' the woman in the grey skirt asks.

I nod and she gives me a plastic red disc with the figure one etched into it. The dressing room has mirrors so I can see all of my body; back, front and sides. Peeling off layers of clothes. I'm down to bra and panties. Studying my waist; the way it dips in then out into my

big hips and thighs. I like my round breasts. They're still OK. No children . . . not yet. Pull the dress over and down . . . smooth on my skin. It's a bit awkward to zip up. Oh yeah . . . It's lovely. I love it. I'm spinning around in front of the mirrors, purple, blood red.

'. . . and Noni, there was a man and a woman. She had the joy of being with child but the famine was acute. Now they came upon a tree with abundant wild fruit. The man said to the woman, "Climb up and pick the fruit so that we may eat!"

'The woman stood looking at the man and asked, "I, who am with child, am to climb up the tree?"

'The man said, "In that case, you just stand here and I'll climb the tree!"

'He climbed up and shook the branches. The woman collected the fruit as it fell down.

'The man yelled from the tree, "Don't touch that fruit! You refused to climb the tree."

'Thinking about his fruit, he hurried down from the tree and said "You have eaten some!"

'She said, "Why of course I haven't."

'He then killed her in anger, gathered the fruit and started eating, leaving the woman's body in the sun. After eating he walked a long distance and fell asleep out of sight of the place where he had left the body of the woman, unburied. Meanwhile the child that was in the woman's womb pushed out, dragging it's umbilical cord. It looked in the direction the man had gone and then started singing:

Wait for me
Wait for me
The little wombless one
Who is it that has eaten my mother?
How red and swollen are those eyes!
Wait till the little wombless one comes.'

That story. I know that story that our mothers and grandmothers tell. The man kills the child many times but the child rises up singing the same song until others hear the child's words. They realise what the man has done and kill him.

The child was once an altar boy at the age of eight. He wanted to

become a priest. He became a communist and a freedom fighter. Umkhonto we Sizwe. Spear of the Nation. A combatant for peace he said. For the sake of democracy, the ANC would have to adopt a policy of forgiveness he said. There will be no Nurembergs in South Africa he said. Hamba Kahle. Where is our peace? Hamba Kahle! The purple dress is off. My jeans feel rough against my legs. I pull my jumper over my head. My hair's a mess. I give the lady the red number one disc and the purple dress and walk back to lonely London streets.

Dread

◆

I often brought dogs home with me when I was young. They would come up and greet the way dogs greet, sniff me, wag their tails, brush their wet noses against my legs, so I'd pat them and talk to them. That was the start of the friendship. I suppose I used to encourage them to come with me. I always told my mum that they followed me and that I couldn't help it. Healthy dogs with shiny coats, scrawny dogs with their ribs showing. Sad-eyed dogs and bright, bouncy dogs. I'd beg to keep them, plead with my mum, but the answer was always no. Then it was really hard to get rid of them . . . because by that time they were enjoying the friendship. You had to suddenly turn cold. Pretend you had never spoken to them in the first place and then if they didn't get the hint you had to yell or throw something at them.

I used to resent my mother for forcing me into such treachery. One time I found a whole litter of puppies under an old bit of tin up on the hill. They were all black and white, squirmy and squeaky. I carried them down the hill in my school bag. I managed to find homes for them, all but one. I loved that puppy. My mum said we couldn't keep it. We already had two dogs. I thought she would come round but she didn't. She took it to the vet and had it put down. I still feel really guilty about that. I cried in my bed for nights.

Sometimes there were kittens, tortoises. She hated tortoises because they left green, slimy – what my mum called tortoise manure – everywhere and dug holes. I didn't like them because they always escaped. They're not very loyal. You don't hear of man's best friend the tortoise, do you? Birds. I remember I found a baby bird that was learning to fly. I picked it up and took it home and it died. I suppose it died of shock. I didn't realise that I should have just left it to learn to fly. I thought it needed looking after.

I found a baby mouse once, the type that has stripes on its back. It

was lying in the dust squealing. Its mouth was wide open and it was squealing, high pitched so you couldn't hear it unless you were close. I took it inside and fed it with watered-down cow's milk in a dropper. Well, I assumed I was feeding it. I probably pushed half the milk down its nose into its lungs and caused its eventual death. It died. My mum couldn't believe I'd brought a mouse into the house. She's spent most of her life getting rid of them. Catching them in traps and flushing them down the toilet. She has a real horror of mice. Mice, fleas and lizards. Ticks aren't so bad. She casually pulls them off dogs, horses, cats and grinds their bloated, bloody bodies into the ground with her shoe. Mice and fleas seem to have some kind of direct relation to her status in life which ticks don't have.

Anyway, I think I was about thirteen or fourteen. I was in secondary school, walking home with my grey skirt hitched up so that its pleats were scrunched together and the hemline hung higgledy-piggledy way too high above the knee. I had put my earrings and mascara on in the school toilets before leaving. That was just part of our defy authority and establish your adult identity routine. Nearly all the girls did it. About four of us, no three, were walking together. There was Lindiwe, Kgomotso and me. Yeah, so this man came up from behind us. He was walking next to us for a while as if he was going to pass. I was next to him. He greeted which was normal. We all greeted him and kept on talking amongst ourselves. Lindiwe started to kind of giggle a bit because this man was now walking at the same pace as us. I didn't really think there was anything strange about that. He had dread locks. Really long dread locks. Now this was before designer dreads came into fashion. Even now real dread locks aren't that common, acceptable maybe, but not common. He also had a really wild beard and his eyes were bloodshot. Big bushy beards aren't characteristic of your normal male in this microcosmic section of the African continent either. He was wearing a khaki jacket, jeans and great big boots. He asked me which school I went to so I told him. Lindiwe and Kgomotso were pretending as if they couldn't hear. They talked louder than usual about dumb things. I knew they were listening.

He asked me which subjects were my favourite. I told him history. He said that was his favourite subject too. He was telling me how Africa needs people like me to tell its history, the real history because

our history has been distorted and hidden by colonialism and imperialism. Sometimes I had to bend my head closer to his mouth to hear him. Other times he got excited and flung his arms about speaking really loudly. That's when I realised that he smelt. A pungent smell that was bad, bad beyond the bad smells I had come to associate with body odours. I had to turn my head for air. Kgomotso rolled her eyes up. Lindiwe giggled again. Then Kgomotso came out with this lame sentence about waiting for her brother. Lindiwe looked at me, trying to hold in her giggles. Her body was shuddering from the effort. Kgomotso didn't have a brother. I felt embarrassed and somehow sorry for the man. We had stopped walking. Lindiwe said that she was going to wait with Kgomotso. I didn't really know what to do. To me, Kgomotso's non-brother and Lindiwe's giggling was like one of those fancy neon signs flashing and pulsing out hurt waves. The man was just standing there swinging his locks to some invisible tune. So I said that I would see them tomorrow and kept walking. The man kept walking too, talking to me about political things until we got to our front gate. I asked him in and he came in. My mum was at work and the house was still and dark. He was studying me. I knew he was looking at me but I didn't want to make eye contact with him. It was creepy. I kept talking about nothing. I felt frightened. I was wondering why I had asked him to come in, and how I was going to get rid of him.

I made coffee in the kitchen. He followed me. He pulled out one of the kitchen chairs and sat on it so the back was facing his chest and his big thighs poked out the sides at right angles. He crossed his arms on the top of the back part of the chair and leant his chin on his hands. He was still looking at me. Somehow the way he sat on the chair intimidated me. I clunked the cups around and took longer than normal to make the coffee.

I thought about men who had no homes and slept in pipes or culverts and about the stories of men who smoked too much dagga and went mad. The Zimbabwe war was going on at that time. As kids it was part of our existence because Smith's soldiers used to come across the borders and bomb places. The teachers talked about the war to us. I sometimes heard my mum discussing what was happening there with her friends. Our neighbour's new baby boy was called

Mugabe and there was a football player at school called ZAPU or ZAPS. We were immersed in it, although we didn't know much about the more complex goings-on. I still don't.

I was making the coffee thinking that this man might have come from that war. If you're fighting in the bush there's no combing your hair or washing it for that matter, or going to the barber to have your beard trimmed. Who's going to be carrying an Afro-pick-type comb in their pocket as they're crawling through the undergrowth? Guerrilla warfare. You didn't have those things. So if a white Rhodesian came across a black man with a beard he killed him or arrested him. That's as far as I knew. Terrorists, 'Ters' they called them. We were taught to call them freedom fighters. So I was thinking to myself in the house, making the coffee, that this man was a freedom fighter. I was thinking of him killing people, hardened by war, maybe mad from killing.

I put his cup of coffee on the table and watched as he loaded seven teaspoons of sugar in. I looked up at the clock on the wall. It was four-thirty. My mind was working overtime. Maybe he was a freedom fighter – maybe he wasn't. I didn't care what he was. I was scared. I just wanted to get away from him. I had to get out. Then I yelled out, 'Oh, no! It's four-thirty!'

He splattered coffee everywhere and jumped up from the chair, looking around him like a frightened mouse and then at me in wonder.

'I've got to meet my mother in town at four-thirty. I'm late. I'm sorry about this.'

I rushed outside and stood amongst my mum's marigolds. The warm sunshine sank into my back and I waited for him to follow which he did. There was a sense of relief building up inside me as I locked the door. I was walking and he was walking next to me. Then I started jogging . . . and turned my head to look at him.

'OK. Bye. I've got to run.' And I ran. I ducked behind the Pop Inn and climbed over Mr Motsumi's fence. I ran up the street towards Kgomotso's house. That was the last I saw of the man with the dread locks.

The Birds in Her Garden

◆

The knife emerged from the marmalade jar heaped with bitter-sweet jelly. Sefe had deftly avoided the orange rind. Toast wasn't exactly her idea of a filling breakfast. It was either toast or the adventure of diving into a packet of cereal that had remained untouched for over six months and was most likely to harbour weevils, ants or cockroaches. She had made a pot of tea which she intended finishing and enjoying in the early-morning calm of her house.

Her husband . . . she was always hesitant to refer to Charlie as 'my husband'. Legally he was her husband. There was no denying that. She hated the suffocating implication of possession, being possessed, and the social legitimacy that automatically accompanied this declaration of ownership . . . Charlie and the three children were asleep. Her eyes managed to relegate the curtained window and its burglar bars to a position outside her conscious mind. She sipped her tea and basked in the beauty of the garden. It was her garden. No one else contributed to its upkeep. There was something rewarding in digging, planting, watering, fertilising, pruning and weeding. But then there was this incredible heat. Every day was a battle to keep the garden alive. It was useless even to attempt planting anything. The tender unfurling of bright green life would only succumb to the force of the merciless sun, leaving brittle desiccated memorials. Any chance of savouring the sweet-smelling roses was aborted just as the rich colours began to emerge from the bud's protective outer case. She would cut the stillborn dryness from the bush to encourage future growth.

Yesterday, the children had dragged her out to view a dehydrated frog. There had been great excitement and disbelief. A frog baked while in motion. Sefe had felt an uncharacteristic urge to touch it. To prove that it was dead. She imagined it in an art gallery – a sculpture

entitled 'Death in Leaping Position'. A thin line of moisture-seeking ants crawled into its body.

There were occasional short bursts of rain which only made the heat more oppressive. The earth, the plants, still screamed for sustenance. It was a rain of illusion. The frogs thought they could emerge from Their hiding places under the ground. Sometimes it would rain while the sun was shining. *Lesatsi le a rota*. The sun is pissing. She thought of the ozone layer, the trees, the encroaching desert and the greedy path of destruction that was being wrought by human beings. It was a rain of disillusion.

Sefe sipped her tea. At least this year there were no corn-crickets. their hideous prehistoric ugliness was made all the worse by their devastating ability to demolish her garden. She could never bring herself to slaughter them wholesale. She would occasionally pick up a stick, zone in on a feasting corn-cricket and hit it with a violence that ensured instantaneous death. She had long given up pulling them off with her fingers, as they were renowned for squirting out a vile yellow liquid. The children were very wary of corn-cricket pee as they called it.

There were more birds than usual. Starlings, warblers, grey loeries, African hoopoes, flycatchers, finches, sunbirds. She loved to watch them. Their presence was positive and full of promise. She focused on a small waxbill. There were others. They moved in groups. Bright turquoise chests and tails bounced through the grass in search of insects and seeds.

Sefe was attracted to bright colours. There was a brilliant crimson-breasted shrike that had appeared for the first time almost three weeks ago. It visited the garden regularly. Undaunted by the dogs, its long hops implied an air of casual superiority. She loved that bird. She loved it in the same way she had loved the red bishop which would stay for a season and then disappear. It had a bright red collar that stretched around its breast and the back of its black head. The lower part of its back and the undertail were also bright red. She knew when it was around by the 'zik, zik, zik' noise that meandered through the trees. She was mesmerised by its splendid plumage and had gone to the library to search for information on the bird. She discovered it was polygamous. The colourful male was known to construct several nests

and have three or four mates at one time. It was also known for deserting its partner, eggs and young.

When naming the bird, the English had obviously been impressed by the male bird's showy breeding dress. The red bishop, the golden bishop, the fire-crowned bishop – all evoked the temporal regalia, the glitzy pomp and ceremony of revered traditions. The colourful symbolic robes of the religion they brought to southern Africa. Were they conscious of the hypocrisy? Was it their subconscious desire to live like the bird, with three mates and no commitment? Was it a Freudian slip that they had named a gaudy polygamous bird after the spiritual and administrative head of their diocese?

Sefe's dreamy thoughts were interrupted by the small arms of her son encircling her neck.

'Hello, Mummy.' He kissed her.

'Morning, Lesedi baby.' She turned, rubbed her cheek against his and kissed him on the nose. 'Did you sleep well?' He nodded as he shuffled back out of the room. Her tea was cold. It was time to move. She began to prepare their breakfast. The two girls were up. Squabbling over some seemingly insignificant matter. It appeared that the younger girl, Thabi, had lost her sister's comb.

'You find it by 5 o'clock or you buy me a new one! Is that understood? In the meantime, I am taking your comb. I'm sick of you using my things. DON'T TOUCH MY THINGS!'

Bontle was almost thirteen. She had developed a certain impatience towards both Thabi and Lesedi. Sometimes she was very tender towards them, at other times she was extremely nasty and unreasonable. Sefe found it difficult to cope with her. She would be drawn into Bontle's arguments and would seek to retaliate with biting words, then she would feel guilty for not having been more adult in her approach. She saw the little girl Bontle and the mature Bontle fighting for attention and she wanted to hug her. She saw the insecurity, the need for privacy, the need to be an individual, the need to conform.

Thabi was now crying. 'I can't go to school if I haven't combed my hair. Please Bontle, please can I have my comb?'

Bontle's gruff reply turned what was low-key crying into turbulent sobbing and howling. Sefe marched into the bedroom. She grabbed the comb from Bontle and handed it to Thabi.

'OK, I have had enough! You comb your hair and find Bontle's comb. You, Bontle, go and eat your breakfast!'

Charlie yelled out from the bedroom, 'Can you make me a cup of coffee, please?' Sefe turned the kettle on.

'Would you like some soft porridge, Charlie?' He appeared at the kitchen door.

'No, thanks, I've got to run.' Sipping his coffee he got some papers together and then called the children. 'Let's go. Hurry up.' Bontle took Lesedi's bag for him. Thabi forgot her homework and came running back with Bontle yelling insults at her. Sefe helped her find her book and kissed her goodbye. She watched them as they reversed out the gate. Charlie was smoking. The children's small golden brown faces shone from the cream she insisted they rub all over their bodies. They were laughing.

Today she was going to relieve the walls and the doors of their ingrained accumulation of thousands of dirty fingerprints. Today was dedicated to the scrubbing of grimy switches and door handles. She washed the dishes and then filled a bucket with hot water and some thick white fluid guaranteed to move the toughest dirt.

Her mind wandered to a river. She sat on a grassy bank with a tall handsome man. They watched the water swirl past and talked. He was very gentle. He enjoyed listening to what she had to say. He didn't want to make her feel small or inferior. She enjoyed listening to him. He touched her when he spoke to her. Softly. His fingertips explored the under part of her forearm stimulating tendrils of tender sensation. They lay next to each other. Their eyes locked into the damp depths of silent communication. Lips caressed lips, searching, tasting the texture and warmth of delicate arousal.

The persistent, repetitious cry of the telephone ruptured the chimeric sweetness of her indulgence. Sefe threw the cloth on the floor, annoyed by the interruption. It was her friend, Pearl.

'Hi Sefe, how are you? I just got back this morning. Can we meet? What about that new coffee shop?'

Sefe agreed. She was glad Pearl was back. She changed into her favourite dress. It was made of a chiffon-like material and splashed with brilliant colours. Even though the fabric was see-through, pockets covered her small breasts so she didn't have to wear a bra. The skirt

was flared and full. It fell into seductive folds around her body. She put on her flat strappy sandals.

Pearl looked relaxed. She hugged Sefe and laughed.

'Did you see that man throwing admiring glances your way, when you came in?' Sefe hadn't noticed. 'Sefe, I don't understand how you do it. What would you like to drink?' Sefe studied the menu. It was too hot for tea or coffee. She chose lichee juice. 'How can you stay with a man for over seven years and not have an affair? It is unnatural.'

Sefe looked at Pearl and felt a little annoyed. 'Look, I can do without complications in my life at the moment. OK?'

Pearl laughed. 'I envy your strength . . . but you've got to enjoy life.'

Pearl always felt that she knew best. She was always bursting out with 'Oh, why did you do that?' or 'How could she do that?' She referred to the middle class as if its members were the scum of the earth and as if she didn't belong to it. Sefe often felt like asking her to define 'middle class' but could never quite bring herself to do it. If Pearl saw a row of what she thought were mediocre houses, she would condescendingly point out that they were typical middle class. She criticised white middle-class South African women with their fashion fads, high heels and painted nails. She knew about middle-class holidays at Durban, middle-class eating habits and middle-class political views. She wanted to be seen helping the working class but desperately sought to prove that she was upper class.

'Sefe don't you feel like talking or something? Is there something wrong? How's Charlie?'

Sefe forced a smile. 'No there's nothing wrong. Tell me about your holiday.'

'Heee, it was great. Really great. I wish you could have come. I met this nice man. You would like him. He's involved with an aid group. They give technical assistance to small businesses . . . you know . . . stuff like that. He speaks Zulu, Setswana, Afrikaans, English, of course, and French. He's coming here in three weeks to stay with me. You can meet him then. He is really good looking.'

Sefe looked at her. 'That's nice Pearl.' She wanted to say but what about Jo and Mpho and that German guy – Helmut? She wondered how Pearl managed to juggle all her men.

Pearl collected people. She liked to feel that women liked her and

that men desired her. She liked people to know that women liked her and that men desired her. These men and women were obviously not classified as belonging to the dull, amorphous middle class that so plagued her. Pearl often attracted people by appealing to their craving for the exotic. Her mother was Iranian. Her father was African. She would entice people to confide in her, ensnare them in the personal, share secrets and tell them of the tragedies in her life. Her tragedies were definitely not middle-class tragedies. They were exceptional, extraordinary tragedies that could only be marvelled at. She was very quick to report any compliments she received. Someone once said she resembled an Arabian princess, another a famous movie star. This was like being awarded a prize or medal. She wanted people to admire her intelligent, sensitive, attractive friends. She wanted people to love her. She found a father in one man, an intellectual in another, passionate romance from the one who played in a band, but she never found herself. She was afraid of herself. All the same Sefe liked Pearl and appreciated her company. It didn't worry her that she was part of Pearl's collection.

'I'll take the bill, Sefe,' said Pearl as she dug into her purse and pulled out a twenty note. 'You still haven't told me what you've been doing with your holidays.'

Sefe smiled. 'I've been cleaning the house.'

They parted at the coffee shop after arranging to meet the coming week at Pearl's health club. Sefe walked through the streets. She stopped to buy hamburgers for lunch. She had completely forgotten to cook for Charlie and the children.

At home she turned the oven on low and placed the hamburgers inside to keep warm. She plunged the cloth into the now cold, soapy water and began to scrub. There was a house on a beach. A house with huge glass windows overlooking the sea. It was the only house for miles . . . standing alone on a magnificent stretch of white sand. She was beautiful. A tall, dark, round-hipped woman. They arranged holidays together. She stood behind her. Her tongue captured the soft hair of her bare neck in hot embrace. Excited breasts paid homage to the intrigue of touch. As lovers they ran along the beach holding hands. They clung to each other in the sea. Rolling, laughing, naked, lapping, breaking in waves through their bodies.

Revenge is Sweet

◆

It was the first time in my life that I had been alone. Yet I didn't feel lonely. I was enjoying my own space, my own time, discovering myself and all that. I did sense the presence of something slightly threatening. Now I look back, I did sense something, yes. It was during the night. Sometimes I would lift my head, thinking I had heard a noise. My neck and body would stiffen as all my senses, especially my ears and eyes strained radar-like in search of potential danger. I lay there like a piece of petrified wood or one of those terrible lava-preserved images from Pompeii. I would think up possible methods of attack and escape routes – most of them probably far more devastating in theory than they could possibly be in actuality.

I suppose I wasted good sleeping hours in this way for about three months, on and off. I would get up in the morning and find my book was not where I thought I had left it. My scissors disappeared. There was sugar on the floor in the kitchen . . . not much, just enough to annoy me, crunching and sticking to my feet. Once the coffee jar was lying in the cupboard with its lid off. I don't drink coffee. I keep a jar in the cupboard for when guests come. I can't say I thought too much of all this though. These things have always happened to me in varying degrees. My imagination has been known to have fun with the creaks and groans of old houses and I can be absent-minded at the best of times.

I had been at Leloba's house. We'd been chewing on sweet reed and laughing a lot about people and work. It was dark when I got home. Leloba had given me a huge water-melon which I was carrying in my arms in the dark. The dogs rubbed their wet noses behind my knees, wagging their tails, bouncing their front paws off the ground and scraping them down my legs. The lights were on and loud rhythms were blasting their bass out of the windows. It was my music so I liked

it but I couldn't remember leaving it on. I didn't have any remote control or automatic gadgets. Maybe one of the kids had come home. A surprise? In some kind of trouble? I balanced the melon against the wall and fumbled around in my basket for the house keys. Surely the kids would have phoned. The door's open ... stupid of me. The blame-yourself-for-all-the-silly-things-that-happen syndrome had plagued me for years.

'Oh, shit! What is that?' I yelled. The water-melon splattered across the floor. 'A Tokoloshe!' It was so horrible. The sight. He came dancing up to me, grinning, swigging gin, my gin and sweating. I knew it was a Tokoloshe from the descriptions I'd heard as a kid. Long furry ears, a pointed snout and spotted body. He was short and seethed a greasy sexuality. Thrusting his pelvis back and forth in time to the music. Leering. Blood-shot eyes. He grabbed my arm and pulled me towards the kitchen.

'Come, cook for me, my sweetheart!'

This was typical Tokoloshe behaviour. They have ravenous appetites and love meat.

'*A o batla nama?*' I asked in a timid voice.

'Yes, give me meat, meat, meat!'

He pivoted on one foot and then sprang across the kitchen floor cackling.

I remembered someone saying that if a Tokoloshe has eaten well it will leave you alone. At least for a while. I had also heard that they hate salt. That is one way to rid yourself of a Tokoloshe. Feed it salt. I eyed the salt shaker. The meat was sizzling in the pan. He was still gyrating on the kitchen floor. I edged closer to the bench and stretched my arm out, slowly, very slowly. Where was he? I couldn't hear him. I stood still, my hand inches away from the salt shaker. I stood there listening, trying to place him. Where was he?

Suddenly his grimacing face exploded from under my skirt, a twisted screeching and salivating mass of teeth and hair. He had wheedled his way between my legs. I screamed, cold sudden fear pounding through my heart and lungs. His long grey fingernails hooked around the cupboard door and drawer handles. He clambered up on to the bench, picked up the salt shaker and pelted it across the room.

'Clean it up!' he spat.

I swept the salt and glass into a heap, scooped it up and threw it into the kitchen tidy. He grunted and began stuffing the meat and onions from the frying pan into his mouth, watching me out of the corner of his eyes. Belching and making sloshy noises as he chewed. I pushed my back against the wall and watched him. He seemed to calm down. He rubbed his bloated stomach and burped again.

'Thank you, my darling! I'll see you later. *Ke tla go bona kgantele, ne?*' The words slithered by my ear as he disappeared in stages. He didn't just disappear suddenly – there one minute gone the next. He faded out of sight in phases with different colours predominating at various intervals. Red and browns, greens, khaki, and mustard yellow. Digestion colours. Regurgitation and vomit colours.

I didn't waste any time. I ran outside. The dogs were jumping all over me – excited by my late-night activity. I carried bricks into the house. Two at a time. Scraping the inside of my arms. Rubbing red brick dust all over my blouse. I kept going until I had sixteen bricks in my bedroom. I placed four under one bed leg. The bed fell and grazed my back. I started crying and sat there for a while with my head in my hands. I removed three of the bricks. Then I placed one brick at a time under each bed leg (it made more sense) until the bed was perched up four bricks higher than its normal height. Four bricks under each bed leg.

I had to shower and put on a clean nightdress. Somehow it felt better. I climbed on to my bed too tired to worry about eating, washing the frying pan or cleaning up the smashed water-melon. I actually fell asleep despite everything. For a while anyway. He came at sunrise. I knew he would. He came into the room. I could see his eyes shining. He was calling me and whispering obscenities. Heavy breathing, the lot. I waited. I rolled into the middle of the bed. His voice was becoming more desperate, beginning to squeak.

'Why did you do that?' he squealed.

He sprang up. His long nails scratched the air. He began screaming, screeching, turning in circles but he couldn't reach the bed. He disappeared. Suddenly this time, in a whirlwind of profanity and burning heat.

'Eat your heart out, Rumpelstiltskin!' I whispered and fell asleep.

I phoned in sick. I had to rest. He'd be back. I cleaned the house,

cooked a delicious lunch and ate it in the garden. I fed the dogs early. I didn't want him to do anything horrible to them. No one believes stories about Tokoloshes. I hadn't really believed the stories I had heard about Tokoloshes but at least I had listened to them. Most people get rid of Tokoloshes by feeding them salt. How was I going to get rid of this one? The bed trick was great but he'd be back. He'd bring his friends. I knew that from the stories.

He did come. He came with a woman Tokoloshe. He sneered at me. She smiled shyly. I put some music on and pulled out a bottle of whisky.

'Now you're getting the hang of it,' he cackled. 'Have you taken the bricks out from under your bed? Eeh? Have you?'

He was dancing and swigging great gulps of whisky from the bottle. She was also dancing. Laughing.

'Let's brighten up the decor!' he yelled and pulled over the bookshelf. He kicked a chair and sent it flying across the room. 'Fruit! Hee Hee!' He squashed some grapes into the wall and nibbled and licked pieces of the green grape skin from under his nails, spitting the seeds against the windows and watching them as they made slimy paths down the glass. I was beginning to lose my temper. I knew it would just make things worse but my control was slipping away.

'Have you cooked? Have you cooked my meat?' he screamed.

I could see right down his reddish-maroon spotted throat and smelt the hot stench. I was going to be sick. Sour milk and stale gin mixed with something beyond definition.

'Cook my meat! Cook my meat!'

I sucked air through my back teeth – '*tllhh, o a ntena monna!*'

He pushed me, digging his nails into my back.

'*Ke batla nama!* I want meat!'

I stumbled into the kitchen, got out the frying pan and threw in a big piece of fillet. He was watching me slyly. The woman was still dancing in the other room making soft crooning noises. I chopped up some cabbage, tomatoes and onions. He loved it. I left him there stuffing the partly cooked food down his throat, slobbering and drivelling over the frying pan.

She was still dancing and crooning. I watched her hips sway. Her eyes were closed. I began dancing with her. She opened her eyes and

smiled at me. I picked her up very gently. We danced across the floor, up the hall to my bedroom. I stroked her neck and back as I climbed up onto the bed. She continued to smile and make bubbly pigeon noises. I could hear him looking for us. He was scruffing and burping his way up the hall. I kissed her downy cheek. She kissed my shoulder. My skin did something it had never done before. It tasted her kiss. My skin became my tongue. I sucked her sweet nectar kiss into my pores and thought of the purple, slim-necked flowers I siphoned from the bees when I was a child.

He was in the room. I could feel his presence. I could feel him watching us. Watching us in stunned amazement. I don't know when his hideous screaming started or stopped. Blue, red, green flashing lights getting louder and louder and then fading off into the distance. Gone forever. *Nna ke ile ka thulamela.* I fell into a deep, sweet jazz sleep. Continuous slumberous curves, peaking and falling into honeyed ripples.

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Gaele Sobott-Mogwe has lived in Botswana since 1978. She is a lecturer in the English Department at the University of Botswana.

'She took her time, as old or rural people often do, filling in the background and then slowly coming round to the question itself... Some looked at her with expressions of patronising tolerance, others with expressions of hostility and contempt.'

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