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The Secret Song of the Rain

A Novel

By Mandla Langa

About 100800 words

Its coming was first felt in the prickling of desires, a thirst for new
tenderness, the budding of vague dreams, then suddenly it took
wing in the violet silk rustle of its great wings of joy, and over the
borough it plunged down and burst open the life inside the huts
like an over-ripe pomegranate.

-- AIMÉ CÉSAIRE: RETURN TO MY NATIVE LAND

PROLOGUE

At the exact moment of his death in the dream, Joseph wakes up and walks around the backroom of Aunt Susie Juma's tavern in a state of stunned relief. He's been having these dreams of late, which leave his mouth dry. Even as he washes, checks that the envelope is in place as he dresses and pumps the Primus stove to boil two eggs in a pot, he has to keep slapping himself to be reassured that he's still alive. He smiles at the self-inflicted assault, comparing the action to the occasions when his father, Sobhuza Mabaso, used to apply aftershave balm to his face, how he'd pull his face at the mirror and slap his cheeks until tears formed at the corners of his eyes. It was as if Sobhuza were confirming something he always said, that the journey to adulthood was full of pain. The memory interferes with Joseph's dream. It becomes part of the steam and merges with the paraffin smoke to paint random patterns on the wall. He's long meant to devote a whole day scrubbing the walls of soot and grime and returning them to their original glory. Give the backroom a facelift.

This, he knows, is as futile as trying to gather smoke in your arms. You cannot instil order to a place like this with beer crates stacked floor to ceiling. Along one wall squats mismatched furniture – a kitchen dresser that reminds him of Hubert, its shelves full of small colourful boxes, phials, broken vases, cups without handles and chipped saucers, books with strange titles, rosaries and assorted seashells, two sets of false teeth grinning delightedly behind glass. The dresser's hulking neighbour is a clothes wardrobe that's never been opened, which Aunt Susie proudly, if breathlessly, introduced as a rare antique armoire from the 1900s, made of quarter-sawn oak with a lion's head and claw feet. For him, seen from an angle under a weak light at night, the lion looks like a live human being with a face twisted in rage. A kist that could have been Joseph's mother's sits under boxes and suitcases that hold mysteries to Aunt Susie Juma's travels. His bed is an orange couch with a centre cushion covered by a heavy chamois blanket to hide two bullet holes. He spends his nights in this hoarder's paradise, and, before he snuffs out the light, he sniffs the air like a pet rodent and gets a whiff of sulphur. It's an unsettling smell that he knows might only exist in his head. He dreams every night.

This morning, he's late for his daily errand. Quickly, though carefully, he eats two eggs and washes them down with a drink of water. He remembers reading somewhere about a fellow who died after swallowing an egg that got stuck in his windpipe. That would be a funny ending, to survive the worst that the world could offer only to be killed by an egg.

Still amused at the unfairness of fate, he enters the main house through the kitchen where Aunt Susie, head covered in a colourful scarf that flows over the housecoat at the shoulders, is brewing coffee; she gives him a baleful before-her-first cigarette look and grunts a reply to his breezy greeting. She's not a morning person, known for her two default settings, *BC* and *AC*. Before cigarette and after cigarette. Shrugging off her bad-tempered, bleary-eyed state, he dashes for the front door. His progress across the wooden floor increases her irritation and he can feel her eyes boring into the spot between his shoulder blades. I wonder, he thinks, whether she still has her revolver, which she whips out when things get heavy in the tavern. Outside, getting a whiff of Johannesburg's morning air, he stops short of taking another step at the sight of two police officers standing outside the empty house across the street. There's been a spate of rowdy carryings-on in the area, with lots of the action centred at the corner of Page and Fortesque Roads, which often spills over into the yard fronting the empty house on whose breeze-block fence is a TO LET sign, under which is scrawled *Moshiach is coming*. One of the cops is studying the sign as if it holds answers to their investigation. Seeing them, Joseph immediately recalls a detail from the dream. He's lying face-up in a coffin with cotton wool stuffed up his nostrils. As mourners file past, the women sniffle and dab their eyes with perfumed tissues. The priest's sorrowful face is the last thing he sees peering down at him before the lid is brought down. A voice says: *And all this, just for a letter*.

The image in his head dissolves into reality. He crosses the street and braces himself for a confrontation. The police officers, however, are on another mission. They give him an incurious look and continue their surveillance of the tavern, possibly checking on smugglers, who knows? What Joseph knows, though, is that he has become very anxious about what to do with the letter in his possession. Where, in order to thwart pickpockets, men have kept their identity

papers or even cash in the inside pocket of their jackets, Joseph has secured his father's letter by taping the envelope directly to his skin, in the fashion of people who wear adhesive heat packs to relieve backache. It is therefore the first item he puts on in the morning and the last one he removes every night. It's become part of him, almost an extension of his own thoughts and desires. At one time he seriously considered memorising its contents, the same way he had learnt by heart the more than two thousand words of his favourite poems by writers such as David Diop, Agostinho Neto, Ama Ata Aidoo and Noémia de Sousa, which were the staple of grade 8 English literature; he'd swallow the letter after committing it to memory. On second thoughts, Joseph quickly discarded the idea, knowing the importance of the physical nature of the letter.

No one knows about the location of the letter. Only that he has it.

He feels it rustling distantly as he walks along Rockey Street on a December morning. It's hot and he worries that his own body heat might generate moisture that would ruin the envelope. The storm that broke out last night hasn't turned into a cooler day. That always happened in Zambia. And Zambian storms were no joke. The floods laid waste to regions of the countryside. In Kabwe, two to three hours' drive from Lusaka, Aunt Taona and Uncle Agrippa would cower in darkened corners where mirrors had been covered, to the amusement of his cousins. He shakes his head, expelling the past.

As he now walks along the concrete pavement, the noise of the sidewalk vendors and taxis increasing the heat, he is somewhat baffled at how he can't quite get over the menace that looms over the streets of Johannesburg. He squares his shoulders, bracing himself for an unseen assault from oncoming human traffic. I am Joseph Mabaso and I've seen what the world can offer. And Johannesburg? He minimises his anxiety. Johannesburg is just another Lusaka with brasher people, taller buildings, more neon signs and lots of *azungu*.

A good number of the black people he's come across – patrons in Aunt Susie's tavern – carry themselves like the *azungu*, noses in the air, noses through which they speak English, their words coming out as if they're struggling with hot potatoes in their mouths. *Hullo. Yew say yew're Zambian but your name's Joseph Mabaso? Isn't that a Seth-African name?*

He crosses the wide Rockey Street to a stall where he buys two loose cigarettes, Rothmans, Aunt Susie won't smoke any other brand, and heads back towards the tavern. He trails two men in loud shirts with patched pockets and pointy shoes speaking in a language he first takes for Chinyanja before it transpires it's perhaps some language from up north. As with railway policemen and security guards, Vhavenda and Vatsonga are taxi drivers here; they put on the dashboard little photos of where they come from, unlike AmaZulu taxi drivers who have little phials containing coloured water hanging from the rear-view mirror, to chase away bad luck. Rosaries are popular. Car thieves aren't deterred by this.

'Ek sê, pionero...'

The voice calls again, and again there's no one. Can it be Jerome, out to get revenge? He shakes his head. The last thing I want to see happening to me, he thinks, is to go crazy in this country before my work is done. My work. He smiles at the adulthood of his observation. He's still smiling when he climbs up the stairs to the tavern. Aunt Susie, surrounded by the scent of the flowers that grow furiously on the front garden, always seems at once surprised and amused at the appearance of her right-hand man.

'Got the fags?' she asks, wheezing as she shifts the vacuum cleaner with a foot encased in a running shoe. Quickly lighting up, she expels a thin column of smoke through one nostril, a feat that never fails to amaze him. She smiles, the morning glumness gone, like a sky relieved of the menace of thunderclouds. 'You've got to finish cleaning up here. I'm off to the airport.'

'Why? You going away?'

'You wish. We're going to welcome Oliver Tambo back home.'

She's an enthusiastic supporter of causes, her tavern sometimes becoming a campaign headquarters. Now, she's changed into a voluminous yellow t-shirt imprinted with Mandela's beaming face on the front and a black skirt. To complete the colours of the ANC she has her head covered with a green turban. She also has an outfit for the Communist Party. Now and then people without the right papers come to her and she knows someone who has the ear of some important official. People call Aunt Susie Juma the unofficial Zambian ambassador to South Africa. When, as is happening today, she has some official

function to attend, she leaves Joseph to mind the store, always with a word of caution for any customer likely to consider cheating him. 'He's my Zambian child,' she would say.

And now, as she leaves, the scent of flowers billowing in her wake, she tells him that maybe one day she'll take him along with her to her meetings, to meet the big guns. Just then it all becomes clear in his mind. Perhaps this is the answer to the problem he's long been wrestling with, what to do with his father's letter. Ever since the envelope came into his hands, Joseph Mabaso has dreamt about going to the Radio Park or Television Centre of the SABC and asking for time on radio to read the letter live on air, for the country to hear. He has thought about going to Shell House, the ANC Headquarters on 90 Plein Street and demanding to see Nelson Mandela. He can well imagine the reaction of the security personnel; big, burly men in wraparound sunglasses he has seen on TV; they'll probably look him up and down and then burst out laughing, calling each other with tears streaming down their cheeks. People, please come and help me hear this; here's a fourteen-year-old pipsqueak who wants to speak with Madiba! He shrugs, going on with his tasks.

The view that he's making the right decision is affirmed later as he's carting crates of beer from the kitchen to the lounge, where he looks over the customers' shoulders at the television news broadcast and sees scenes of excitement at the Jan Smuts Airport. Close ups of people jumping for joy shift to the focus of this merriment, the tall and stately Mandela holding hands with a frail-looking Oliver Tambo. From the balcony of the airport building, the two men wave as they acknowledge the greetings of a throng of leaders, foreign ambassadors and various VIPs. The announcer says that Oliver Tambo, the seventy-three-year old ANC leader, left South Africa in 1960 on a secret mission to rebuild the banned party in exile. Mandela tells the crowd: 'We welcome him with open arms as one of the greatest heroes of Africa.'

For Joseph, 13 December 1990 takes on a different, important meaning. It's suddenly clear to him that the person who should receive Sobhuza's letter is this hero. In fact, he now remembers his father never once saying anything negative about the man he called O.R. He, Joseph, will tell O.R. that his father, who went by the nom de guerre Sobhuza and who also tended to disappear on

operations for the ANC, didn't want the letter to fall into untrustworthy hands. His, Tambo's, are the most trusted hands in South Africa today. The letter holds the key to the much-publicised murder of Mrs Martha Kweyama in 1989 in Pinetown, which is linked to Sobhuza Mabaso's disappearance from Zambia, leaving his wife, Chanda and four children.

Joseph wonders what Mulilo, Banji and Emmanuel, his siblings, will make of him when he sees them again. If he sees them again. Tears well up into his eyes and he looks away before the customers can see. There's nothing as unsympathetic as drinkers on their last cash. But what do they care? They've got their own battles to fight.

He overhears their debates, these greybeards quaffing quarts of Castle Lager or Black Label, speaking English and quoting dead poets. His voice scarred by hard liquor, one of them reminisces about the time when he did good deeds and the notables with whom he rubbed shoulders. He used to drink twelve-year-old Chivas Regal. Now he's been reduced to what he calls this Old Grouse shit from Makro. Joseph listens as the tavern crackles with instant wisdom: Mandela will be the man to bring real prosperity to this country; poverty will be a thing of the past. Blah blah blah. Joseph looks on pityingly. Until totally legless as happens nightly, none of these men knows when it's time to go home.

He counts himself lucky to have reached the age of fourteen.

As time passes, Joseph starts appreciating what he has gone through from the reactions of others. He has packed several lifetimes into his short existence. This afternoon, he listens to the drinkers offering unsought advice. Go find a young girl and take your mind off the past. He's too young for women, what kind of advice is that? No. Go to school, even if they'll frustrate you. Go see an *inyanga*, take a piece of something from your father and get yourself cleansed. There's Mbambo at Maye-Maye in Jeppe. He also helps solve problems of weak erections. Stop with that mumbo-jumbo. You'll confuse the young man. The youth can't be confused more than they are already, you know. This feedback helps him come up with his own theory about life.

Life begins at fourteen.

It's at fourteen that you can really feel the blood pumping in the arteries; at least, that is how he feels. His grandmother, Gogo Mulubwa, used to call it the

sap of life. Seeing Mulubwa's face in his mind's eye brings back a flood of memories.

CHAPTER 1

It is during the summer of 1985, and it must be Sunday because everyone is dressed in what Sobhuza rather mockingly calls church clothes. It's a pleasant afternoon and they must be out in the garden, the sky a clear blue. Emmanuel, who hates staying out in the sun on account of someone's advice that the sun would darken his already dark skin tone, sits in the shade under the huge rubber tree, keeping an eye on both Mulilo and Banji. Because Emmanuel enjoys being alone, has actually told his elder brother he enjoys his own company, Joseph picks on him.

'What are you reading?' Joseph asks and then flips the book over to read the back cover. '*Child of the Owl*, oh, aren't you too young to be reading this?'

'Give me back the book,' Emmanuel says and snatches it out of Joseph's grasp. 'Leave me alone.'

'You want to go woo-woo...' He's just started on his impression of an owl with his hands cupped around his mouth when he notices Emmanuel's gaze lifting to settle on something behind him. Whirling around, Joseph almost collides with his father. 'Sorry, sir.'

'Careful, Jojo,' Sobhuza says. Although his expression is stern there's a hint of amusement in his voice. 'Leave your brother alone to his books and help me with these.'

'These' are four chairs, two held back to back in each hand, which alerts Joseph to the imminent arrival of visitors. This had been a usual affair on Sundays but was discontinued at first by the onset of winter, which had been especially vicious; and then the break had been lengthened by Sobhuza's absences. His father was the engine that drove social engagements, which was a puzzle, really, because the Sunday visitors were almost all from Chanda's side of the family. Few South Africans ever paid casual visits; somehow Sobhuza's life was controlled in a manner that he only allowed into his life, or the life of his family, what he could manage. Everything Sobhuza does is for a specific purpose; even on those rare walks with the boys, and except for a perfunctory nod, Joseph has never seen him stopping to chat with other men or, as was normal with other

fathers, simply going to the sports ground and kicking the ball just for the hell of it. Or, as the South African boys at school put it when expressing something that didn't necessarily have to make sense...*just nje?*

'School okay?' Sobhuza asks. He's crouched on his haunches, using a hammer to the underside of a trestle table. 'You managing?'

Joseph stammers an answer; he is managing. He doesn't want to tell Sobhuza that his age-mates at school torment him about his father's disappearances. Sobhuza has been absent in a number of the parent-teacher meetings, which, Joseph knows, are just a platform for the principal to share his vision with parents. It is a big affair where Mr Muzonda, who, while threatening to take names of those parents who missed his sessions, never passes up an opportunity to inform anyone within earshot that he once headed the University of Zambia's debating team. I'll take names. Mark my word.

Avoiding a direct question, Joseph asks: 'Do you go to many places?'

'We have to travel a lot,' Sobhuza says. 'One day I'll tell you the reason behind it all. I can only say that the world is in a bad state. And we're trying to do something about it.'

'The world?' Joseph has an unclear notion of the world, always unable to look at the map of Zambia and relate it to the ball that spins on its axis atop the bookshelf in the classroom where Ma'am Ndawo teaches Geography. At the same time, he has a sense of the world as something represented by people that speak different languages. The number of people that make up the population of the world is staggering. Also, why don't the people in China fall off into space? And so, how can anyone do something about the world? What is that something?

'Your mind,' Sobhuza says, 'has to grow so that all these things can make sense.'

'Is it to sort out apartheid?' At least he has heard the story told many times at school. We are at the cusp of defeating imperialism and apartheid.

'More or less.' Sobhuza regards his son, a look of something inexplicably tender crossing his face. He closes his eyes as if fighting off a thought or, perhaps, imprisoning it behind his eyelids. He shrugs. 'Let's get the food.'

The smell of food prevails on Sunday afternoon taking over everything, wafting across the yard and causing the neighbour's dogs to yelp in yearning. Sobhuza has prepared a feast and could not have chosen a better Sunday afternoon. Ranged around the rough timber table under the shade of a giant rubber tree, Chanda's relatives, who include Mulubwa, Aunt Thelma, Agrippa and his wife, Taona, start their marathon feast with a prayer, whereupon Agrippa pours a measure of vodka on the red ground as a libation to the ancestors. Now that both the God of the Holy Bible and the forebears have been adequately soothed, the hungry family members can start eating. Joseph, Emmanuel, Banji and Mulilo occupy their own little table, which they share with Agrippa and Taona's children, his cousins.

Sobhuza, a most genial host, offers the children the Mazoe cordial mixed with ice water in plastic tumblers; the big people are lavishly supplied with the harder brews. Sobhuza goes on to tell a short story of the time he went to a restaurant on Chachacha Road, where he ordered orange juice. The waiter returned with a glass of emerald cordial. When Sobhuza insisted that he wanted orange juice, the waiter retorted, 'Ah, but-ty, sah, this is *green* orange juice.' The visitors crack up, Agrippa most volubly although seemingly not quite getting the joke. Taona smiles shyly while Aunt Thelma laughs and leans across to clap Sobhuza on the shoulder as Chanda looks on, her face impassive.

When the time for food comes, Sobhuza retreats into the kitchen and returns wearing an apron and a chef's hat, which reminds Joseph of the lesson on drama at school, why actors choose costumes that can enrich their roles or help them remain unseen throughout the play. He has a sense of his father's dress as a means to take attention away from himself.

He can cook, Sobhuza can. Uncle Agrippa says as much: Sobhuza knows exactly how to titillate the palate. At 'titillate' the children giggle behind their hands and Aunt Thelma and Chanda exchange glances. Chanda's folks ooh and aah over the dishes that come out of the kitchen. Even Mulubwa: Joseph has an idea that she might be conflicted about Sobhuza, perhaps, like all mothers-in-law, unsure about what to make of her daughter's choice in marriage. He sometimes catches her giving Sobhuza a sidelong glance.

Possibly sensing this, in the fashion of a cat that crosses the room to rub itself against the one person averse to her, Sobhuza outdoes himself in producing Mulubwa's favourite dishes. He knows her preference for *nshima* prepared with cassava rather than with maize meal or millet. He ensures she is the first taster, spooning titbits into a side plate for her to taste, alerting her to the consistency of the meal, the *nshima* that is neither crumbly nor stiff, but bouncy like a ball. A spicy goat meat stew, chicken, butter beans, playfully called *umadum'ezinqeni* for generating gasses whose subsequent release results in a series of loud blasts; kapenta sardines, vegetables that include groundnuts and sweet potatoes accompany the staple, the serving table exploding with colour and aromas.

From their vantage point, a little removed from the adults, Joseph and his more boisterous – and hungrier – relatives tuck into the food. The adults chide the youngsters against using cutlery.

'You use your fingers to eat this type of food,' says Agrippa, who is getting quite tipsy, shredding a piece of pumpkin leaf and then rolling it around a handful of *nshima* soaked in goat stew and plopping it into his mouth. And, after a show of wide-eyed chewing and swallowing that involves letting the Adam's apple bob up and down, he belches. 'There.'

There follows a spell of silence of undiluted enjoyment punctuated by the sound of lips smacking with relish. Mulubwa then puts into words what was in the minds of the others.

'Ah, Sobhuza, my son,' she says. 'You were not named after a king for nothing. You really know how to please people.'

'Let's have another round of drinks,' Agrippa says. Taona gives him a look. As if wanting to break the tension, Sobhuza launches into a story.

'We were travelling to a conference in Congo Brazzaville,' he starts, 'two colleagues, one Zimbabwean, another Zambian. As we take off, Chisha, my friend from Zambia, breaks out with a few bottles of Mosi beer. I still don't know how he got them on the Angolan carrier. He says to us: "You don't know how to drink. I'll show you how to hammer the Mosi." By the time we stopped over in Luanda, he was out cold, the Mosi had hammered *him*!'

More laughter. Agrippa does a deceptively funny impression of Kenneth Kaunda chastising his countrymen: 'I will not lead a nation of drunkards...'

By now, however, everyone has forgotten about Sobhuza the host. He has participated in conversations but has contributed nothing memorable. Clearing the table, he signals to Chanda that she should continue with the entertainment of the guests and murmurs something before disappearing into the kitchen. After an hour at the sink, there's no trace in the house that there has been a feast later in the afternoon. Whatever Sobhuza does, Joseph notices, he ensures that he leaves no trace.

Sobhuza leaves again, two days later. It's not clear when he'll come back.

Joseph's troubles – although he at first doesn't know how he knows this – start in July 1986, when he is ten years old. It's all so long ago when Sobhuza is a presence as rare as a Christmas feast, a handy threat to be used when the children are naughty. Your father will sort you out when he comes back, Chanda would say. The whole of the city of Lusaka and its surroundings – certainly their house in the suburb of Helen Kaunda – is in the grip of a particularly cold spell. The shops and pharmacies have run out of Vaseline, which has been snapped up by mothers anxious about young ones turning ashy and scaly. Initially hazy and layered by emotion, the details of Joseph's troubles emerge later. It all comes down to the fact that he has been playing truant at school. That's what his mother's sister, Aunt Thelma, says.

'He's been bunking school, sisi,' she confides in Chanda, her voice carrying all the way over to the lounge where Joseph, hunched over a grade 4 Maths worksheet, pretends to be doing homework. He is bored already with the section on Additions.

For instance, he has to solve problem 4(d): *A publisher published 87654 books in the year 1968, 24543 books in 1969, 87679 books in 1970 and 12367 books in 1971. How many books were published in total?* What the hell is this?

Emmanuel leafs through a magazine. Looking up, he asks: 'Are you in trouble?' If Joseph is in trouble, it means *he* is off the hook.

'I'll be fine,' Joseph says.

'Ma will kill you.' *Which serves you right because you didn't take me along with you.*

Joseph strains his ears to hear the seriousness of his situation. Aunt Thelma says something, putting a few more nails into his coffin.

“Strue?” his mother asks. ‘How did you find this out?’

‘Gordon told me. You know Gordon?’

‘That new teacher at your school you’ve been telling me about. Where was Joseph?’

‘At the cinema, the 20th Century on Cairo Road.’

‘Thelma?’ Chanda is exasperated. ‘It feels like I’m pulling teeth with you here...what film was he watching?’

‘I don’t know, sisi.’

‘Hm,’ Chanda says unconvinced. ‘I hear this Gordon fellow is very handsome...’

‘Okay,’ Aunt Thelma says, giggling. ‘You got me there, sisi. I was with Gordon in the cinema. He also wanted to see *The Return of the Living Dead*.’

‘*The Return of the Living Dead*?’ Chanda is aghast. ‘You see your ten-year-old nephew in a cinema where they show a horror film and you don’t do anything about it? Even I, and I’m a grown woman, do you think I’ll ever set foot in a place where they show horror films?’

‘I’m not so *nkram-nkram* about horror movies myself,’ Aunt Thelma says, throwing in a South African phrase to show her sophistication. ‘It’s just that Gordon so wanted to see it.’

‘Ah,’ Chanda says, slyly, ‘so it’s Gordon now who plays the guitar and you do the dance?’

‘You know how it is, sisi. A girl’s got to get her groove back.’ After a small pause, which Joseph supposes is filled with giggles and meaningful looks between the sisters, Aunt Thelma says: ‘Ah, but Gordon’s soon falling on the wayside.’

‘Pray, tell me.’

Aunt Thelma rummages in her bag and takes out an envelope. Tapping it on the table, she traps a ring spinning out. ‘This is what I mean.’

Chanda picks up the ring and looks at it against the light. ‘This is a real diamond...’

‘Yep. You remember Tsedisio Tsotetsi?’

‘TT? Your playboy from the Botswana High Commission? I thought you’d given him the boot.’

‘Well, we’re back together. And he’s proposed.’

‘Congratulations.’ Chanda looks thoughtful. ‘Has he stopped playing around, though?’

‘Men never do. You just have to set the limits, sisi.’ Thelma gives her sister a long look. ‘You have to have options, otherwise people take you for granted.’

‘Meaning?’

‘Look at you. You’re young and could still be on the market.’

‘Me? I’m married. What do you mean?’

‘I’ve seen the way men look at you. For instance, Paul?’

‘What about Paul?’

‘It’s clear he’s attracted to you. I see him grazing in your field soon.’ And then, cruelly: ‘You’re married to an idea, but that Sobhuza is never coming back. How long has it been now, these disappearances, five years?’

‘More or less.’

‘One day, you’ll realise that your sons are crying for their father. That’s what boys do. And before you know it, *they’ll* have become him – and they will also leave their families.’

‘So, what are you now, a social worker? Sobhuza’s doing work that takes him away from home.’ Chanda sounds weary. ‘Don’t drag him into this.’

‘Well, sisi, you must get some clarity in one form or the other. Just don’t sit on your assets,’ Aunt Thelma says. ‘Don’t let dust collect between those glorious legs of yours.’

‘Now you’re just being vulgar.’ Then she calls out: ‘Joseph?’

Joseph waits for her to call again. A prompt response would mean he’s been within earshot and has most likely picked up their gossiping. Then Chanda and Aunt Thelma shout in stereo: ‘Joseph!’

Joseph responds, ‘Yes, ma!’

‘Come over here.’

‘Chanda,’ Aunt Thelma says, ‘don’t be rough on the boy...’

‘I should be getting rough on *you*,’ Chanda says, getting up from the kitchen table. ‘And your Gordon.’

It always amazes him whenever he is in trouble how certain features of the house, the furniture or fittings, suddenly seem different, as if he's seeing them for the first time. The curtains, drawn, complement the effect of the kitchen being an isolated space, cut off from the rest of the house and any place of refuge. The kitchen table is still cluttered with the cups and tea things ma and Aunt Thelma have been using; a saucer holding ash from the two cigarette stubs; the stove, black and shiny, squatting in the corner; the pots on top shiny and now and then one of them burping with something simmering inside.

The chair occupied by Aunt Thelma, who averts her eyes and suddenly busies herself with a magazine, is part of a pair of wood-frame chairs with ornate carvings at the top of their backs. She looks pretty in that hard way, her hair pulled back and coiled into a bun on top of her head. She is dressed in the formal manner of schoolteachers, a white blouse under a grey jersey and a black skirt, attire that complements the girls' prim black gym dresses and white shirts.

It's quite clear she hasn't been home. Where has she been all this time; it's almost 9.00pm? Probably with that Gordon – may they both rot in hell. He wishes he had the presence of mind to scour the cinema foyer for people who might recognise him, but the Mwila twins were in a hurry to get in. They didn't want to miss the serial that played before the main feature. Inside, it was a place with its own rules, dark, ideal for couples intent on sickening everyone with their smooching, which squelches like gumboots treading through a muddy track. He almost smiles at the thought of Aunt Thelma and her young man. He didn't dare laugh with his ma here. Naturally slightly built, ma seems even smaller as if fury has played its role in shrinking her, her face leaner and more feral. If she could turn into an animal, he thinks, she'd have become a lynx or a caracal, something in the cat family. He's aware that she's holding her breath, arms crossed, itself not a good sign. That things are bad is reflected in her smile. Ma smiles when her claws are about to come out. Emmanuel comes trailing behind.

'Manny,' ma says through clenched teeth, 'go and get you and Mulilo ready for bed.' Turning to her sister, she says: 'Thelma? Maybe you want to get home now. It's late. Give my love to Taona and Agrippa.'

‘Okay, sis,’ Thelma says, getting up and collecting her things, ‘see you Sunday at church.’ Shooting Joseph a quick glance, she says softly: ‘It’s going to be all right, *mchimwene wanga*.’

It doesn’t turn out that way.

There’s a certain practice favoured by parents, which is hated by every growing-up boy. As a prelude to corporal punishment, some parents tend to go on and on about the nature of the wrongdoing. By the time they are through you feel like a handcuffed *kabalala* on the way to the Lusaka Central Prison. But however intolerable the lecture might be, it is far better than the humiliation you suffer when ordered to go out to the garden to cut a switch appropriate for the offence. Joseph sits through the reprimand, Chanda telling him that what hurt her is not so much that he went to the cinema without permission, or even that he was watching something unsuitable for his age – Jesus knows she’s seen how hard it is to stop children from seeing inappropriate things, and so on – what galls her, what totally destroys her faith, is the deceit. You bring shame to this house, Joseph, acting like a little street child from Kanyama Compound. She has brought him up to be a God-fearing child and now she has to doubt her own faith because Joseph is a despicable little shit that...she runs out of breath. ‘Just go and get the stick. You know the process.’

And out he is, like a shot, wondering if he’s ever going back inside the house, thinking of running away; there are many runaways in the streets of Lusaka. Can’t he go to the Mwila twins? They are the ones who came up with the idea of the film anyway, but, no, he tells himself, their father is a policeman. I just might wind up in police cells. Fathers will always protect their children and anyone else becomes a handy scapegoat. What about Uncle Agrippa and Aunt Taona – his cousins, Luyando, Mulunga and Nsansa, would welcome him with open arms, but what about the parents? There’s no telling. Big people stick together, and they’d take him back to ma, enraging her and worsening the punishment tenfold.

And so, he proceeds to the back of the house where it’s darker, the only illumination coming from the horizon where the clouds have forgotten to let go of the sun’s last rays. Down a small hill, along an unseen path through a waist-high copse from where he can hear the sound of water, the gurgling in the

distance intensifying the eeriness. That and the crunch and snapping of twigs underfoot. All this to find the best branch out of which he must cut a switch with satisfactory heft, which ma will use to thrash him. If there's ever been a ridiculous mission, this is it. It's dark, frustrating work. He blindly reaches into the darkened bush and gets his fingers pricked by thorns, struck, at the same time, by the strangeness of it all with the plants breathing out into the night. He asks himself if there are snakes around and wonders if his mother would be overcome by grief and thus suspend punishment if he gets bitten by one. With his luck he might even disturb a scorpion, that won't be a joke; he's seen someone being stung and he draws a line at...

'...Joseph?'

He looks back for the source of the voice, wondering if he's imagined it. There is no one along the curvature of the hillock silhouetted against the grey hulk of the back of the house. For the first time he thinks of his father and feels a mixture of depthless yearning and rage. Where the hell are you? Would this be happening if you were here? And did you hear that thing about Paul? I've also seen him, skulking like a jackal, laughing at unfunny jokes just to be seen to be agreeable around ma. I don't know what men and women do in private, but I hear they shiver together, and I don't want anyone shivering with ma. He turns to continue his search for the perfect rod when something, a stone, no doubt, whizzes above his head and lands just a few feet ahead. Looking up, he sees Emmanuel bending down, most likely to pick up another stone.

'What are you doing?' Joseph asks.

'Been calling you all this time,' Emmanuel says. Closer, wearing one of the coats Sobhuza has unusually left behind, Emmanuel looks bulkier and taller than Joseph remembers. When the coppery light catches his face at a certain frozen angle, Joseph is staring not at the familiar face he's used to waking up to every morning but at Sobhuza's face. He shakes his head, trying to get his bearings.

'What is it? I thought you'd gone to bed.'

'Ma wants you back in the house.'

'But I still haven't cut the switch.'

Emmanuel shrugs. 'Maybe she'll use the belt this time,' he said.

She doesn't give him a look as he enters with his younger brother. She's standing on a chair, trying without much success to straighten an unruly dog-eared section of mosquito netting on the window, dabbing silicone adhesive to the frame and pressing it down, only for the corner to spring up again. She curses under her breath but won't give up. That's Chanda when she wants to demonstrate her unhappiness: in lieu of bashing someone, she finds something to fix. It's also her way of showing you how much she doesn't need you. Standing at the doorway, torn between action and inaction, Joseph wants her to see that he's willing to help; at the same time, he wishes he were elsewhere. She turns and gives him a withering glance, jerking her head, signalling that he shut the door. He decides to brave it.

'Should you be working this late, Ma?'

'You're letting the draught in,' she says brusquely. 'Sit down and I'll be with you in a minute.'

Even as she speaks, she's beginning her descent from her makeshift ladder. Her whole manner, her carriage conveys something barely held in check and Joseph, the lover of horror movies, suddenly wishes that his mother would punish him. He feels responsible for the empty stare, his nonexistence in her eyes as if she's already cancelled him and consigned him to yesterday's world. The act of withholding punishment is worse; he's entered the kitchen with tightness in his chest, feeling the warmth from the silent stove whooshing up like a current, enveloping his toes and coursing all the way up to the crown of the head. He wonders, as has happened to him in the past, whether coming in from the cold into the warm interior would make him sick. A cold would be welcome.

'I'm sorry,' he says.

'Yes,' Chanda says, still not seeing him, 'but you must know that the world is full of women who are fated to hear that meaningless phrase dropping from the lips of men who have wreaked havoc. I don't expect you to understand everything, but I want you to know something. In your wrongdoing, you've done me a great favour. You've opened my eyes and given me the resolve to wake up and do what I should have done a long time ago. I realise I'm surrounded by wilful men, some of them, like you, Manny and Mulilo are still boys, like tiger cubs that grow into predators. As for your father, you can see I have an uphill

task given his work. So,' and here she swallows hard, 'I'm going to be on your case. Always.'

'But, ma,' Joseph starts. She puts up a hand; he flinches.

'I'm not going to hit you,' Chanda says. 'I'll leave the hitting to your conscience.'

It's only then that Joseph starts crying.

CHAPTER 2

Instead of cementing his connection to Sobhuza, the letter deepens the distance between father and son. When he reads it before bed, usually in the loneliness of the midnight hour, it brings back a memory when Joseph is twelve or thirteen, in the winter of 1988, where, during the day, a cold June wind blows through the streets of Helen Kaunda, in Lusaka. In their house at night, the windows and doors rattle as if about to snap off the hinges. Ma tiptoes into the boys' bedroom with a bundle of blankets, the weak light from the lounge spilling into the room, briefly spreading over the still forms of Emmanuel and Mulilo. Knowing Emmanuel, though, Joseph wouldn't put it past him to be lying awake under the blankets, quiet like some watchful mouse. For Emmanuel, contact with the parents is something to be avoided; once parents have you in their sights, they suddenly dream up an errand for you. Once they run out of errands, they source your services out to the neighbours. Seeing that Joseph is awake, Chanda whispers, *Go to sleep*. She checks the windows, which have been rattling earlier and, satisfied with her inspection, disappears back into the main bedroom. For a moment, Josepha wonders if Chanda hasn't in truth been part of a dream. Dreams, he tells himself, are an echo of everyday reality.

He must have drifted off to sleep. The next moment he's aware of voices coming from the lounge, his father pressing a point with Chanda protesting and pleading in the same breath. There's a dull sound, *biff!* of a fist striking flesh, and an angry-sounding Sobhuza asking, *Look now, what you've done*, and ma saying, *Sobhuza, for the love of God, stop with this*, and Joseph rushing out of bed, sure that Sobhuza is beating Chanda, his ma. In that breathless instance of stepping on the cold floor and dashing to the door, he hears a whimper. It's a man's voice. A man in peril cries out. That it's not his mother's voice leads him to conclude, improbably, that it's actually Sobhuza who's been struck. The idea fills him with a mix of dread and feverish joy because, for once, he's curious to see his father humbled, taken down from the lofty heights he occupies and brought to the ground. Still holding the mutinous thought in his head, he peers through the crack in the door and sees his father. Although Sobhuza's face is turned away, there's a tension in his shoulders as if he's holding himself together, afraid of

falling apart or lashing out uncontrollably. Now, as if sensing Joseph's gaze, he turns and seems to probe the darkness of the bedroom. Joseph has never seen his father's eyes filled with so much malice. The eyes turn away from him, the unseen son behind the door, to fall on the bloodied face of a young stranger.

Seated on the chair with his arms pinioned behind him, the young man has an unkempt appearance of a *kabalala*, the rough treatment he has received – lips split, and eyes reduced to slits and set deep under a dark welt above the eyebrow – making him look wild and dangerous. There's a long-bladed knife on the table. Snarling as if in pain or incensed by the sight of the weapon, Sobhuza draws back his fist and brings it an inch from the man's faces. The latter flinches, crying out. There's a sound of something tearing and the lounge is suddenly filled with the rank stench of raw sewage. Chanda has had enough.

'Leave it, now-o, *abambo a* Joseph,' she says. 'This is a hungry young man-o...'

'A hungry young man caught red-handed busy burgling our house,' Sobhuza says. 'Look at his knife. He would have butchered us all.'

'Of course, but you've caught him now. You can take him to the police.'

'The police?' Sobhuza laughs. 'The police work with these people...'

'*These people?*' Chanda's tone has turned icily cold. 'Who are these people?'

'You know what I mean...'

'I know what you mean, all right. You mean us Zambians...'

'You're twisting my words...'

'I am part of these people, *abambo a* Joseph. Your children are half-Zambian. Half of the blood in their veins belongs to Zambia.'

'The government here should be looking after them instead of them committing crime,' Sobhuza says. It's clear his heart is no longer in continuing with this matter.

Chanda takes a deep breath. 'I'm surprised at you. Zambia is in this state because of Kaunda's support for you, your people, your ANC. It's being punished economically left right and centre. I really hope that when you get your freedom, you'll be able to feed your people. You won't have any crime. I have my doubts.'

‘When we get our freedom,’ Sobhuza says stubbornly, ‘*we’ll* make sure there are no *kabalalas*.’

‘I feel sorry you,’ Chanda says. ‘I feel sorry for your Tambo and Mandela, who are fated to realise that nowhere do people wake up in the morning with a wish for their country to be overrun by *kabalalas*. You, too, will have your share of them. In your case – after all these years of hunger – you might just have a *kabalala* running the country.’

Sobhuza laughs; it’s an eerie, grating sound. He shakes his head at such a ridiculous notion.

‘You may laugh,’ Chanda says. ‘But time will tell.’

The letter.

It guides Joseph in his attempts to assemble all the scattered pieces that constitute Sobhuza’s life. Each line on the lined notepaper puts into perspective an episode, a piece of a jigsaw puzzle of a life that seems intricately linked to the life of the emerging country. The words, scribbled in different places and in various states of mind, are sometimes mocking in elusiveness. Sometimes they reveal while obscuring, much like Sobhuza himself, who’d show a part of himself the better to hide the fulness of himself. Joseph perceives him as a series of disjointed impressions, no different from the pictures that flicker on the screen in total confusion before the projector whirrs to life. Sobhuza’s absence, first, physically from Zambia and, second – and later – from memory, troubles him, leaving him with pressing questions. One of them is: is it possible for people to manipulate things in such a way that they effectively remove themselves from your mind, the way a thief could steal a file that contains all your information, leaving an empty folder? As Joseph has heard that it is possible for a person to suffer partial or total loss of memory from a head injury, he wonders what really happened to him during his crossing of the Zambezi – the long travel – from Zambia to Botswana and from there to South Africa. The truck and the goats and the roadblocks, the blood. There are certain gaps in his recollection of the time, fragments that don’t make sense, which he fills by imagining or even inventing scenarios. What he can’t manufacture, however, is the reality of his feelings on surfacing from those moments when everything had been suspended. The

woollen darkness that embraced him. Where his eyes went dry and gritty, a metallic taste of blood in his mouth. Could the source of forgetfulness have been the flying insects falling from a grey-dappled sky, which tormented them throughout his journey? All that comes to him is a memory of a bad time when he wasn't – and couldn't have – been himself; it is like remembering a time when he was unable to get relief from pain.

But now, in Yeoville, another memory flashes across his mind, where Sobhuza goes away and comes back only to disappear again.

When he returns, it's on October 14, 1989, a Wednesday recording one of the highest temperatures in Lusaka, where the thermometer had risen to the upper thirties.

But Joseph is less concerned about the heat than about whether his parents – his ma to be sure – will remember that he turns fourteen tomorrow. Coming from school, earlier, he's already had some words with Emmanuel, the know-all who tells him that no one – let alone parents – ever remembers anyone's fourteenth birthday. 'Fourteen,' Emmanuel says, curling his lower lip in distaste, an expression which, taken together with his large glasses, makes him seem years older. 'People celebrate when you turn sixteen. Or twenty-one.'

'Twenty-one?' It sounds like a lifetime away.

'Yes. If you live that long.'

Joseph wants to tell his kid brother that he's wrong. The Mwila twins had a big party at the Pamodzi when they turned fourteen in July. Henry and Arthur told him that they'd even had a taste of champagne at the party. Champagne, *mnzanga*, champagne, with bubbles that tickle the nostrils! Arthur, who is fast that way, even claimed to have kissed a girl.

'Birthday parties for children,' Emmanuel says, 'are just a nice excuse for adults to drink.'

Joseph wants to say something cutting and smart that will shut Emmanuel up. Something moving catches his eye and forces his gaze upwards. A hornet buzzes above, circling around like a helicopter before settling up in the rafters. *I wonder if it has a nest there.* His skin crawling, he can imagine a small colony of

hornets already revving themselves up to wreak havoc. The zinc roof crackles as if ready to crack into small pieces. Far, far away is the sound of other insects twittering, accompanying a lone frog whose croaking might have been a sign of thirst or boredom. Banji and Mulilo are at play somewhere out in the back garden, voices raised, Banji most probably bossing her brother around. This will end in tears as usual, Joseph thinks. He wonders if he'd have had the same relationship with an older brother as he has with Emmanuel.

Driven by great curiosity, Joseph finds himself standing at the doorway of his parents' bedroom, feeling guilty, knowing that ma would give him an earful if she caught him loitering about. Sunlight pours in through the double filter of lace curtains and the mosquito screen of the bedroom window. The room has been cleaned and aired by the Wednesday-only domestic helper, Auntie Sphiwe. Ma has voiced her misgivings about her, fearing that her Zezuru influence might rub off on the children. But, in the same vein, Auntie Sphiwe is the only one who knows how to get Mulilo, who tends to pick at his food, to eat up. And Banji simply adores her; it's only Emmanuel who tends to avoid her, but then Emmanuel avoids everybody.

Although it's a bedroom, the most prominent piece of furniture is a large armchair occupying a corner. The chair looks forlorn as if it's missing Sobhuza, the only one who'd sit on it and read. He'd look up whenever anyone entered, rattling the newspaper as if telling you that he wanted to go back to an interesting item he was reading.

Joseph sinks into the folds of the chair, resting his arms on the smooth wooden armrest, imagining what his father sees from this vantage point. On the side table is a family bible in which his unknown grandparents recorded important moments in their time. Deaths, births and marriages, even coded scrawls that could only have been indications of awkward histories, can be read in the once-blank pages. It suddenly strikes him as strange that he knows almost everything there is to know about ma's people; his father's side is one blank page. He'll have to ask Sobhuza once he comes back. If he comes back, that is.

In this somewhat uncertain frame of mind, he leafs through the bible, the flapping pages wafting a smell of age and lavender, when his eyes rest on a

passage that has been underlined with a red ballpoint pen. It's Deuteronomy 31:8:

And the LORD, he it is that doth go before thee; he will be with thee, he will not fail thee, neither forsake thee: fear not, neither be dismayed.

Although he doesn't know what is happening, he senses that there has been a subtle shift of power since the evening of the bleeding *kabalala*, where his father has been put on the defensive. This, he understands, puts more responsibilities on ma's shoulders.

It starts to get dark and he has chores to do before ma comes back and asks him all sorts of questions. Did you water the plants? Are the uniforms of the kids all sorted out for tomorrow? Today, suddenly feeling the onset of a bad mood, he wants to demand that everyone knows it's his birthday tomorrow. Have you got a cake for me?

Back in the kitchen, he finds Emmanuel, who's fixed himself a giant sandwich and is sipping from a mug of black tea. He wonders at his thin brother's huge appetite. Maybe he's got secret storage sections in his stomach like a cow.

He knows he should be calling Mulilo and Banji back into the house. But they both sound happy and he's loath to spoil their fun. Ma wouldn't have such scruples. When a thought enters her head, she immediately acts upon it. With a shock, he realises that he's actually the eldest in the house.

'When you finish your feast,' he tells Emmanuel, 'don't forget to wash your mug and side plate. We don't have servants to serve you here.'

Emmanuel gives him a long look before getting back to his munching.

'One day...' Joseph says.

'What?'

'You'll see.'

They are both glaring at each other when they are forced to really look at each other as they hear the sound of a car pulling up to a stop outside. This is followed by the thuds of doors banging shut. Then two people arguing, ma's fury erupting like a geyser, Sobhuza – for that must be Sobhuza – trying to calm her, 'Don't say that, Chanda, the children...' 'The children, Sobhuza? The children? Since when are *you* concerned about the welfare of the children? Were you

thinking about them, us, when you shackled up with that, that *hule* in Chelston?' 'She's not a *hule*. Keep your voice down.'

Joseph stops listening, feeling as if he has taken a headlong dive into the water, all earthly sounds momentarily eliminated and replaced by a confused warbling of life beneath the surface. Standing there rooted to the spot in the kitchen, he suddenly feels that Emmanuel, the little brother he doesn't really like, is his only anchor. Joseph wonders if Emmanuel has heard everything, hoping that he hasn't and wishing, if he had, that the words won't mean anything and that he would, in time, somehow *unhear* them.

In that moment in the kitchen, Joseph is brought back to a time when he and a couple of boys were walking around the Kanyama Compound. They saw a crowd that had gathered in front of a house, one of the rundown shacks with a front yard filled with raw sewage. The stink didn't seem to bother the people who were shouting as if they were spectators egging on their side to a win. A police van careened up the corrugated road and came to a stop, scattering the crowd of onlookers. Four people jumped out, two policemen walking ahead of a man and a woman in white who carried a collapsible hospital stretcher.

The four went into the house and, after a short while, returned with a stretcher on which lay, face-to-face, two figures under a shawl that didn't quite manage to cover the tops of their heads and also left their feet exposed. As the quartet gingerly stepped over puddles of stagnant effluent, the police making menacing gestures to clear a path to the van, the crowd exploded in jeers and chants. Some of the spectators, uncomfortable with the presence of young people on the scene, tried to shoo Joseph and his friends out of the immediate area. Two or three went as far as to try to block the children's view. But Joseph had already seen enough. As he threaded his way through the throng, he saw two or three women bystanders clicking their tongues and shaking their heads. A group of men with red eyes was yelling, '*Iwe hule!*' and spitting in disgust. It puzzled Joseph – who was hearing this word spat out with such venom for the first time – that the only one under attack was the woman. He gathered from his more well-informed friends – Arthur Mwila among them – that the couple being conveyed to the back of the police van, a married man and someone's father and a young single woman, had failed to become uncoupled while having sex. Joseph had seen

this happen with dogs, which would give anguished yelps as the community thrashed them and pelted them with stones. The couple, Arthur said, would be separated in hospital, leaving it to everyone's imagination what that operation would entail. Joseph had an idea it would be painful. The word '*hule*', however, remained with him.

He hears it now, the word, and, looking into his brother's eyes, he sees it has registered with him too. Before he can say anything, their parents make their entry, Chanda with Sobhuza in tow. There is at first an unreadable look on ma's face, which, in a minute, accommodates a smile. For his part, Sobhuza looks like Sobhuza, a father pleased to return to his loved ones after so many months away. Mulilo and Banji, flushed from their frolics outside, rush into the lounge and fling themselves at Chanda and Sobhuza, who have both lowered themselves down on their haunches. After some hesitation, Emmanuel joins the happy tangle of hands, arms and knees. Joseph manages a thin smile.

Thanks to a power failure – and despite ma's protests that Auntie Sphiwe has left supper warming on the stove: *Why are we so wasteful, people?* – Sobhuza insists that they go out. He feels like a big steak and knows of a good place in the city. Her face lit by a series of lamps, candles and a torch hastily fished out of a cardboard box that houses odds and ends, ma nods as if half-asleep, taking part and yet seeming far from everything happening around her. When she catches Joseph looking at her, she smiles and touches his cheek. Her hands smell of soap.

Now, at the wheel of a cream, mud-splattered Range Rover, a cheerful Sobhuza gives Joseph a sidelong glance and makes a funny face. For Joseph, the earlier exchange between his parents lingers, not so much the words themselves but the memory of the conjoined couple and the atmosphere at the Kanyama Compound. He wants to say something. 'This is a nice car,' he says.

'Do you think we should get your cousins to come along?' Sobhuza asks. The question hangs in the air. Chanda looks away. She pushes Joseph to the front seat next to his father. There's a bit of a scuffle in the back.

'The window seat is mine,' Emmanuel tells Mulilo.

'And what do you hope to see in the dark?' Mulilo asks.

Emmanuel growls. 'G'wan. Move.'

Whap! Joseph flinches at the sharp sound of a palm striking flesh. 'Don't you dare speak like that to your brother, you hear me, 'Manuel?'

Perched on her mother's lap, Banji starts to whimper. 'It's okay, *mwana wanga*,' Chanda says. 'We'll be eating soon.'

As the car pulls out, Joseph wonders if it's at all possible to make peace, if only to get everyone focused on his birthday. But how do you make peace when you don't know what sparked off the quarrel in the first place? Who was the *hule*? Could he just come out and ask? But then, he knows from experience that a child who pokes his nose in big people's affairs ends up being very sorry.

'*Amayi a Joseph?*' Sobhuza says, 'do you think we should fetch...'

'You're in the driving seat, *abambo a Joseph*,' Chanda says. '*You* decide. It's a weeknight and I have an early start tomorrow. The kids have school.'

'It's all okay, then,' Sobhuza says.

Joseph knows it's not okay. On the rare occasion that his parents get into a fight, they address each other politely as Joseph's father or Joseph's mother, depending on the case. Is the politeness, which happens when people are strangers meeting for the first time, aimed at taking them back to the time when they didn't know each other? It reminds him of the boring television series of lawyers and prosecutors who address each other as 'My learned friend', even though you can see they hate each other's guts. One day, if he remembers, he will ask – maybe a teacher at school, maybe Aunt Thelma – why people use words that don't quite match with how they really feel. Someone falls off a bicycle on Freedom Way and the whole world can see that it must have hurt, but when you ask if it was painful, nine out of ten times, he will say, 'No, it's all right.'

That it's a weeknight does not seem to have any effect on the people on the street or the ones standing in groups or singly behind the hedges in front of their houses, most of them drinking and chatting, the glasses glinting in the flickering light of lanterns, paraffin lamps or candles. It might as well be a weekend for all they care, life carrying on, music blasting from some unseen speakers. As the car's headlights stab into the gloom, Joseph reads the names of the streets, Kudu Road followed by Alick Nkhata Road. At school they learnt about Alick Nkhata's history as a soldier in Burma before making a name for himself as a musician. He

was killed on his farm in 1978 by South Rhodesian soldiers chasing Zimbabwean freedom fighters. Perhaps Sobhuza has met some of the Zimbabwean fighters at the UNHCR, where he works and where freedom fighters and refugees – are they one and the same thing? – get their monthly fourteen kwacha. He'll ask him one day and also request to see the UNHCR offices on Leopards Hill Road, which sound very interesting. He'll also ask about the names of the streets, Chila Road: who was Chila? Was there a freedom fighter called Chila? There are names, like Chila, which don't sound as if they would fit a freedom fighter. Unlike, of course, the names he's now reading, which line the route to town: Chiparamba, Katondo, Lumumba – he knows something about Lumumba and of course Haile Selassie. There are some strange choices, like Los Angeles Boulevard. Hollywood is in Los Angeles, but what has Los Angeles got to do with Zambia, except to show its films in its cinemas? His wondering comes to a stop when they are suddenly in a well-lit section along Cairo Road. Sobhuza chuckles.

'Look at that,' he says, pointing at the general brightness of the area, 'It's like ZESCO has taken away all the light from the rest of Lusaka just to brighten up the city...'

Even though the shopping centre beckons – the restless people milling about, a few touts shouting destinations, hopefully trying to catch the attention of early evening shoppers and workers – Joseph is more interested in studying his father. He sees how tall he is even seated, the strangeness of his face – a new face – that has cultivated a full beard during the absent months. The arms rippling with muscles, the hands on the steering wheel bespeaking strength, fingers curled, clean-cut nails. Will he – Joseph – inherit his father's looks and sense of style? These thoughts accompany him as the car slows down to turn into a gravelled track leading to a parking lot full of sleek sedans and four-wheel drives, most of them sporting CD plates, which he knows belong to embassies. A different breed of touts reigns supreme here. These are the car guards: six or seven young men led by a lanky fellow in a yellow tracksuit and tattered sneakers emerge from the shadows and direct the Range Rover to a parking. Even before Chanda, Emmanuel, Mulilo and Banji are completely out of the car, the windows are already getting streaked with water as the car guards set about washing the car under Lanky Boy's watchful eye.

‘Make sure you keep watch all the time,’ Sobhuza says, handing him a few kwacha notes, ‘and they mustn’t scratch it.’

‘Yes, *bwana*,’ Lanky Boy says, taking the money. ‘Like always, *bwana*.’

Joseph watches the exchange, remembering his mother warning him that if he didn’t watch his ways, he was fated to end up washing cars at the taxi rank in Kanyama. He looks at Lanky Boy who’s handing one of the guards a cigarette. The other boys splash the car with water from a bucket while continuing an animated conversation. One leaves his post to accost a new arrival, his rags flapping in the headlights. Joseph wonders if the boys ever go home to celebrate their birthdays. Possibly feeling Joseph’s eyes on his back, Lanky Boy stops talking to one of the boys and turns. He whispers something to them, and they break into gales of laughter. Joseph has no doubt that he is the cause of their merriment.

‘Joseph?’ Chanda calls. ‘Come.’

‘You must stop this daydreaming of yours, Joseph,’ Sobhuza says, leading them up the stairs to the level of the entrance. Pointing at the restaurant door, he adds, ‘*Tafika*. We have arrived.’

CHAPTER 3

Walking behind his family, Sobhuza a step or two ahead of everyone, Joseph doesn't have to see his father's face to know he is smiling. On occasion, Joseph has seen that smile bring out the best in strangers. It comes as no surprise to him that the waiter who guides the family to the table is grinning as if his favourite customer has finally arrived. This magic doesn't seem to extend to ma.

Throughout the journey from the car – past the group of well-dressed guests standing outside, smoking, possibly waiting for others, and through the two doors that cut out the noise of the outside world and its heat – Chanda has not said a word, except to hiss at Mulilo when he wanted to skip ahead.

The interior is dimly lit, lamps positioned at various points of the dining room. It seems to Joseph it wouldn't have mattered if the power failure had also hit this restaurant. More lamps, unlit, stand as if in readiness for exactly such an eventuality. The longer he looks, probing the gloom, the more he can make out the faces that have earlier been in darkness. The men are in dark suits, their white shirts even whiter in the shadows. The women look like models in ma's magazines, in dresses that seem to have been made of delicate fabric. Sobhuza pauses briefly to chat with someone at a table, causing the waiter to interrupt his own progress, menus folded in his arms, before finally showing the united Mabaso family to a table.

A tune Joseph recognises, *Kusiyana Siyana Kwa Maofesi*, by the popular band Amayenge, is playing. Seated to the left of ma, he taps a beat on the table with a spoon while locking eyes with Emmanuel with whom he's always debating the guitar wizardry of Zambian artists. Emmanuel is partial to gospel. And he'll always make anything he likes sound superior. With gospel artists, he would say, you get an idea what they are singing about. But now, Joseph feels a twinge of satisfaction when his father says, 'I like this tune.'

'Reminds you of someplace special, perhaps?' Chanda asks.

Sitting across the table from ma, Sobhuza looks up from the menu as if surprised she is speaking to him at all. 'All music,' he says, 'is about time and place and people – yes.'

‘Except music that’s just instruments,’ Emmanuel pipes in, miming the action of someone playing a guitar. ‘It’s got no time or place. Or even people.’

Joseph is about to weigh in, feeling this challenge shouldn’t go unanswered, when ma, seated next to him, clears her throat. ‘It’s after 8pm, people,’ she says. ‘We should order.’

Banji, who’s been quietly marvelling at her surroundings and touching everything within her reach, says: ‘I like it here.’

‘We should bring your schoolwork here,’ Mulilo says. ‘Then you can ask the waiters to help with homework instead of bothering me.’

‘And *you’d* stop bothering *me*,’ Emmanuel says, titling his head at his younger brother.

‘If gogo was here,’ Banji tells Mulilo, ‘you’d not be speaking to me like this. She’d pinch you pink and blue.’

‘I haven’t seen Gogo Mulubwa in a while,’ Sobhuza says. ‘Maybe we should have picked her up.’

‘Do you think she’d have wanted to be here, Joseph?’ Chanda asks, responding to her husband through her son. ‘I think she regards eating out as a waste of money.’

‘It’s not a waste of money,’ Sobhuza says, sounding unhappy. ‘I’m trying to do something to bring us all together. As a family.’

Chanda continues her discussion with Joseph. ‘Do you think we’re together, Joseph?’

Before Joseph can say anything, Sobhuza snorts loudly and shakes his head. ‘I think we should really order now. This time, we’ll be led by the birthday boy.’

The waiter is apologetic as if he doesn’t want to disturb the family atmosphere around the table. He recommends some of the dishes, venturing to say that there’s no place in the whole of Lusaka where they prepare a steak like in this restaurant. The fish and vegetables, ah, they are exquisite, this accompanied by a loud kiss of his thumb and forefinger and a flick of the wrist. Banji and Mulilo opt for meat and chips, which they will proceed to bury under a splodge of tomato sauce. Emmanuel, who can eat chicken the whole year through, orders a quarter chicken, *nshima* and pepper sauce. Joseph asks for a

hamburger, the double-decker one with chips with the gherkins and mustard removed. At every order, the waiter nods his head. 'Good choice.'

During the meal in which Sobhuza surprisingly decides on fish instead of the juicy steak whose praise songs he was singing earlier, there is silence. This gives Joseph a moment to think about what it means to have parents, a mother and a father; there are kids at school who come from families with one parent. And, where there's only one parent, you can bet all your shooter marbles it's a father who's missing – usually dead or whereabouts unknown. There are, of course, those refugee children who don't even have uncles and aunts, let alone mother and father, who end up calling every adult they meet 'uncle' or 'aunt'. Even ma is called Auntie Chanda. He's never heard anyone call Sobhuza by any other name for the simple reason that he hasn't stuck around long enough to be called anything.

Although the afternoon's coolness between Sobhuza and ma seems to have thawed somewhat, there's still no direct communication between them. For instance, ma pointedly ignores Sobhuza when trying to get a condiment right under her husband's nose.

'Emmanuel, pass me the pepper.'

Noticing this, Joseph calculates that, with his parents at war, he's most likely going to get two birthday presents. It's only when parents put their heads together to get you something that you end up with one present.

Joseph is beginning to enjoy the picture he's built in his head when he notices two people coming down the passage between tables, gliding along in that heel-to-toe gait he's come to associate with South Africans. That and the slouching walk with one shoulder angled higher than the other; tonight, however, the pair is walking upright. When they stop at the table, standing slightly behind and to the left of Sobhuza, Joseph has a suspicion that they want to harm his father. Looking up from her plate, Chanda fixes them with a hard stare. One of the pair, tall, angular, in a khaki safari suit, takes off his bush hat and crumples it in his hands.

'So sorry, mama,' he says. 'Sorry to disturb your supper.'

Without turning, Sobhuza asks: 'What is it, Pule? Violet? *Nenzani la*? What are you doing here?'

Violet, swaddled in an oversized tracksuit, emerges from behind her companion into the light. The beret that barely covers her head sports a red star front and centre, which glints like an extra eye. 'We saw the car, Comrade Sobs,' she says. 'And we knew we'd find you here.'

Comrade Sobs? Joseph almost chokes on his food. He tries to catch Emmanuel's eye, but he is dreamily chewing on a drumstick.

'We have a crisis situation,' Pule says, still addressing himself to Chanda.

'Couldn't it wait?' Sobhuza still hasn't turned to look at the two.

'No,' Violet says. 'Unfortunately, we can't talk about this...' She makes a vague gesture with a hand, embracing the diners. 'Can we go someplace outside?'

'No,' Chanda says. 'I've had it with this hush-hush stuff. You'll tell us what's going on here, in the full hearing of everyone.'

'But Chanda...' Sobhuza starts.

'No, I said.' She looks up. 'Pule? Violet...are those your names, my dears?' Without waiting for them to respond, she gets the children to shift and make room for the two visitors. 'Make yourselves comfortable while we get more plates. You can feed a whole army with what's already here.'

'...Chanda...'

'... and it's bad manners,' ma continues, 'for us to continue eating while you two merely stand there. It's not right. Come. Sit. No crisis can be solved on an empty stomach.'

The stomachs of Pule and Violet must have been empty indeed. Joseph watches, fascinated, as they tear into the food. The roast baby chicken disappears into a pile of bones. The waiter brings a small tray of rump steaks and vegetables, sweet potatoes and pumpkin. Pule's eyes light up and his Adam's apple bobs up and down. Violet, who has one hand bandaged, has difficulty using a steak knife until ma intervenes, slicing through the flesh with skill, transferring the meat and vegetables into Violet's plate.

'Now,' ma asks, 'what's the crisis?'

'What's a crisis?' Emmanuel asks.

‘It’s when you are really pressed,’ Joseph says, ‘and there’s not a toilet in sight.’

Sobhuza, who’s been quiet all along, says: ‘Joseph? Not at the table.’ He turns to Pule. ‘*Wat gaan aan?*’

As Pule is about to start saying what’s happening, ma puts up her hand, stopping him. To Sobhuza – addressing him as if for the first time – she says: ‘Wait. *Abambo a Joseph?*’

‘Yes, *amayi a Joseph?*’ Sobhuza asks. A look passes between the parents and then Sobhuza slaps his brow. ‘Of course,’ he says. ‘How could I forget?’

He reaches into his bag and produces a small packet wrapped in brown paper. Sliding it across the table to Joseph, he says: ‘Happy birthday, Jojo.’

‘What is it?’ Emmanuel asks, his eyes glinting behind the glasses. ‘Open it.’

‘Yes,’ Mulilo and Banji shout, almost in unison, ‘open it!’

It’s a Seiko watch, shiny and expensive looking. Joseph puts it up against the lamplight, studying the date window. He’s always wanted a watch, and this is just perfect. Every gift has to give the owner bragging rights – and this will make the Mwila twins green with envy. ‘Thank you,’ he says to his parents, to the table at large, feeling safe and loved.

Pule picks up the box and releases a long, low whistle. ‘Stainless Steel Blue Face Men’s Quartz Watch,’ he reads. ‘Sonny? This is the real McCoy. Not the *mshanga* stuff you find at the market.’

Violet starts laughing. It’s so sudden, unexpected, and it changes her face, making Joseph see how young she is. When she has the outburst under control, she says: ‘Excuse me. It’s just that I know Comrade Pule would be selling this first thing in the morning.’

‘First thing in the morning?’ Pule says in mock horror. ‘My pockets would be bulging with some real *ndalama* before midnight.’

Later, outside, the temperature has dropped somewhat. The cars have thinned out from the parking lot. Lanky Boy’s car guards have been huddling in the shelter of a carport. To a man, they stand up and approach Sobhuza’s party, Lanky Boy pointing to the now-gleaming Range Rover. Sobhuza gives Lanky Boy

the plastic bag of leftovers from the dinner and a few more kwacha notes. To Chanda, he says: 'I have to take care of this business with Pule and Violet.'

'Don't worry,' Chanda says. 'We will take a taxi home.'

'When will you be home, Dad?' Emmanuel asks.

Sobhuza gives him a long look. 'Soon.'

Chanda says: 'We'll see.'

There is a slight drizzle that cools the already chilly air, streaking the good windows of the meter taxi and blowing in the plastic sheeting covering the broken window on Joseph's side. The journey, then, entails adjusting the corner of the makeshift cover while ensuring that Banji, who has fallen asleep, is not disturbed. The motion of the car, at once soothing and grating, stops Mulilo, who is yawning repeatedly, from joining his sister in sleeping. Ma, sharing the seat with Emmanuel and the driver up in front, strives to answer Emmanuel's many questions.

'What was the crisis, ma?' he asks. 'You told them to tell us about the crisis and then you let them go.'

'Yes,' Joseph joins in. 'They never really told us what the crisis was.'

Chanda answers, 'If it was a real crisis, they wouldn't have sat down to dinner with us.'

'So, it was a small crisis?' Emmanuel persists.

'Maybe no crisis after all,' Joseph says. Emmanuel can't have the last word.

'Your father will tell us what it's all about,' Chanda says.

It's his father, he thinks as he prepares for bed, who's always helped him understand things, who's told him what it's all about. A memory from his earlier childhood: he's about five or six, riding on his father's shoulders, looking at the trees, flowers, motorcars, people passing by, hearing his father telling him the names of things in both Chinyanja and English, now and then lapsing into isiZulu, which, he says, is his mother tongue. Looking at the world from that perch, Joseph wonders what his mother tongue is. Sometimes – when he remembered the lesson – he watched Chanda's mouth to see the tongue between the lips or disappearing behind the teeth when she laughed in the days she used to laugh a

lot, puzzling over how that pinkish organ, which he knew was for tasting food, had any connection with his own everyday use of words.

The next day after the birthday dinner, a Thursday morning, promises to follow the everyday drill. Although a bit stiff from the goings-on of last night, he finds waking up not so difficult, nor the task of readying his siblings, Emmanuel, Mulilo and Banji, for school. Emmanuel, who doesn't need anyone's assistance, will go with him while Mulilo and Banji foot it less than a mile down the road to their junior primary school. There's no sign of the Range Rover in the yard. He is not surprised his father is not around.

The real surprise though is that ma is not at home either. It's not even as if the bed has been made. It was never slept in. The bedspread, pillows and scatter cushions covered with doilies are all undisturbed. Yesterday's dress is laid across the bottom of the bed on its hanger – unusual, because ma keeps her clothes in the wardrobe. Also, this is perhaps the first time she's disappeared without first giving him, her eldest son, a warning.

Emmanuel stands at the doorway. He's uncomfortable about being late for school. 'We've got to go,' he says.

'I know,' Joseph answers. 'Ma is not here.'

'Of course, she's not here. She had to go early.'

'Did you see her going? Or hear her?'

'No, but what's this? What do you want ma for? Hoping for another present?'

Mulilo and Banji join Emmanuel at the door. 'Where's ma?' Mulilo asks.

Joseph looks at his kid brother, notices a dark patch in the front of his grey flannels. 'This place is getting crowded,' Joseph says. 'Emmanuel? See to Banji, get her ready...Mulilo, come here.'

Emmanuel bristles. 'You don't tell me...'

'Now!' Joseph uses the same tone ma uses when under pressure. 'Get moving, *pangani nsanga*, Emmanuel.'

Mulilo, he sees, had a problem trying to unbutton his trousers in the toilet and ended up messing on himself. 'You must tell ma if you've got a weak bladder, Mulilo,' Joseph says. 'She'll get you something.'

‘I don’t have a weak bladder. I have a crisis. With these pants.’

‘You’re nine years old now, Mulilo.’

‘I need new pants. With a zip.’

Later, Joseph still can’t believe that everyone actually made it to school with minutes to spare without ma. Mulilo needs new pants, with a zip. Emmanuel is a pain in the neck. Banji? It’s hard to know what she’s thinking. But she is everyone’s darling. Just then, the school bell rings, stirring him out of his musings into the realisation that he has forgotten his new watch at home. Even before school starts, as he joins the rest of his class in the assembly, he’s already hoping against hope that no *tsotsi* will break into the house and steal his watch. There’ve been many burglaries in Helen Kaunda lately. He shudders as he remembers the rough treatment Sobhuza gave to the *kabalala* who tried to break in. He wonders what finally happened to the young man. Perhaps, he hopes, Chanda is back at the house already. Any *tsotsi* that comes will curse the day he was born.

CHAPTER 4

He forgets everything about last night. Even the watch or the possibility of it being stolen by a *tsotsi* takes its place at the back of the queue of things to be considered for Joseph to get through the day. Firstly, the morning assembly is torture; Joseph's class consists of a few smaller – and therefore more likely to be bullied – fourteen-year-olds who include him and the Mwila twins. The majority of the boys – fifteen-years old who act like grownups – tend to ill-treat these smart alecks, accusing them of showing them up in front of the class. They force the younger ones to stand at the first line in front, literally within spitting distance of the principal's podium. During assembly, Mr Muzonda reads a lesson from the Bible and then launches into a long lecture, his fleshy moist lips spraying a mist of spittle as he talks. Joseph and his smart classmates have to stand with heads bowed like chickens waiting out a cloudburst.

On this particular Thursday, however, the principal is the least of Joseph's worries. Bernard Gumbo, the only grade 8 student known by his initials, BG, is back. Rumour has it he's been to the mountain, to be circumcised, which means that he'll be regaling everyone with stories of his adventures. An all-rounder in sports and a striker sure to score a goal during inter-school tournaments, Bernard is popular with both girls and boys. Joseph, however, has little time for him. Bernard is not very bright when it comes to school subjects; his only chance to shine is in religious instruction – no surprises there because his father is a priest.

It's around 10.30am and Mr Kazembe, the social studies teacher, is in a bad mood. Glowering, thin as a rake and looking even skinnier in a black suit and tie against a white shirt, he's called Mr Lollipop on account of his shaven dome-like head. The black suit alone strikes fear in the children, confirming the widely held belief that schoolteachers choose to dress in certain ways to signal whether they're going to be agreeable or nasty to their charges. The more sombre the dress, the gloomier the day becomes.

'Okay, class,' Mr Kazembe says, 'someone tell me where's the Kamchatka Peninsula?'

A low rumble of panic spreads through the class. Turning around to look at his classmates, Joseph sees confusion written in their eyes. Everyone knows Kabwata, Kamwala...but *Kamchatka*?

Mr Kazembe insists, snapping his fingers. 'Come on, come on, people, don't keep me waiting...'

Joseph likes to give Mr Kazembe a wide berth. His intolerance for some of his students' inability to retain his words is legendary. On countless occasions he has railed against forgetfulness, which he takes to be a sign of disrespect. And when disrespected by a whole class, he doesn't just brood about it; he administers what he calls collective punishment. 'So, you'll always know I'm a fair person,' he'd say, 'I'll jog the collective memory of the class by meting out collective punishment. That way you'll be sure to remind one another that you need to respect the lessons we give you.'

A certain logic operated within the class, however. If one student raised a hand and took a stab at answering the teacher's question – and got it wrong – well, that one unfortunate soul became the sacrificial lamb and saved the class from punishment.

While wondering if someone will come up with an answer, Joseph feels something sharp pricking him on his elbow and instinctively raises his arm. It takes him a moment to realise that Bernard, seated next to him, has jabbed him with the sharp end of a divider, which he now innocently replaces in the tin housing of his set of maths instruments. Should he punch this fool and risk a trip to the principal's office? Still smarting, in that region between white-hot rage and pain, Joseph is further ruffled by Mr Kazembe's question.

'Ah, at least someone has been studying,' Mr Kazembe says. 'Yes, Joseph...where is the Kamchatka Peninsula?' There is a strange expression on the teacher's face, an anticipation of winning this round whatever answer is given.

It's too late to do anything. Joseph closes his eyes, trying to visualise a world map, remembering what the different colours represent – green vegetation, blue water, brown land – hoping this would light a fuse somewhere in his memory to guide him to that part of the globe where the stupid Kamchatka Peninsula is located. But, on opening his eyes, all he can see in front of him is the wiry terror in black, which now bends to retrieve a cane from under the desk,

tests its suppleness and causes it to whistle as it slices the air. In such situations, the sacrificial lamb doesn't wait for an invitation but simply has to step forward and stretch out one hand for the five or six lashes on the palm. Gritting his teeth, Joseph swallows his screams and blinks back the tears in his eyes. It's unlike the situation at home with ma, where a show of strength invites prolonged suffering.

'Thank you, sir,' he says at the end of it all. The class, which has been holding its breath throughout the punishment, can finally exhale.

Taking the long way home to walk off the anger he knows will dog him until he pays BG back, Joseph passes fields of uncultivated land, clusters of thorn bush, here, the ground itself dotted with mounds of soil dug up by moles, there, a termite nest as intricate as if designed by human hands. He is of a mind to kick the nests and level them to the ground, but even in anger he can hear Gogo Mulubwa telling him to try to live in peace with his surroundings. Wasps, she once cautioned, feed on termites and will always hover around places where their prey nests.

He can't ask the teacher if he could be moved to another desk away from BG. That would raise eyebrows. What silly boy doesn't want to bask in BG's reflected glory? Challenge him to a fight? Out of the question; BG is stronger, fitter and would pummel him to dust.

Walking now on unpaved road, he sees a truck laden with mupapa logs trundling past, leaving behind a spiral of smoke and dust. Taxis taking shortcuts and avoiding police roadblocks toot their horns at him, one conductor hanging with almost half of his body out the window, holding onto the sliding door. His mood lifting somewhat, Joseph laughs at a memory of someone joking that the conductors now preferred to be referred to as SDCs – sliding-door controllers.

He would welcome a ride in one of the taxis, although the destination, which was at first home, is now undefined. He walks northwards, following the road, noticing that he is now in a built-up area, Helen Kaunda Extension, battered cars on either side of the road, skinny boys sitting next to piles of retreaded tyres for sale or exchange. Up ahead in front of a butchery offering halal meat, women have set up a stall selling second-hand clothes and fruit and vegetables.

One of them calls out to him. 'Josefa, *bwerani kuno*,' she says, beckoning him with a crooked finger. She has a thin, reedy voice that cuts through the sounds of traffic, above the blaring hooters and excited exchanges of workmen cutting grass on the side of the road. *What now?*

When he stops at the stall, Joseph cannot place the woman, although she seems vaguely familiar. For her part, the woman points at him but addresses herself to her three colleagues. 'Look at him, Chanda's boy, hasn't he grown so?'

Another woman, slightly stockier and sporting a huge smile on her face, asks: '*Amai wako walikuti?*'

Before Joseph can answer, the first woman says: '*Alikugwila ntchito kuKabulonga?*' To which Joseph nods, confirming that Chanda still works in Kabulonga.

The interrogation continues. '*Umaphuzila grade chani kusukulu?*'

'I'm in grade 8.'

This is followed by a babble of surprised admiration, all the women at once speaking one over the other, interrupting and finishing one another's sentences like some three-headed creature. '*Grady-eighty. Awa. The boy is a teacher already!*'

He leaves during that confusion, mumbling his goodbyes, wondering if age shrinks one's bones because these women, ma's friends, obviously, must have perhaps been taller in their days of youth but were now diminished by something he can't quite figure out. At fourteen, he stands head and shoulders above them. Or have I suddenly shot up like a twig and grown taller? Is this height appropriate for a fourteen-year-old? Am I going to be as tall as my father and also have a son who will ride on my shoulders to look at the world from a great height?

The thought of his father reminds him of his disappearance in the company of Pule and Violet: is that what contributed to ma's visible unhappiness? Why is it that big people don't talk about what is bothering them? It becomes even more urgent that he sits down with Chanda and gets to understand what is going on between the two of them. More importantly, however, he knows that at his age, he needs to find out when his own initiation will happen. These are matters to discuss with a father, but Sobhuza is otherwise

engaged. And, as a South African, Sobhuza might not be familiar with the rites and rituals that inform initiations. So, he's not going straight home from school. He hopes Emmanuel will have the presence of mind to take the key from the hiding place, under the garbage bin at the back of the house, to open for Mulilo and Banji, otherwise all of them will have to wait until nightfall for his return. Emmanuel might just deliberately decide to not open the house, inconveniencing everybody, just so Joseph is cast in a bad light. We'll see. What's important is that he finds ma.

It won't take him long to reach Kabulonga. If ma's not at work, then that's a problem. The mathematics box rattling in his satchel reminds him that he still has a score to settle with BG. He knows that boys must show courage and withstand pain and face the elements in the mountains, so why was BG so scared of Mr Lollipop's punishment? Joseph wonders what Sobhuza will make of his desire to go to the mountain.

CHAPTER 5

It feels as if he's been walking for ages although, apart from taking a slightly roundabout route, he's covered almost the same distances he travels daily back home from school. Feeling a curious buzzing in his head, which reminds him of when he was fighting off a bad cold, Joseph walks along Bishops Road. He casts his mind back to events in the classroom. Is it possible that BG actually pricked him with a divider laced with poison, like he's seen it done in the *Spy 13* comic books? For a moment he sees himself transformed into David Doughty, the hero, delivering an uppercut and disarming BG, now a Japanese soldier, *Take that, you yellow-bellied cur!*

The cars inching along are almost human in their anger, their exhausts fuming as they battle for the road with pig-headed pedestrians, some carrying babies strapped to their backs and loads on their heads. A bunch of schoolboys, shirttails hanging out, play a game, weaving through traffic, their shrieks louder than the annoyed curses of drivers.

One minute he's been lost in the schoolboys' game and the next he's being pushed from behind for blocking the way. The schoolboys' frolics: how is it that some boys could be so carefree? No matter how thrilling the boys' game might be, Joseph knows, he'll always have to be a spectator, standing on the sidelines. If he was to try any of this, Chanda would simply kill him.

Chanda. It's suddenly more urgent to find her, if only to get rid of the nagging feeling that something uncontrollable is about to be set loose. Do that and get back home. It's early, a little past 3pm, but the afternoon presses down on him, far off in the horizon are daubed shadows of the night. Even though the daylight glare lessens as the afternoon wears on and the shadows grow bigger, the heat doesn't let up. Heat is like a guest that overstays his welcome, making everyone uncomfortable with his presence.

The noise of the crowd milling about and the cranky traffic blend into a memory of the days just before Christmas when there wasn't a whiff of breathable air and every inch of space was clogged up by shoppers. However, here, on Bishops Road, you can see the out-of-towners, either barefooted or

wearing colourful clothes or big coats despite the heat, the women in chitenges printed with Kenneth Kaunda's smiling face; they are loud, calling one another from across the street, *muli bwanje, mchimwene wanga*.

The taxis add to the confusion. Grinding to a halt in front of you with brakes squealing, sending pedestrians scattering onto the pavements, the conductors trying to jostle you inside, they emit clouds of smoke that has bystanders spluttering with their faces covered. Wearing a torn green-and-white t-shirt of the Mufulira Wanderers, a conductor nods to the beat of the loud music blaring from the taxi's sound system; he holds his midriff as he laughs at the sight of some old man who's had to jump for dear life. His hard face streaked with grime, the lips curled, the conductor starts swearing. '*Tapitani uko nkhalambainu*,' he says, waving his arms as though to shoo off a flock of chickens.

There's a general murmur of shock and surprise among the bystanders. Joseph wonders why no one does or says anything. People watch the old man's shame. No one challenges the conductor who now jumps like a monkey and climbs on the running board as the taxi gets into motion. It departs in a cloud of smoke and dust, the conductor's chant also trailing off: Matero, Kabwata, Lilayi...five *kumbuyo*!

Joseph's attention is drawn to a knot of some tough-looking boys washing mini-bus taxis. He remembers Lanky Boy and his assistants; Lanky Boy, the boss, giving orders, doling out the leftovers from the restaurant. Even from the distance of a few feet, above the noise, Joseph can clearly hear one or two of the boys making that *mfff!* sound of a blocked drain clearing its throat. He knows it's a challenge aimed at him and wonders if there's something about him that arouses hostility. Would they react to BG like that, for instance? Or Emmanuel: even with those glasses, there's something about the way Emmanuel carries himself, one look and you know there'll be hell to pay if you interfere with him. And me, he asks himself, do I have four nostrils? What is it about me that makes people think I'm a softie?

He can tell from the men and women in housecoats or overalls of domestic workers and gardeners that he's nearing his destination. He wonders if Chanda also wears a housecoat, although he's never seen one hanging on the line.

Perhaps her employer, Mrs Gertrude Shakalongo – whom ma calls ma'am, even in her absence – keeps hers in the house. Chanda rarely speaks of her and has only told them that she comes from the Cape Province in South Africa and married a Zambian a long time ago.

He hopes he'll recognise the house; Chanda showed him once, but that was a long time ago. If not, he'll ask around.

The air is a little fresher in Kabulonga. It's a suburb of huge houses fronted by high walls; some of them are almost completely covered by creepers and climbers. There are happy houses and there are those looking out onto the street with sadness. There are trees and shrubs with different flowers. There are Gogo Mulubwa's ivies and morning glories and bougainvilleas busy flowering in different shades of red. He thinks he can recognise some of the herbs from the fragrance, which, mixed with the smells of freshly upturned earth and mown grass, wafts across the air like something touchable. While enjoyable, these sensations are simultaneously the cause for his heart to miss a beat because he knows – he's heard them already – they go hand in hand with vicious dogs. There are signs on the gates: *Chenjelani ndi agalu*, beware of the dog. For those that can't read, there's an image of a dog with dripping fangs.

The little well-groomed and confident girl standing at the gate has a complexion that makes Joseph think of sunburnt pumpkin. Perhaps sensing his hurtful judgment, she's also irritated with Joseph. It could also be that he has shown up as she was executing a tricky jump during the girls' game of hopscotch. While she advances to the gate to talk to him, she leaves four other girls of about the same age to take turns jumping inside the squares. Those not playing give him a baleful look from the sidelines. He's got a sister their age and knows perfectly well how vindictive they can be. Ma never told him she has to deal with so many children into the bargain. Their leader looks up at him from behind big glasses.

'What do you want?' she asks. The game comes to a stop. They all stare.

'Can I speak to your mother?' He'll be damned if he has to explain himself to this little upstart. At the same time, he has a feeling she could easily frustrate his mission. 'I just need to ask her some questions.'

‘What kind of questions? You’re just a schoolboy.’

‘It’s questions only your mother can answer.’

Hands on her hips, she juts out her chin. ‘No. Ask me.’

A chorus of voices chimes, ‘Yes, ask Lizzie, ask Lizzie...’

‘I can’t.’ This is crazy.

‘Ask Lizzie. Lizzie’s the best hopscotcher in the world,’ says one of the little girls, arranging her mates to form a semi-circle around their champion. There is a general murmur of agreement.

Joseph is on the point of saying something when a car pulls up behind him. The door opens and a plumper, older and darker version of Lizzie struggles to get out, her difficulty compounded by the shopping bags in her hands. Knowing this must be Chanda’s ma’am, Joseph rushes to relieve her of the bags, his nostrils getting nuzzled by leafstalks. Giving him a curious look at first, ma’am surrenders the bags and then reaches behind the seat to retrieve a walking stick.

‘Careful with that one,’ she says, pointing at a grocery bag marked *Makeni Deli, Fruit & Veg*. ‘Hold it upright or you’ll have fish curry running all over your nice shirt.’

Still visibly hostile to Joseph, Lizzie and her friends cluster around ma’am, keeping up a litany of questions, ‘What have you got for us?’ Ma’am shushes them with a wave of a pudgy hand. Then she looks around her, pointing with her walking stick.

‘Elizabeth?’ she asks, ‘this place, *jirre*, why is the stoep so grotty? Go on, pick up all your books and bicycles – and clean up that game. How many times do I have to tell you I don’t want chalk marks on the driveway?’

‘But this is the best place to play,’ Lizzie laments.

‘No, go to the back. You’ll be able to get more fresh air that way.’

Her telling-off is in mild, kind tones but there’s no doubting the steel in her voice. Like ma, she might speak calmly but if you don’t do her bidding, you’ll find yourself with a bump on your head. In a moment, he follows ma’am into the house.

The interior of the lounge is like something from a dream, the furniture dark and shiny and old, the sofas deep, the carpet muffling the sound of footsteps. Even

the curtains are made of material that highlights the folds that soar like pipes to a ceiling from which hangs a chandelier with scores of candles. It's the kind of place where you have to be careful to avoid knocking into huge vases with beautiful flowers. Bees must like it here.

A tumbler of Fanta orange in his hand, Joseph listens to his host telling him about the trouble of running a school – a boot camp – for young girls.

'If your mother wasn't here to help,' she says, 'I really don't know how I'd manage. You see, young girls, Lizzie-*hulle*, they don't have a snowball's chance in hell to survive if they're not given extra skills, and the first skill is here,' tapping her brow, 'in the head.'

Most of the girls are daughters of families of freedom fighters, people who are on the go all the time, sometimes travelling to God-knows-where, like the United Nations in New York, in America, imagine, or elsewhere, talking about the struggle and whatnot. We have a duty to impart knowledge, she says, sounding like she's repeating a familiar speech. Every generation has to leave something for the one that follows, especially when it comes to people who experience exile. For what is exile but a place of limbo that needs more information every day, otherwise people become stagnant. Look at what happened to the poor Children of Israel, in exile in the desert for forty years, *die Here weet* what people were doing traipsing around all that time, no wonder they started making graven images. The South Africans have to watch out, *hulle moet pasop*, they also don't end up doing a long stretch in the wilderness, which is why they must teach their children, give them skills, not just the three Rs but a lot more about how the modern world works.

He listens to her story about the golden calf, wondering whether it would be okay to dunk a cream cracker into the drink and deciding against it, as it might be offensive to her. Perhaps dunking biscuits is exactly the kind of thing she'd warned the girls against...

'Do you hear what I'm saying?' she says, and then: 'So, you're looking for your mother?' Before he can respond, she goes on, 'Strange coincidence. I was thinking of going over to your place because it's so unlike Chanda to be absent from work.'

They sit in silence, trying to think where Chanda might be. The three women he met earlier in the day mean she couldn't be at the market. Friends of Sobhuza's: who are they? Aunt Thelma? Gogo Mulubwa? He thinks he'll try all of them although his heart is not in it. Deep down he feels it would be a waste of time, but then, who knows? The girls playing outside are somewhat more subdued. What would Banji think of them? Could she make friends with Lizzie? He has his doubts, but then it is difficult to know with girls. He's seen Banji cry for nothing and then one day she removed a tooth that was paining her, using a length of cotton. He almost fainted when she showed him the bloody gap in her gum. And she is the only one who can blow her nose on a tissue the size of a postage stamp. That calls for respect.

Getting up from her seat, ma'am limps up to the window and peers through the curtains. The light outside has turned a dark grey. She draws the curtains and the room goes back to wearing a more serious face. His gaze is drawn to the framed paintings on the wall. Placed on the lower level atop a piano, a television set and two display cabinets shimmering with silverware, crockery and glass, are photographs in oval frames. The most prominent one is a black and white picture of a white family, where the men are dressed in that smart style of bygone ages of double-breasted jackets and hats, the women in wide hats and jackets with big shoulders, skirts, all the subjects posing like models with big handbags in hand. He wonders if any of them are related to ma'am. There are other photographs of black people, the men mere smudges in the gloom. He wonders if Mr Shakalongo is perhaps in one of them.

'Oh, I almost forgot. There was another man, earlier today. Funny looking fellow who was looking for Chanda.'

'Looking for ma?'

'Yes. Said they have a message for her. From your dad.'

'He didn't say who he was?'

'No,' ma'am says, shaking her head at the memory. 'I asked him if he wants to leave a note, but he said it's okay, he knows where she might be. Perhaps he can't write and was afraid he'd embarrass himself. He wore one of those funny hats that make everyone look like a *skollie*.'

Although Joseph doesn't know what a *skollie* is he has no doubt it has a lot to do with shadiness, something less than wholesome. A word like that would only apply to someone like Pule. Ma'am must have had a visit from him. He thinks of asking whether Pule was accompanied by a woman, Violet, but drops the idea. Although ma'am is well meaning and kind, Joseph has a sense that she would just as easily put him in his place; he doesn't know how he knows this but it's there. Perhaps it's in the way she spoke to the girls, chiding them and still maintaining a kindly voice, something not quite making sense there, confusing. In any event, it's getting late and the gloom has seeped into every part of the lounge.

'Are you sure you'll find your way home?'

'Yes, ma'am. Thank you. I'll be all right.'

'If you find you mother's back, tell her I expect her tomorrow.'

'Yes, ma'am.'

There's a general smell of smoke in the air, people preparing the evening meal. He can imagine families huddled in the lounge, watching the six o'clock news, Charles Manda telling the whole of Zambia how blessed they are to have KK as their leader. Right now, though, all Joseph needs is for someone to tell him where his mother is.

Mulubwa told him once that there is a smell behind each moment things change. He'd asked what she meant. She said: You must look at how people's noses start twitching the moment an argument gets out of hand and fists start flying. There is a smell, perhaps hard to trace, which animals can pick up when day becomes night or when seasons change. Dogs sometimes just put their noses up in the air, sniffing. That's when they're sensing something about to change.

Walking home from Kabulonga, he feels this change happening, a mood shifting like gears, as the late afternoon turns into night. The sounds of the day, the drone of a faraway aeroplane or traffic or even the voices of children at play, have been overtaken by the crick-crick-crackle of unseen insects, frogs croaking as if summoning rain and a bird sounding lonely as if afraid of the night. In that instant, the air thickening with the smell of upturned soil and mown grass and breathing plants, the rain comes down.

It's warm rain, almost soothing. He worries momentarily about his satchel, if the water will seep through and soak the books. He remembers a story about one of the boys at school whose suitcase, which looked like leather on the outside, was actually made of cardboard and disintegrated during a storm. My bag is made of leather; it has to be because I got it from my father. Sobhuza doesn't deal in imitations.

At some stage, in his walking, hearing the water squelching in his shoes, worrying whether the shoes will still be wearable later, feeling the drops that ceased being drops but became a stream as though from a bucket emptied from above, he accepts the situation set by the rain and feels his whole body becoming part of what it intends. What the rain's intention is, he can't tell. He knows only that on the Thursday of his birthday, his mother has disappeared, he has been punished in class and is now walking home in the driving rain.

It's still raining, the sole purpose of the downpour, it seems, is to discourage people from being outdoors. They have been running with newspapers spread above their heads, some rushing to open umbrellas, which get blown inside out by a gust of wind in league with the rain to generate as much discomfort as possible.

Time has passed but he hasn't been aware of it by the time he reaches home. Ma is, of course, not back. As he enters the house, he gets a strong whiff of burning food and knows that Emmanuel has been at the pots, possibly rustling up a meal out of Auntie Sipiwe's cooking.

He's struck by the condition of the kitchen; although clean, the tile floor he's never noticed before looks run-down. The kitchen dresser, stove, built-in cupboards look ratty. As he takes off his shoes and steps on the prickly coir-fibre doormat marked WELCOME, he feels a wave of shame wash over him. He knows he's comparing his mother's house with ma'am's plush palace in Kabulonga. In that moment, he feels a kinship, almost affection, for his siblings, who are now looking up at him from their reluctant meal.

'Hope you brought something to eat,' Mulilo says, pushing his plate away. 'Emmanuel burned the food.'

'Oh,' Emmanuel says, 'now I *burned* the food. Wasn't it you eating like a pig just a minute ago?'

‘I was hungry,’ Mulilo says. ‘We were hungry, right, Banji?’

‘Leave me alone,’ Banji says. But she also looks like she wouldn’t be surprised if the bit she’s eaten ends up giving her stomach cramps.

Joseph says: ‘I’m sorry. It’s late now to go to the shops.’

‘There’s Monde’s Spot,’ Mulilo says. ‘They sell fish and chips.’

‘They sell *mowa* there, Mulilo,’ Banji says. ‘Ma will kill you.’

‘Ma’s not here to kill anybody. I don’t even smoke cigarettes, why would ma think I’m smoking *mowa*?’

‘Okay,’ Emmanuel says. ‘I burned the food. I’ll go to Monde’s Spot. But who’s got any money?’

‘I don’t have anything,’ Joseph says, not relishing the prospect of going out.

‘You can give them the watch,’ Emmanuel says helpfully.

‘My watch.... are you mad?’

‘They can hold it until we pay them.’

‘No.’

‘Yes!’ Emmanuel, Mulilo and Banji say in unison. Emmanuel adds: ‘Don’t be so selfish.’

‘Just for fish and chips, you could sell my watch?’

‘No, they’ll give it back to you once we get the money together.’

‘Or when ma comes,’ Mulilo says.

The odds are stacked against him. Joseph wishes this day, which started off on a bad footing in the morning, would come to an end. He values the watch, but it’s suddenly associated with his father, whose disappearance has led to ma’s absence, to the squalid kitchen, burnt food and a general state of sadness – and anger.

‘Where’s that stupid watch anyway?’ he asks.

CHAPTER 6

Joseph grits his teeth as he again goes out into the rain, which started out warm and comforting but which has now turned cold and wholly unwelcome. Huge droplets splash on the nape of his neck, icy fingers exploring the small of his back and increasing his discomfort. It doesn't help that Emmanuel is walking jauntily next to him. Unaffected, with his head down and hands stuck into the pockets of his windbreaker, which is zipped up to the neck, Emmanuel kicks a stone and sends it skittering onto the grass verge. Tonight, he's got sense enough to steer clear of anything annoying, probably sensing his elder brother's murderous mood. Emmanuel gives Joseph a sidelong glance, the glasses reflecting a distant streetlight.

'Did you find out anything about ma?' he asks.

'Ma'am says someone else came looking for ma today.' Joseph hesitates whether to tell him he thinks the visitor was Pule. 'Don't know who it was.'

'You're lying. You know who it is. I know you.'

'Okay, since you're now a *nchimi*. Who is it?'

'I don't know. But I know you when you're keeping something away.'

'You're talking nonsense.' They are now at the entrance to Monde's Spot. The regular, four-roomed Helen Kaunda house distinguishes itself from the rest by the twin domes enclosing lurid pink lights atop the gateposts. Burning on throughout the night and alive even when there's a power cut, these cast a pink glow that streaks the puddles on the pavement. The ripples, driven by the rain, do a crazy dance of their own to strains of *Ukwenda Nayenda*, the tune streaming with vehemence from inside the restaurant. There's also a lingering smell of frying meat. Joseph wonders if sound carries more in the rain in the same way he's read somewhere that intestinal gases smell worse when released under a shower. 'You've been here before,' he tells Emmanuel. 'You lead the way.'

There are about a dozen people in the lounge, the majority being Zambians with some South Africans and a black American couple. Well-dressed young women weave in and out of the lounge, taking orders and supplying drinks and various snacks on trays; they bend to light the customers' cigarettes

and bring ashtrays to side tables. The smoky lounge is all the more striking as it has taken the tone of the lamps that give off so many colours, which bounce off the faces of the drinkers.

Emmanuel is welcomed like a long-lost son by the hostess, Mrs Lusaka ('No relation, just a coincidence, ha, ha'), who scoops him up and squeezes him until his glasses almost drop onto the tiled floor. 'Where have you been?' she asks, not waiting for a response but continuing to introduce him to an indifferent group, waving her fleshy arms. Her energetic roundness eating up most of the space, she steers the two boys through beaded curtains separating the lounge from the kitchen. Heads bent, two men and an elderly, thinner Mrs Lusaka look-alike are hard at work at the gas stove. The smell of frying chips, chicken wings, sausages and peppers has thickened the air.

'How's the work, my dears?' Mrs Lusaka asks and doesn't wait to hear their response, her attention already on Emmanuel. 'How come you no longer visit us here? Where's your uncle, Whatshisname?'

Emmanuel says, 'Uncle Agrippa. He's at his place in Kabwe.'

'Well. He still owes me, you know that?'

'I'll tell him.' Then Emmanuel points at his brother, hesitant. 'Have you met my brother Joseph?'

'No,' Mrs Lusaka says, the animation in her voice not quite matching the look in her eye, 'but I've heard some good things about him. How is he?'

Joseph is amused that, even though she's addressing him, she's still talking about him as if he weren't there. 'He's fine,' Joseph says. 'Just cold.'

'Oh my God, you poor children. You must be freezing – and hungry.'

'Actually,' Emmanuel chips in, 'that's why we are here, to see if we could get some food.'

'Yes,' Joseph says. 'We understand we can buy...'

'Buy?' Mrs Lusaka asks, outraged, 'what do you mean, "buy"? I know I provide *mowa* to these..., 'making a gesture towards the lounge, '...people, but I cannot sell food to children.' Clapping her hands, she calls out. 'Clarabelle, my beautiful sister, could you be so kind as to prepare a takeaway hamper for my visitors.' Smiling at the Mabaso boys, she squeezes Joseph on the shoulder. 'Be sure to pay us a visit again.'

‘Thank you,’ Joseph says and watches her disappearing in a clatter of beads. ‘Clarabelle,’ he whispers. ‘What kind of name is that?’

‘Wait until I tell you what *she* is called,’ Emmanuel says.

‘What?’

‘Loveness.’

The tall, unsmiling Clarabelle comes with a package wrapped in plastic inside a grocery bag. ‘Here it is, boys. Careful, hold it upright.’

‘*Zikomo*,’ Joseph says. The bag feels heavy.

Outside the rain has stopped. On the road back home, he stops. ‘What makes you such a star with these people?’

‘They have three daughters,’ Emmanuel says. ‘I think they’re hoping to match me with one of them.’

‘Or maybe with all of them. Some people support polygamy.’

‘*Ayi*. Never.’

‘I can see you having to take *vubwi* every day to keep up with your three wives, who’ve given you fifty children, all of them lisping, “Papa”, when you pass by...’

‘Shut up, Joseph.’

‘Okay.’ He’s already seeing the hungry ones back home jumping for joy at their arrival.

The hero’s welcome Joseph expected when he and his brother took the food home from Monde’s Spot is quashed by Gogo Mulubwa’s unexpected visit. As they stamp their feet for warmth and remove wet clothes at the entrance, she is busy ladling out rice and potatoes and minced meat onto Mulilo and Banji’s plates. She looks up as the two brothers enter, a tired smile on her face.

‘Ah,’ Gogo Mulubwa says, ‘the returning warriors. I was getting worried about the two of you.’

Her face is more lined than when he last saw her, the gaiety not quite reaching the eyes. When did she cook the food, which is steaming, fresh and certainly more appetising than the hodgepodge of chicken, chips, mash, *nshima* and sausages squirming in the bag?

‘We’re okay, gogo,’ Joseph says. ‘I was protected by my popular brother here.’

‘Come here, you.’

As they both fall into her embrace, Joseph realises that it’s really been a long time since he last saw her. He gets a whiff of the musty odour of age, which overrides the smell of soap and cooking on her clothes and hands. He can’t quite account for why all this fills him with sadness. A ripple goes through gogo’s body.

‘Let’s sit down and eat,’ she says.

With everyone asleep, the house has fallen into a hush. From the near corner of the house, there’s the measured *plink* of a stubborn raindrop falling from the roof gutter. Tired and haggard but stubbornly fighting off sleep, Gogo Mulubwa is seated across from Joseph at the table, cradling a cup of tea. It’s an arrangement that makes him suspect he is in for an interrogation. Looking at her speaking with her head tilted as if she were listening to something in the distance, he feels as if he’s seeing her for the first time, noticing, with alarm, that this is what Chanda will look like some years from now. Chanda’s other siblings, Aunt Thelma and Uncle Agrippa, bear no immediate resemblance to gogo. Was there some polygamy somewhere at the beginning of the making of this family? And Uncle Agrippa, how come he, Joseph, didn’t know of his expeditions into Monde’s Spot? There is still a lot to learn about people around him.

‘I decided to come and see for myself,’ Gogo Mulubwa was saying, ‘how my grandchildren are doing, because I have tried, *tried*, to get your ma to tell me what’s going on. I have not succeeded. I don’t want to turn you against your father, but believe you me, I don’t think I understand him, his life, his mission.’

‘I tried to look for ma,’ Joseph says.

‘I appreciate that,’ Gogo Mulubwa says. ‘If I disappeared, I’d expect my children to search for me high and low. A mother disappearing goes against the laws of nature. Fathers disappear all the time; it’s their speciality.’

‘But where could she have gone?’

‘Probably following your father. A friend in the government tells me that this is a desperate period in the South African struggle. Some of the women who have relationships with South African men are sent on assignments inside South

Africa. They have passports and can go in and do work for the liberation struggle.' She pauses, looks at him. 'We all did mad things when we were fighting the British colonialists. Because we, the women, are thought to be soft, we can get into places where men are naturally forbidden entry.'

He imagines Chanda as a female Spy 13, getting behind enemy lines, disabling radio communications and punching and kicking her way out of tight spots – *Pow! Thwack!* Here she is disarming a soldier shouting, '*Banzai*', charging her with fixed bayonet.

It's a frailer Gogo Mulubwa, however, who sits opposite him at the table. He has an impression she's holding herself erect in a show of strength. Even though his nostrils still hold the memory of her odour, he can't bring himself to stretch out a hand of reassurance. If she senses his dilemma, she gives no sign of it.

'I wouldn't blame Sobhuza if he has enrolled your ma in the battle,' Gogo Mulubwa says. 'God knows, that Botha is doing horrible things in that country and has to be stopped. However, a struggle is a good idea when someone else is waging it. It's a different matter altogether when it involves your own kith and kin.' Rummaging in her handbag, she comes out with a purse made of the skin of some animal. Extracting a wad of kwacha notes, she slides them across the table. 'I'm going to sleep now. You must go find your mother.'

'The children?'

'Go. I'm staying. I'll take care of things.'

As he steps out later, swaddled in Sobhuza's olive padded jacket, which has many pockets and buttons and comes down to just below his knees, Joseph marvels at how darkness and light and the recent rain have changed the way everything looks. The trees wear a grim expression, the leaves glinting like the teeth of a dangerous animal; water gurgles in the gutters and carries the smell of the hidden dead things that have been dislodged from their burial grounds. The atmosphere seems to have inspired a choir of frogs in the dark to croak in different sharps and flats, deepening the strangeness. Although affected by the sights and sounds in the surroundings, he feels strangely unafraid, as if the brief moment with Gogo Mulubwa has given him protection. She hasn't said a word

about why he would need protection except talk in general – and biblical – terms about what the future holds. The future, she tells him, is uncertain; we just have to gird our loins for what lurks ahead. Unfortunately, she continues, we are in a world of men who have wrecked the place and have no idea of the harm they’ve wrought. He listens to a litany of men’s wrongdoings, wondering if he, too, would be spoken about in these terms when he became a man, whenever that might be. There are exceptions, of course, Gogo Mulubwa says, reading his mind, men who will always do the right thing. I know you’ll be counted among those.

It’s all hazy. The darkness and the speech become confused in his head, carrying him in his walk to a destination that hasn’t quite clarified itself in his head. A few people coming his way give him a look as they pass; there is no one travelling on foot along the road to the city. He discovers that he’s retracing the route taken not too long ago, to the restaurant to celebrate his birthday; the events of that evening belong to another era, a lifetime away.

The shopping centre is mostly in darkness. The arched entrance is now shuttered and topped with sharp spikes. To further discourage any *kabalala*, a tall security guard is seated on a stool, his bulk almost completely blocking the small side gate into the centre. It makes no sense to approach him; everything, including the restaurant, must be closed. The car park is empty except for an old pickup van rotting forlornly on bricks where the wheels should be. Walking around the side of the building where he’d last seen Lanky Boy and his cronies hanging about, Joseph probes the darkness for any signs of life. He discovers that darkness consists of different shades, with the deepest grey graduating to midnight blue at the farther corners where there’s an absolute absence of light. Figures covered in blankets or greatcoats sleep in scattered humps in the bays, none of them tall enough to be Lanky Boy.

Trying to step over these human hurdles, he ends up treading on the hand of one of the sleepers. This elicits a pained yelp followed by a string of obscenities that detail the processes before, during and after Joseph’s bloody expulsion from ma’s birth canal.

Forging ahead, Joseph sees a single pinpoint of light in the deeper recesses of the covered parking; the light flares up to brighten a thin face with

lips pursed around a roll-up cigarette. Smoke carrying the sickly-sweet smell of *chumba* floats in the air. A disembodied voice calls out.

'Bwela kuno, munyamata, come over here, boy.' Then: *'Give us a light, Sputnik.'*

A shadow moves, rising above the dark figures. After much rustling of tarpaulin and sacking in the gloom, someone strikes a match and throws it into a brazier. Joseph jumps back when, with a sudden whoosh, flames shoot into the air, releasing the smell of gas and burning charcoal and some other fuel Joseph cannot quite place. It's all looks quite dangerous.

Soon, the warm glow of the inventive heater lights up the faces in the ring of people gathered around the fire, some with their hands extended over the flames. They're all young, five of them. The woman who summoned him over is the only one seated with a blanket draped across her lap. The rest are crouching on their haunches, the flickering flames creating shadows under their eyes. The woman is a surprise; she's possibly not much older than the rest of the group, a girl really, but carries herself with controlled authority. She's thin with a head covered by stringy hanks of hair, which she flicks this way and that when turning her head. Why did they all wait until his arrival before firing up the brazier? The girl-woman looks at him. Taking a drag so long that the seeds in the joint crackle and pop, she asks: *'What do you want here?'*

Here we go again, he thinks, resignedly, people forever suggesting he's in the wrong place. This woman, this group, seeks to rattle him, for what, for trespassing in their place, this parking lot? *'I'm looking for someone who could tell me where my mother is.'*

The one called Sputnik, short, squat with a dome of a head like a compressed Mr Lollipop, snickers. *'He's looking for his mama, poor boy.'*

'Shut up, Sputnik. You were looking for your mother just the other day,' the woman says. Turning to Joseph, she introduces herself. *'I'm Leila. What's your name?'*

'Joseph. Look, I think I should leave.'

'And where will you go, Joseph?' Leila asks, but doesn't seem interested in the answer. *'Do you know what time it is?'*

'No.' He'll be damned if he's going to take out his new watch.

‘Whatever it is,’ Leila says, ‘it’s late. Late and dangerous. There are *kabalalas* around who’ll take that nice coat with many buttons. Maybe they’ll leave you alone, maybe you’ll end up in the casualty ward in UTH, if you’re lucky, maybe you won’t wake up at all...’

‘Look...’

‘No. *You* look. We’re heading towards the celebrations of Zambia’s independence and, do you know what happens in that period when everyone’s full of *mosi* and *chumba*?’

‘No.’

‘You get many people dying. The soldiers, who are *kabalalas* in uniform, go crazy.’ She pauses and accepts the joint from one of the quieter members of the group. She holds the joint up to Joseph’s face. He makes to demur. ‘Just take one pull.’

Against his better judgment, perhaps to quieten Sputnik’s scornful gaze, he accepts the joint. He takes a pull. The smoke hits him inside his chest and he splutters, handing it back, rolling the bitter taste in his mouth. The others look on, but there’s no judgment now, even from Sputnik, just mild curiosity. The joint does another round and comes back to him and, this time, it’s all logical, expected, even correct that he should take a drag, and, this time, even though the smoke has become a tangled ball in his chest, it’s almost pleasant. There’s a fuzziness about everything; his tongue has coiled in his mouth, and he has to keep glancing at his hands, whose fingertips scrape against the inner lining of the gloves he can feel but cannot see. He has been standing or squatting on his haunches like Sputnik and the rest – the rest whose edgeless faces consist of eyes and mouths, lips bared to expose teeth. But now he finds himself seated on a brick. The hard edge of the brick is pressed against his tailbone, but the idea of shifting puts an enormous weight on his brain. It’s a curious feeling, where on the one hand he’s completely clear about what step to take, and, on the other hand, something in him dissuades him from taking the step. He feels as though he’s doing the thinking for two Josephs in one head. Suddenly, looking at the faces around him, wondering if they, too, are in the same boat, he finds his clear helplessness very funny. As he laughs, with more waves of mirth burbling inside his stomach, his own voice sounds as if coming from afar.

‘What’s so funny?’

He doesn’t know how long he’s been sleeping or dozing. Leila’s question has followed a series of questions asked in a dream or vision he’s just had. Seeing her watching him still propped on her seat, which turns out to be a wheelchair, the others lying sprawled around her, he wonders if he was snoring in his sleep. It’s become very important that he makes a good impression on her. ‘What’s funny?’ she asks again.

Her question jogs his memory. It’s getting light although it’s still night-time. There is the hum of electricity, a solitary truck or bus climbing a hill, sounds of the night. He recalls the dream. ‘I got hold of my father’s old shoes under the bed,’ he tells Leila, ‘and, as I was just about to slip my feet into them, Emmanuel...’ He stops, seeing her puzzlement, ‘...my younger brother, an annoying know-all, he tells me to turn the shoes upside down and shake them. He hardly finished his words when a huge scorpion jumps out of the shoe. It starts chasing him around the room.’

‘That’s what made you laugh?’ Leila asks. ‘That’s evil. Your brother saving you and then becoming a victim himself?’

‘It was funny,’ Joseph persists. From her scowl, he’s likely to join the long list of people she regards as undesirable. ‘It’s only a dream.’

‘Dreams tell us a lot about who we are.’

‘Is that something you read in a book?’

‘It’s something I’ve lived.’

Later, time having sneaked past, everything he sees brings a lump to his throat: it’s the sight of the horse-drawn wagon; feeling his grip on the handles as he wheels Leila along an alley so narrow, it’s as if the inhabitants of houses on either side could easily shake hands without leaving their respective dwellings; the vendors setting up their stalls, Zezuru women in their white robes and matching headscarves, their tins, zinc containers, pots and saucepans clanking while their kerosene lamps flicker, the flames splashing a yellowy light on the wares: fruit, assorted vegetables, peanuts, herbs and spices; the persistent smell of kapenta wafting across in waves; the voices of sleepy children; the adults giving orders. It’s the knowledge that he’s never been so near and yet so far from

home. He knows he could turn, bid Leila goodbye and go back home; he'd even make it before the morning recess at school. He knows, however, that he's never going back until he finds ma. He now yearns for sleep, but he knows he's got to keep on walking.

Without breaking his stride, Joseph glances over his shoulder to see Sputnik and another young boy called Rider tagging along a few paces behind, helping each other carry a wooden crate. He feels a pang of shame at having misjudged Sputnik, whose one arm ends not in a hand but in a stump at the wrist, with which he supports a mattress on his head; limping alongside, Rider carries a bundle of blankets with his other arm. Alerted by Joseph's sudden stillness, Leila watches the two young men's progress until they have gone past.

'When I found Sputnik with his hand smashed by people who said he'd been stealing,' Leila says, 'we rushed to UTH. I don't know how we got there but I do remember people jumping and fleeing in terror when we got into a taxi. You know, if you want to get a place in a public transport you must bust in and pretend to be about to splash some vomit around. People don't like that. It's worse with blood.' She pauses. 'We ended up in Casualty, but they couldn't save the hand.'

'They cut it off?' Uncomfortable with any form of infirmity, Joseph feels his gorge rise.

'Yep. There's this incinerator where they throw all dead flesh, like stillborn babies and what's left after amputations.' Leila seems to relish dishing out the gory details. 'They sewed up the stump. He was there for two days. They fed him well there, though.'

'His parents, what did they say?'

'Parents?' Leila laughs; it's a strange sound he can't quite associate with her. 'He has no parents. None of us has.'

They watch as Sputnik and Rider load the cart with the crate's contents and bedding. The brazier, now cold, sits crammed together with odds and ends. One of the two horses snorts, swinging its head this way and that, almost as if it were imitating Leila. Joseph watches flies buzzing around the horses' heads, wondering if there's an open wound or something that's attracting them.

‘It’s a lifesaver, the cart,’ Leila tells him. ‘It was much smarter and the horses were prettier than the old hags they are now when they used to transport tourists in Victoria Falls.’ Victoria Falls, which Joseph remembers from geography lessons, still fascinates him although he’s never been there, this faraway place of splendid waterfalls and cruises along the Zambezi. She doesn’t know how her father, a businessman long dead now, brought the horses across from Zimbabwe, but businessmen achieve pretty much everything they want to achieve. She herself has no reason to thank him because she broke her spine in a riding accident – and her father, who was too busy making money and supporting another family, her half-brothers and sisters in Kitwe – could not bear the sight of her. ‘I think it was guilt more than the cancer that killed him.’

‘Fathers are strange,’ Joseph says. He can’t say why. ‘What business was your father in?’

‘Everything. Shops. Casinos. Property.’ She stops, something clicking. ‘The ANC offices on Chachacha Road are on his property.’

‘You think I should start there, looking for ma?’

‘Nah. Those are office people. The leaders. Your Pule and Violet sound like rank and file.’

‘Rank and file?’

‘Common people, not the *mabwana akulu*...didn’t you say something about Mtendere?’

‘Yes. Do you think Mtendere should be our starting point?’

“‘Our’?” Leila gives a high-pitched laugh. ‘Since when did I start having a horse in this race?’

Joseph doesn’t quite get what she means but has a fair idea she’s not going to cooperate further. ‘I thought you’d help me trace my mother.’

‘You must catch a wake-up, Joseph.’

‘How?’

‘Ah. What will you do in Mtendere? Who do you think will lead you to your ma?’

‘There must be people who...’

‘Who can do what? Show you where a Zambian woman is shacking up...’

‘Ma’s not shacking up with anyone.’ Even to himself, he sounds shrill. An offending image flashes across his mind: ma and a faceless man being carried out on a stretcher. ‘She must be with my father, wherever she is.’

Leila sighs. ‘Help me up.’

He has a sense of having lost valuable time. He’s aware of lights surrounded by a misty haze as he sits next to Leila on the hard bench, the cart swaying as if they were on a boat, the horses’ hoofs clop-clopping on the uneven, stony road. Propped up on pillows in the back and elevated by cushions that put her at shoulder level with him, Leila has her ruined lower body covered with a blanket; both her hands are clenched around his arm. Rider and Sputnik, both holding the reins and shouting at the horses, are lost in their own world, now and then looking at each other and breaking into hysterical laughter. Obviously, Joseph reasons, the effects of the *chumba* are hard to shake off. He’s still having problems feeling the tips of his toes.

‘Where are we going?’

‘There you go again with the “we” story,’ Leila says. ‘For your information, today’s Friday. Do you know what happens to refugees on a Friday?’

‘No.’

‘Good. Enjoy the ride. We’ll see.’

‘We?’

‘No. *You’ll* see.’

CHAPTER 7

The light is elusive, dancing towards dawn and then retreating into night. A gust of wind blows across, fanning his face, bringing to his nostrils the smell of the unwashed armpits of the city. It suddenly makes no sense for Joseph to think of sleeping. With all these strange things happening around him and in him, sleep promises to bring something bad. This feeling, the fear, he knows very well; it comes over him when he expects to sleep soundly after he's just watched a horror movie.

Closing his eyes and opening them again, Joseph feels his brain hammering a thought that insists like a verse repeated in a church sermon: *Where's Chanda? Where's Chanda?* Yes, where's Chanda? She left before to look for Sobhuza and came back. Now, this time around, he has a sense of her having gone forever. Gogo Mulubwa's eyes have never reflected such concern as when she came on her last visit. Find my child, she was saying. What's ma doing at this deceptive hour between darkness and light?

Leila next to him is out for the count. He feels the vibrations on his shoulder where her head is resting, warm breath of sleep fanning his neck. She has taken hold of his arm in a grip that tightens each time the cart judders over a pothole and relaxes during an even stretch of road. Now and again, she wakes up and stares ahead before drifting back to sleep.

Sputnik and Rider are no longer talking, and, for a panicked moment, Joseph imagines them also overcome by sleep, the horses trotting on out of pure instinct. Where would they take them, these horses? Perhaps to a paddock with endless supplies of bran and hay and oats, like the one he hears exists on a farm named Gonakudzingwa, which is run by Zimbabwean refugees? What is the difference between refugee, freedom fighter and guerrilla? And terrorist? He remembers a debate involving his father, Gogo Mulubwa, Aunt Thelma and Uncle Agrippa. Ma always stayed out of these debates, letting her sister argue on her behalf. Right now, though, Joseph cannot quite remember all the details. Despite his fears, he's also nodding off to sleep.

He's startled awake by a crack of a whip.

'Hoya, Jamlud!' Sputnik shouts at the horses, as if proving he is wide awake. 'Webster, *hoya*!'

Even in the dark, where the sky meets the land in the distance, Joseph sees grooves of light – broken by ragged outlines of buildings and a ridge of hills – mark the stirrings of dawn. The temperature has dropped considerably. There's a trace of woodsmoke in the air. Leila stirs awake, rubbing her eyes and sniffing the air like some small animal.

'Sputnik?' she calls. 'I heard you shouting at the horses...'

'They are stubborn, Leila,' Sputnik says. 'I had to push them.'

'You don't push by shouting,' Leila says clicking her tongue. She turns to Joseph. 'Do you know that the horses pool their resources to see the way?'

He doesn't understand what she means.

'Each one of them is blind in one eye.'

'Which eye?'

'How would I know?' She's suddenly bored with the subject. 'What time is it?'

The watch is of service for the first time. 'It's 5.15,' he says and adds with pomp, 'a.m.'

He studies the road as it opens up in front, wondering if his vision is clearer than the horses', although he knows that animals have a more developed sense of sight, one-eyed or not.

Behind a mist that tells him it's going to be a hot day, a few stars still cluster across the sky.

'Was your mother a sad woman?' Leila asks, patting her mouth to stifle a yawn. He gets a whiff of sour breath.

He can't recall ma ever being explicitly sad or happy – he can't remember when he last saw her laughing. 'I don't know,' he says.

Is laughter a measure of happiness? Am I happy? Sure, he was laughing back there when smoking a joint, a lifetime ago, it seems now. Was that happiness? Was it happiness on Sobhuza's face, when he cooked mouth-watering meals and told stories and relived a life no one knew about?

He recalls a rare moment of friendly banter between ma and Sobhuza, which happened such a long time ago, he isn't sure it really happened or if it's

just something he's making up. Sobhuza was complaining about how ma was always changing the house, repairing this, knocking down that.

This place, Sobhuza said, might as well be renamed the nest of the weaverbird.

The most important thing, though, ma countered, is that, however shabby, the nestlings have a home – and they are safe.

He wonders whether Sobhuza was made unhappy – that word again! – by the fact that ma was the one who was always working, or whose work was real, something the whole family could see.

'My mother,' Leila says, reaching into her bag on the floor of the cart and coming out with a plastic folder. There is a lot of rustling before she hands him a postcard-sized photograph still tacked to its frame.

'Do you always travel with your whole family album?' His forefinger slides diagonally across the glass and traces a hairline crack. 'Your mother?'

'You can't really see how beautiful she is...was, because it's dark.' She can hardly contain the pride and love in her tone.

He closes his eyes for a moment and opens them again, expelling, in the process, an inner darkness he feels spreading in his stomach. It's a feeling he can't explain or escape, which is connected to the photograph of the unknown woman. The details of the photograph, the image, seem to leap out of the frame as if drawn to the promise of dawn, the face oval, big eyes beneath a dark pair of eyebrows, eyes that emit a light of their own. A smile dances at the corners of Leila's mother's mouth, a smile that makes Joseph wonder what her laugh must have sounded like. He is drawn more to the gap between her upper front teeth, recalling someone saying that people with such a gap were born lucky.

'She's very pretty.' He wants to tell Leila that, like her mother, she's also pretty but suspects she'd just reward him with a punch in the mouth. Leila's the kind of person you weigh your words with.

'When we were small, she was happy. Do you know that your beauty blossoms when you're happy? That was my mother, Sarita...do you know that the name Sarita means a Spanish princess in Hebrew? My mother was more than a princess; she was a queen, proud. She became unhappy when she lost the power to run her own life. My father wanted to impress everyone, make out like he was

a big shot with a pretty wife at his beck and call. She lived to please others. She went to places with my father when all she wanted was to stay home and enjoy being with us – because we enjoyed being with her. That was a mistake. Her sadness got huge after my accident because it happened when they were away. The picture was taken during the happy times.'

'It seems as if mothers' days start off being happy,' Joseph says. 'And then something happens.'

'Let's hope nothing's happened to your mom, Chanda.'

He doesn't remember giving her his mother's name. He could have mumbled it in the hazy moment of *chumba* fumes. In any event, from Leila's lips, the name sounds fuller, rounder – a name that could only have been his mother's.

'Do you think,' Leila asks, brightening up, 'that there's somewhere else in the world where a Zambian boy and an Indian girl are sitting in a horse-drawn cart swapping stories about their mothers?'

'Indian?'

'I'm Indian,' Leila says with vehemence. 'Or hadn't you noticed?'

He turns to study her face in profile. 'Now I see,' he says. Then: 'I don't know if I'm truly Zambian. My father is from South Africa.'

'You're Zambian, my friend. If your mother's Zambian, you're Zambian.'

'Was your father from India?'

'From Uganda. Then Idi Amin kicked out all the Indians in 1972. Then we made Zambia our new home.'

'But how are you Indian in Africa?'

'Just as you can be an African in India. Simple.'

It's not simple, but it's early morning and not the time for complicated issues. Emmanuel, who plays up his South African roots at every pass, would have certainly given him a funny look if Joseph had voiced doubt about the South African half of himself.

Shrugging, he watches the horses in the light of the new day; they raise their tails and snort when they reach Chilenje as if greeting the destination in their special horsey way. Here, the place has a rumpled appearance as if rudely awoken from an enjoyable sleep. At the taxi rank, passengers headed for work or maybe returning from night shifts make their way to the stalls for something to

eat and drink. The touts standing outside of their cubicles try to outshout one another as they announce the usefulness of the wares on display. Some women hold up posters with pictures of different hairstyles.

This rumpled place whose every feature links to poverty and hardship is at the same time breathing a certain type of freedom that Joseph has not seen anywhere else, except of course in the riotous freedom of Kanyama or George Compound, where people have long forgotten that there is such a thing as housing provided by government. Here, it's hard to determine where the shops end and houses begin. It's a mix of everything. Some of the regular four-roomed houses, like the ones at Helen Kaunda, stand proudly while others are incomplete with the exposed bricks-and-mortar walls crying for paint and plastering. Here and there are shacks with roofs held down by old tyres and stones and pumpkins. There are lean lean-tos, bringing to mind the sorry shanties of Kanyama Compound, where the sewage runs on the unpaved streets. From the shells of old cars, chickens squawk their protest against dogs. The dogs, sidetracked by something more exciting trundling down the road, stroll with their tails up and growl at the passing cart while staying well clear of the horses' hooves. There are big dogs and small dogs, with the less daring ones barking from behind the flimsy fences and barriers of wooden stakes, manioc shrubs and tyres cut in half, filled with earth and fastened to barbed wire.

'Tafika,' Sputnik says from his perch up in front. *'We're here.'*

'Here' is a walled-in housing compound of three long single-storey buildings that form a U, and which remind Joseph of school. Having alighted from the back of the cart, Joseph retrieves the wheelchair from its slot along the undercarriage and helps Leila down, feeling that, even though small, she's big-boned and heavy. *'I want to see what this is all about,'* she says so softly he thinks he might have been imagining it.

There are some groups of people outside the gate, some seemingly idling, others chatting with friends. A few women have set up stalls, selling mainly edibles, bread rolls, tea poured from steaming urns, meat frying on griddles. The area is already littered with disposable cups. There is a gaiety accompanying music from small radios. The cart has drawn the attention of a bunch of children. As they come closer, Sputnik shoos them away, raising his whip. Rider is amused.

‘Let’s go in quickly,’ Leila says.

Joseph wheels her past the guard at the gate; two other people in wheelchairs are also waved in by the guard, who seems half-asleep. Inside, Leila catches her breath.

‘So many people,’ she marvels. ‘And nice cars.’

Parked along the breezeblock fence are two Lada 4X4s, an IFA truck, two or three Toyota Cressida sedans, or actually one of them is a Valiant, a Peugeot 504 and – here Joseph’s heart skips a beat – two Range Rovers. Even though they are the same models as Sobhuza’s, he sees, as he gets closer, that they are different; he does not even need to check the registration plates. Still, he hopes. As he searches all around for familiar faces, something tells him he won’t find his parents. Not here.

In the middle of the courtyard several people, maybe ten or so women with three or four men, stand, sit or squat as they sort out bundles of clothing, removing an article, checking it and either throwing it back into the tangled pile or putting it beside them. Their activity, hands buried deep to the upper arms, seems more like a group of bakers kneading dough in a huge vat. There’s excited chatter, perhaps one of the women holds up a jersey or blouse and offers it to a neighbour – *Think this would fit Thembi?* – the latter either accepts or declines. *Thembi’s no longer the little girl you knew, she’s grown bigger than that balloon for promoting tyres...*

There’s a clash of gears and shouts at the gate. The guard slides it open, the chains clinking, and lets in another IFA truck, this one laden with identical sacks stencilled in a foreign script. There’s a huge roar from the people crowding the building facing the gate, the base of the letter U. Some of them break into a song:

Ayez’amaloli sizohamba no Tambo

Ayez’amaloli sizohamba no Tambo.

They sing, the song becoming a chant. One person calls out and another responds, the way they do it in church. This gives rise to a dance, people stamping the ground, raising their knees and bringing their feet down, stamping the ground again. The singing and chanting go on. The men peel off from the group and make their way to the truck. Each man bends and steadies himself the

way wrestlers prepare for combat before a sack is dropped on his shoulder. Only two of the men stagger a bit under the weight. The rest don't. They carry their loads steadily while singing their songs.

'What are they singing?' Leila asks. 'The words.'

'The lorries are coming, we'll go with Tambo,' Joseph says. He recalls a time when he and Emmanuel were small, and Sobhuza, who must have been returning from faraway travel, would sing some of these tunes to lull them to sleep. In those days, he didn't have to know the words of Sobhuza's songs to understand they meant a lot to him; if they were important for his father then, they must have contained important messages for the boys. 'It's one of the liberation songs.'

'Hey,' one of the men says, 'isn't that Patel's little girl?' Stripped to the waist with his sweaty torso flecked with powder, the man supports a huge sack of flour on his shoulders. 'What are you doing here?'

Joseph answers, 'I'm looking for Pule and Violet. Comrades.'

'How did they allow you in here?' Not waiting for an explanation, the man rearranges the sack over his shoulder and tramps towards the rest of the group. His calf muscles stand out like ropes.

'Uh-oh,' Leila mutters under her breath. 'These people don't like us being here. This is a big day for them, and they don't want scroungers.'

'What happens?'

'They receive their rations: some money. I think it's fourteen kwacha. At least that's what it has been for years now. They get food parcels, groceries, no veg: that they have to buy themselves. They get cuts of meat. You see the cardboard box that woman is carrying?'

'Yes?'

'There are large tins of cheese from Holland in there.'

'How do you know all this?'

'These people get it from here... from Mr Matrosov. Comrade Matrosov. Then they come to exchange it for cash at my father's shop.'

'Oh?' Joseph is grappling with something that doesn't make sense. 'But I thought your father was dead?'

'He is dead. To me.'

Leila intimidates him; her intensity and certainty in her own rightness leave little room for the views of others. In the cold light of the morning, he gets to see her, really see her, her thin face and sharp nose and eyes that probe into his. He's never fought a girl before and would certainly not start with this one.

'Look,' he says, 'thanks very much for bringing me here. But I must continue searching for ma.'

'Glad to be of service,' Leila says. 'This is as good a place as any to begin, not some shopping centre.' Her father, she says, had told her that if there's anything anyone wanted to know about the ANC in Zambia, all they had to do was ask Matrosov. Using her father's voice, she says: 'Matrosov is the quartermaster. He caters to everyone's needs. So, he should know where all the bodies are buried.'

The room in which he sits nervously waiting for Matrosov has the feel of a hardware store like the one at the shopping centre. The difference is in organisation; here everything looks like it's been deposited hurriedly.

The room has an air of a small warehouse cluttered as it is with building materials such as bags of cement, new picks and shovels with their brand names still on the handles. Shelves sag under the weight of blankets, uniforms in plastic wrapping, gumboots, cardboard boxes, cans of powdered milk, large vats of cooking oil and tubs of tomato paste are stacked in rows that go up almost to the ceiling. The floor space behind the counter, all the way to the back door, is covered with an assortment of sacks, some of which, Joseph guesses, formed part of the cargo freshly unloaded from the IFA truck outside. Some of the sacks have been slashed open and flour, maize meal, beans, rice, lentils and a certain grain he can't identify have trickled to the floor, the powdery mess bearing the shoe prints of the feet that have trod on it. Formations of black ants help one another cart some of the particles to some unknown destination. There is a smell of spices that reminds Joseph of the Kabwata Indian market. There are other unidentifiable smells and he wonders, remotely, if Leila's father wasn't joking about Matrosov knowing where the bodies were buried.

There are shelves sagging under the weight of books so big he wonders who the readers could be. There are bound copies of *Sechaba*, *The African*

Communist and *News Briefings*, the titles written on the spines in block letters with felt-tipped pens. There are more books, volumes in languages he cannot quite make out, old magazines stacked alongside old newspapers forming piles that reach the level of Joseph's shoulders.

Matrosov looks like someone with a lot of experience, much like Sobhuza but in a different, rougher way, perhaps, like a circuit inspector whose mere gaze puts the fear of God in school principals. Striding ahead of a group of men and two or three women, he conveys authority even in normal gestures, as when he gets two men to clear some of the sacks that block access to the counter. Small in stature, bowlegged, full of energy, Matrosov stands with his head tilted to the side, amused at something only he knows. He points at Joseph.

'And this,' he asks in a curiously high-pitched voice, 'what's it doing here?'

'My name is Joseph Mabaso. I'm looking for my parents.'

'And they told you that this is the lost-and-found depot for missing parents?' Seeing the puzzlement on Joseph's face, Matrosov breaks into a snaggle-toothed smile. 'Relax, young man. What kind of parents are these that get lost to their children?'

Joseph relates the recent events, words crashing into one another in his haste to explain. Matrosov puts up a hand and tells him to take it easy.

'There's no hurry in Africa,' he says. 'I've got sons and all they do is rush to the conclusion and skip the important part of the story. I'm busy, sure, but take your time and tell me what's happening.' Without pausing, he looks up and calls to one of the men: 'Mpungose? Tell Mpho to make tea and to bring some *amakukisi*. This boy's breath tells me he must be starving.'

Minutes later there are only crumbs left on the side plate, which recently held a crude cheese sandwich and an apple. ('There are no cookies,' Mpungose reported Mpho as saying. 'What does Matrosov think we're running here – a hotel?') Suppressing a belch, Joseph tells the story of his parents' disappearance, detailing everything except for the part involving the *hule*; Matrosov shouldn't know about his parents' quarrels. Matrosov listens attentively, rarely interrupting, his eyes only widening at the point where Pule and Violet are mentioned. This is followed by a tiny shake of the head. 'I know Sobhuza,' Matrosov says. Then he shouts over his shoulder. 'Mpungose? Will you give the

boy a lift on your way to the stores?' He pauses. 'You go past Mtendere, don't you?'

'Yeah,' Mpungose says, not really relishing the chore. 'Those fellows don't like civilians dropping in without warning.'

Matrosov waves down Mpungose's objections and turns to Joseph. 'Joseph?' he says, 'I don't know what to do to help you with the trouble that brought you here. As you might have heard from your Indian friend, this is where ANC people get their supplies. There are some Zambians, wives of South Africans and their hungry bundles of joy. And all of them know trouble. I say this because you are going to Violet and Pule – and they are trouble, I tell you. But I hope they will lead you to your ma. I haven't met her, but she must be a good woman because Sobhuza's a good man.'

'Ma is a very good woman,' Joseph says.

'I believe you,' Matrosov says. He turns to Mpungose, who's standing at the doorway, jingling a bunch of keys. 'Make sure you see that he's with Pule and Violet. There are too many rascals around there.'

'They don't like civilians,' Mpungose laments again.

'Of course, they don't,' Matrosov says. 'You didn't like civilians either when you were a *kursant* in Kongwa. Now it's their turn to be difficult.' He pauses. 'We give them supplies. They must send someone here if they don't want civilians delivering stuff to them.'

'That'll be the day.'

'Exactly.'

'*Ek sê, laaitie*,' Mpungose gestures at Joseph to come, '*laat ons nyakaza*.'

In the cab of the IFA truck, Mpungose, whose angular face, deep-set eyes and restless alertness remind Joseph of a mongoose, initially manages a grumpy silence before settling into muttering critical opinions about anything from the Zambian weather, through the bad roads, 'greedy ANC bigwigs' to the 'bloody guerrillas in the underground houses who think they're God's gift to the revolution. You'll see them as we drop their supplies, my *laaitie*,' he gripes, 'stuck up lazybones. They should be at the front fighting the Boers instead of sleeping

until the sun shines up their arses, carousing with Zambian girls at Munda Wanga.'

Joseph maintains an attentive though respectful silence, wishing he could shrink and be less noticeable, nodding agreeably when prompted, although he doesn't absorb much of Mpungose's running commentary, which is delivered in a mix of languages, including South African slang. Chanda once chided Sobhuza about the South Africans' fondness for switching into tongues peppered with Afrikaans, which others didn't understand.

Isn't that the language of the oppressor?

No one, not even an oppressor, Sobhuza replied, can have total ownership of a language. Or words to that effect.

The road is a rutted track consisting of loose rock washed with rainwater into gullies. Its state brings out a stream of swear words and frustrated sighs from Mpungose, sounds that echo the metallic crunch of gears as the truck struggles up the rise at the entrance to Mtendere. Once over the climb, the road levels slightly, allowing Mpungose to drive at full speed, scattering people, dogs and chickens to the non-existent pavement on the side of the road, in certain cases into a ditch. Seeing Joseph eyeing him, Mpungose chuckles evilly.

'That section is notorious,' he says. 'Too many of our trucks have been hijacked. *Kabalalas*: most of them Zairians. Before nightfall your truck is merrily coursing through the streets of Kinshasa.' Brightening up, he says: 'Anyway, here you are.'

'Here?' For the first time Joseph feels a pang of real fear. The outside of the unmarked house looks forbidding. The paint has peeled off the door, showing the original, rusty patches beneath the grey coating. The neighbouring houses are no different, small, overgrown with weeds and bushes. Joseph thinks of snakes. The windows are covered with cardboard where there are broken panes, making Joseph think of a man wearing broken spectacles.

'Do you think they're here?' he asks. He'll take his chances with Mpungose's grumpiness over entering this dubious dwelling. All round is the smell of fecund growth mixed with sewage.

'They are here, all right,' Mpungose says. In one hand he's carrying a big plastic shopping bag full of supplies. The top of a flagon of cooking oil juts above

the rest of the foodstuff. Banging on the door, Mpungose glances at his watch and rattles the knobby handle. 'Pule? Violet? Got your supplies here.'

There's shuffling followed by something clattering from the other side of the door. It opens a crack, and Violet peers at them, hair unkempt and eyes struggling to focus. From inside wafts the combined smells of sleep and body odour. 'Wait,' she says in a croaky voice.

'What did I tell you about the revolutionaries and sleep?' Mpungose asks Joseph, a triumphant glint in his eyes. Then, louder: 'I'm leaving the boy here with your supplies. See you later, comrades.'

'Wait!' Violet's cry is cut short by the roar of the truck starting. She shakes her head. 'Mpungose, that stupid bastard.' After a minute of examining Joseph's face, she says: 'Come in.'

In sleep, Pule looks like a child. Curled under a coverlet on the mattress in the kitchen, he has the knobby point of his one knee peeking through a hole in the fabric like a big toe through a worn sock. He snores, a wheezing that comes from somewhere in the depths of his long body, which now and then gives way to a few explosions like seeds popping open in the summer sun. From her position on her knees on the floor, Violet tries to shake him awake. He mutters something as if continuing a conversation started in sleep. 'This is supposed to be a guerrilla,' she says, shaking her head. 'Pule? *Vuka!*'

It's like trying to get a response from a stone. Violet takes a deep breath and raps Pule on the exposed knee with a wooden spoon, the contact producing a hollow sound; the answer from under the covers is a louder series of rapid-fire bursts. Curiously, apart from the funk that welcomed him earlier, Joseph detects no new smell added to the four-roomed house. He wonders if he hasn't already grown accustomed to the mustiness that has absorbed all the other smells, including paraffin fumes from the Primus stove, which Violet has just turned off. The abrupt silence lets in the sounds of the suburb of Mtendere. Neighbours call out to one another; the usual morning struggle of a child being told to hurry up. Wondering about school, Joseph listens to the hum of traffic, heavy vehicles bursting and roaring in the distance.

Violet hands him a mugful of instant coffee, which he cradles with both hands. The powdered milk still bubbles in lumps in the liquid. He doesn't mind this, enjoying the first sip of the over-sweetened beverage, feeling it coursing down his throat to settle in a warm puddle in his belly, taking away all the cold of his morning trek. 'Thank you, Violet,' he says.

'Sis Violet to you, kid.'

'Thank you, Sis Violet.'

'Who's this saying thank you in my place?' Propped on one elbow, Pule fumbles for his cigarettes. Rubbing his eyes, he peers at Joseph through a film of smoke. 'Ah, schoolboy with the zappy watch. What you doing here?'

'I told you not to smoke indoors, Pule,' Sis Violet says.

'Indoors, outdoors, you just don't like me smoking.'

'Don't say I didn't tell you...'

'Aww, Vi,' Pule says, looking at her, smiling. 'I know, the baby, I know...'

Sis Violet doesn't drop her own gaze. 'It's about the baby, yes.'

Flinging the coverlet aside, he puts out the cigarette in a saucer littered with stubs. Without his hat, he looks like a meerkat. He sniffs his armpits as he puts on a worn t-shirt and adjusts his pair of boxer shorts printed with pictures of flying airplanes. Standing on the mattress, Pule slips on a pair of jeans. He catches Joseph's eyes fixed on his feet; the long toes end in scaly nails.

'*Eintlik*,' he says, his annoyance targetting no one and everyone in the room, 'what's the *laaitie* doing here? Vi? Is this an underground house or what...?' Then something dawns on him. 'In fact, how did you find this place?'

Sis Violet says: 'Mpungose brought him. It's taken a lot of effort to get him here. And he brought our supplies.'

'I'm looking for my mother,' Joseph says.

'We're all looking for our mothers,' Pule says, snorting. 'That's why we became revolutionaries.'

Joseph holds back from saying what others think of revolutionaries, watching Pule rummaging through the two plastic carrier bags. He gives a long snort of frustration.

'What, love?' Sis Violet asks.

‘That stupid Mpungose. There’s our stuff and stuff for Charlie and Robbie. He gives them fillet steak while we get soup meat. These fucking bones.’

‘It’s okay. You know I don’t really like meat. As for the packet for Charlie and Robbie, we were going there anyway, weren’t we?’

‘Ja, but what does he take us for, delivery boys?’

‘Perhaps,’ Sis Violet says sunnily, ‘a delivery boy and a delivery girl?’

‘Jesus, you’re impossible.’

CHAPTER 8

As they walk, Sis Violet keeps glancing at him and it's clear she has a burning question plaguing her.

'Does Chanda have a history of disappearing from home?' she asks. Having started, she presses on. 'Do you know if she has any mental illness? Zambia is full of cases of women who have gone missing, most suffering from dementia.'

Even though he has started warming towards Sis Violet, he finds the suggestion offensive. Chanda's particular way of rebuking someone or voicing disbelief echoes in his mind. *Hey, you, idiot-i iwe – are you demented?* Chanda is one of the sanest persons on earth, and no one will make him think otherwise. He feels the intensity of Sis Violet's gaze on his face.

'You must understand, we have to ask these questions, Joseph,' she says.

He accepts glumly. The uneasiness, which has lingered since Mpungose dropped him in front of Pule and Sis Violet's place, increases. He feels like an old man, the pit of his stomach hollow and belonging to somebody else. Sniffling, wiping his runny nose with the sleeve of his jacket, he remembers – and starts to understand – Uncle Agrippa's laments about feeling out of sorts with muscle stiffness and body aches after a long night out. It's as if Joseph has just finished running a long race, his feet sore and heavy.

'Are you all right?' Sis Violet asks. Again, he nods.

'Leave him alone,' Pule says. Pule is also grouchy, clearly unhappy at having to carry the grocery bag meant for Robbie and Charlie.

'*Ndili bwino*,' Joseph says, finding it easier to lie in Chinyanja. He is scared of the way he feels. He recalls a time back when he felt as weak. That was when he returned from school with a scratchy throat and soon thereafter being laid up with malaria. It was a period of chills and fever, shrill headaches and vomiting, time getting scrambled as days collapsed into one another, Chanda feeding him soup, which he immediately threw up. Later being injected with medicine that smelled of eucalyptus. He'd thought he was dying.

He prays now that it's nothing serious because this would be an unsuitable time and place to get sick. The ground is oddly soft and hard at the same time. Here, a sandy and rocky stretch sprouts grassy tufts that feel spongy underfoot, like there's a lot of small, living animals getting squashed. There, the clammy wetness from an unseen puddle of mud. He wants to shrug off what's happening around him – at least for the present, including the condition of his shoes. As for the socks, ma, forget it. You wouldn't think I'd got them for Christmas, good for a Christmas present (together with a white button-down shirt baba got from South Africa) that also served as part of my school uniform.

As he tries to match Sis Violet's step, he's aware of her eyes on him, her quick, sharp glances; he's also amused by her attempts to catch Pule's attention. Hands swinging freely, no longer wearing the bandage of the night at the restaurant, she walks with a heavy tread, often with one hand cradling her stomach as if she's guarding against something spilling out. Although it's still early in the morning, the October heat rises up from the ground as if too impatient to wait for midday. It's clear Sis Violet feels it. Beads of sweat stand out on her forehead. Walking ahead unconcerned, Pule takes long, loping strides, making it hard to keep up with him.

'I wish you'd slow down,' Sis Violet says. She swabs her face with a cloth.

Hands on hips, Pule turns to look at them, irritation written on his brow. 'This is how you get killed in an ambush,' he says, slackening his pace anyway.

'More people get killed in their sleep,' Sis Violet says, 'your favourite pastime.'

'Where are we going?' Joseph asks. All along he's kept back, letting adults take charge, but some of them don't seem to act like grownups. 'Will we find ma where we're going?'

'It's not too far,' Sis Violet says, 'There's another house at the corner there,' she points. 'Comrades who have dealt with your father.'

'When last did you see him?'

'A couple of days ago,' Pule says. 'He was going to Angola.'

'Driving?'

‘Part of a convoy that would cross the border at Caripande.’ Pule gives a shake at once playful and serious. ‘I wouldn’t travel that route even if they armed me with a nuclear weapon.’

‘Pule? That’s malicious. You’re talking about the boy’s father here.’

‘It’s because I admire Comrade Sobs,’ Pule insists. ‘He was one of the few drivers to lead convoys on that trail through Caripande.’ He seems momentarily caught up in imagining. ‘Cazombo to Caianda to Jimbe: these were vital roads for refugees coming from Zaire and Zambia but were heavily mined. The trucks had to go at a snail’s pace. And then they would constantly fall under UNITA ambushes.’

‘UNITA?’

‘Savimbi’s bandits fought a guerrilla war against the MPLA in Angola. The MPLA gave us shelter. Your father will tell you about that one day.’ Pule appears unable to shake off the grip of some memory. Joseph suddenly feels sad for him. ‘Most of our comrades died as a result of UNITA activity on the Eastern Front. We ran out of coffins and buried them in 120mm mortar ammo boxes. Bloody UNITA and the Boers.’

‘You know the boy doesn’t get what you’re on about,’ Sis Violet says. Then, mimicking him, ‘120mm ammo boxes...for God’s sake!’

‘He understands more than he lets on,’ Pule says.

‘You’re talking about a war situation. And he’s fourteen.’

‘You were fourteen when you left home and joined MK...’

‘That was different. We fled the war.’

‘If you don’t think Zambia is also at war, then you’re fooling yourself.’

‘I just want us to be careful.’

They are talking about him as if he’s not present. Joseph asks: ‘What are they doing in Angola?’ Angola sounds like the end of the world.

‘What are they doing?’ Pule repeats the question, lost for words. He looks up at Sis Violet for help. ‘Maybe you can tell him.’

‘It’s the same reason your father came here. Why we all came here.’ Sis Violet wants to continue but is halted as if by something she finds difficult to express. ‘The world,’ she says, ‘is in trouble.’

‘Is ma in trouble?’ Father has made it through difficult places.

‘Hopefully not,’ Sis Violet says. ‘We’ll find out. They’ll have more information in Miramar.’

‘Miramar?’

‘Yes. The underground houses here are named after some of our safe houses in Angola.’

Miramar, Joseph thinks. That has a nice ring to it. The very sound of the name lifts his spirits.

The wind carries strains of a hymn being sung in a school not too far from the residence of Miramar; the voices, mainly without harmony, must belong to pupils in lower primary, who – unlike their equals in higher grades – are excused from punishment when they sing out of tune. They carry on singing, almost certainly swaying to the baton of some ma’am wearing glasses. Joseph longs for a time when things were normal. His absence from home is real.

The situation at the residence makes him even more homesick.

As he steps into the yard, also overgrown with weeds and the flowers that grow on the side of roads, Joseph has a sense that the search for his mother means being delivered from one adult to another. From Matrosov to Mpungose to Pule and Sis Violet – and now: who is going to be his future guide? Or guardian? The question has hardly finished forming itself when the door opens and two men, both stripped to the waist and barefoot, with their khaki slacks rolled up just above the calves, first glare at the newcomers and then direct them to the back. ‘We’re cleaning,’ the taller one says. ‘We’re the men on duty today.’

‘What are men on duty?’ Joseph asks, looking at the fierce growth of bush, mango and rubber trees, a true forest at the back. There is a frame for a broken set of swings, dangly chains replaced with a tyre on a rope; further down as the ground slopes, past a boundary breezeblock wall, is denser bush where treetops partially hide the top of the neighbour’s red roof. Towards the corner is a forest of bamboo stalks, with yellow leaves peeling, adding to the place’s scruffiness. Ma would never tolerate this. ‘Shouldn’t the men on duty be on duty in the garden?’

Sis Violet laughs, again sounding young and joyful. ‘That’ll be the day,’ she says. ‘Robbie and Charlie doing the garden...ha!’

Pule is not amused. 'These are people on duty from morning till nightfall,' he says. 'People living in groups have to take turns cleaning, cooking, generally putting everything in order.'

'What do the others do?'

'Sleep, mainly. Many of them would have been up the whole night, doing two-hour stints of guard duty.'

They are standing at the back of the house. The back door is closed behind a wrought-iron gate.

'Why?'

'We're at war. The Boers can attack any time. No residence is safe.'

As if to stress the element of safety, Joseph starts at the sharp metallic slide of what must be a lot of hasps, bolts and shooters from the inside. There is a sound of something heavy being rolled. Pule shoots Sis Violet a quick look. When the door opens, Joseph is drawn to the shorter man's mouth, toothless gums too pink in the morning light.

'*Hoezit*, Pule,' he says, giving Pule a hug; he then shakes Sis Violet's hand. 'Hallo sis' Vi.'

'Jesus, Charlie,' Pule says, 'you'd think you guys are guarding all the gold of Fort Knox. Talking of which, Charlie, isn't it about time you got some new teeth? You can get them capped with gold these days.'

Charlie laughs good-naturedly. 'The dentist is fixing me a set in the clinic in Emmasdale.' From somewhere in the house come the strains of classical music. Carefully closing the door and returning the locks to their original positions, Charlie quickly drapes a chitenge with the smiling face of Kenneth Kaunda over a machinegun with a magazine case that looks like a big lunchbox, which rests on a tripod; the weapon seems more deadly covered, as if it could come alive, shake off its tent and wreak havoc. Sis Violet sucks on her teeth.

'Better stow that away,' she says. 'Someone quicker will use it on you.'

'Will do,' Charlie says. He seems a little scared of her. 'Comrades are still asleep. Didn't want to wake them up.'

Unconvinced, Sis Violet gives him a disapproving look. 'Still...'

‘Point noted, commissar,’ Pule says, lightening things up. He takes her one hand in his and lets his fingers linger for a moment, but she snatches it away from his grasp. Charlie looks away.

‘Come into the lounge,’ he says. ‘Robbie’s just finishing with the floor.’

But Robbie is far from finished with the tiled floor. His method of work consists of dabbing a handful of wax polish and then buffing a section with his feet, which are swaddled in strips of blanket fabric, shuffling to and fro, like a skier to the rhythm of the music. The room smells of solvent, but Robbie doesn’t seem to mind or hear anything outside of what he is dancing to. Charlie steps forward and points to his own ears and then at the pair of earphones jammed into his comrade’s ears. Jerking aware, as though he were waking from a dream, Robbie removes the cables and whips a Walkman player out of his back pocket. From the top of his other back pocket peeps what seems to be the handle of a pistol, although Joseph can’t be sure.

If the machine gun under its cover was alarming, it’s the sight of the pistol that gets Joseph into a panic. He’s in a strange place where people are on the alert for the enemy, doors bolted and machine guns kept hidden in plain sight. Thinking about it now, he is surprised he has never wondered whether Sobhuza also carried a gun. Recognising something he can’t quite explain, even to himself – something in the way people carry themselves – from Matrosov, Mpungose, Violet, Pule, to the two new people in the Miramar residence – he comes to the conclusion that his father must also have a gun hidden somewhere. It is the reality of life here. He senses Charlie watching him.

‘*Wie’s die klein* terrorist?’

‘Ah,’ Pule says, putting an arm around Joseph’s shoulder and giving a little squeeze. ‘The small terrorist is Joseph. Bra Joe from Kilimanjaro.’

‘This is Comrade Sobhuza’s son,’ Sis Violet says, getting down to business. ‘He wants to know what you people have done with his mother.’

Charlie gives a slow whistle. ‘That’s Comrade Vi, for you,’ he says. ‘None of the twaddle.’ The volume of the classical music track being played somewhere in the house increases.

‘Can I brew you people some can-can?’ Robbie asks. ‘Joseph, would you like some Mazoe?’ He proceeds to the kitchen. There’s the sound of a fridge door

opening. 'Someone's pinched my can of Carlsberg, *filho da puta*, and there's no collie here, just some Mosi.'

In a short while Sis Violet, Joseph, Pule and Charlie are seated outside on the bench in the back. The mango tree provides shelter, although the heat is everywhere. Pule tries the swing, flexing the rope before sitting inside the tyre, swinging it around, smiling like a kid with a toy. 'Give us a cigarette, Robbie.'

Robbie removes a cigarette from the packet, which he throws to Pule. He reaches into his back pocket and produces a huge lighter. As he lights up, he looks at Joseph, seeing the fascination in the boy's eyes. 'Do you want a smoke also?'

'No. I thought that was a gun in your pocket,' Joseph says.

'Don't worry, sonny,' Robbie says. 'We're civilians here. No guns.'

Joseph feels a pang of disappointment at being lied to by someone he was just beginning to like. Just then, four more people – three men, one of them hobbling on crutches, and one woman – come out from the house. Pule, Charlie, and Robbie scramble to their feet.

Looking slightly embarrassed, the man on crutches says: '*Vol'no*,' and waves them to sit down. He gives Sis Violet a long look. 'You don't salute, Comrade Violet?'

'I only salute the national anthem, Comrade Mbizo,' Sis Violet says.

'And the leadership?'

'Only when in uniform.'

Joseph doesn't know whether she means she reserves her salutes for leaders in uniform or salutes leaders only when *she* is in uniform. He finds this slightly amusing and searches the faces of the others. He wonders why they don't seem to see anything funny. He remembers a prank they once played at school. Caesar was a known joker, always coming up with the funniest stories after every weekend. Popular, he was targeting one of the girls that Henry Mwila had kissed at his fourteenth birthday party. One day, Joseph and the Mwila twins rounded up the rest of the class and told them of their plan. During the first recess, where Caesar habitually held court, the class waited in stolid silence for him to finish telling his funny story. At the end, someone said: 'Caesar, please tell us when you reach the punchline.' Caesar squirmed with embarrassment, providing the

punchline that had some of the conspirators laughing until tears streamed down their cheeks.

But the people around Comrade Mbizo aren't about to collapse with laughter; they all look grave. Comrade Mbizo changes the mood with a soft chuckle that starts from inside him, rises in volume as it shakes his heavy body. Dressed in a red *guayabera* and khakis, he seems relaxed, a smile never leaving his smooth face. He's likeable. Easing his heavy bulk into the chair provided for him, he extends the left leg, which ends with a foot encased in a plaster cast.

'Comrade Violet,' he says, 'uncompromising as ever. It's good. We need people like you, who keep authority on its toes.'

Sis Violet looks away. After a brief moment of silence, Robbie says: 'Talking of authority, Comrade Mbizo. We have young Joseph here, who can't find his mother.'

'I didn't think,' Comrade Mbizo says, his tone still jocular, 'that Lusaka stores are so developed that kids are losing their mothers there.' When the general laughter subsides, he continues, 'Seriously, though, what's that got to do with us?'

'He's Sobhuza's son.'

'Ah, Sobhuza. Anyone know where he is?'

Sis Violet comes in. 'Wouldn't it be more sensible,' she asks, 'for the boy, Joseph, to give us a list of all places his mother frequents?'

'From what I understand,' Pule says, 'he's already been all over the show.'

'What's most important is why he thinks we would know where she is,' Comrade Mbizo addresses Sis Violet. 'Has Sobhuza disappeared with her before?'

'No,' Joseph says. 'Ma and baba have never really gone away at the same time.' Ma once disappeared for some days looking for baba, but he's not volunteering that information. He's suddenly aware of the utter folly of it all; it was a mistake letting Leila go. Leila and her horses, each with a blind eye. And Sputnik, now remembered with fondness. The adults are adults, except for Sis Violet, who spoke earlier of a baby and holds herself like she's going to give birth not too long from now. He knows something about pregnancy; one day one of the girls at school had to be sent home after it was discovered she was pregnant. He remembers her face, acne ridden, her mouth surly as she collected her books and

made her way out of the gate, wearing the blazer she had always worn even on the hottest day.

They talk, the grownups. Each one of them – except Sis Violet, who has become very quiet – comes up with a suggestion. Someone else's explanation full of common sense knocks down an earlier suggestion. That in turn is mocked – '*I beg to differ with the comrade*' – until everyone, including Comrade Mbizo, slips into silence, all of them now looking at Sis Violet as if her own silence were an affront, an accusation.

'We have to go to the police,' Sis Violet says quietly. 'If we find no joy there, then we'll search the hospitals.'

'We can't do that. We have to ask the chief rep; he's the liaison between the ANC and Zambian officialdom.' Mbizo sounds like someone who has dealt with officialdom – whatever that is – before. 'The police will then throw it back at us. You people are always getting into scrapes. Especially over the weekends. That's what they'll say.'

'Except Chanda, his mother, is a Zambian national,' Sis Violet says. 'That she's married to a South African doesn't mean they'll wash their hands of her.'

'Whatever it is, it means a lot of legwork,' Comrade Mbizo says. 'I would offer my car but...' he points to the leg encased in plaster with his crutch, '...it was wrecked in the accident in Makeni.'

'We could ask Matrosov to lend us a runabout,' Robbie offers.

'I'll make a requisition for transport,' Sis Violet says. 'We will look very bad with the Zambians if one of *theirs* disappears and there's suspicion that one of *ours* is implicated.'

'"Implicated"?' Comrade Mbizo cuts in. 'What do you mean "implicated"? As far as I know, this is the first time we've heard of this matter. We don't have to jump to conclusions.'

'I don't work with the police,' Sis Violet puts in quietly, 'but anyone who has the merest understanding of investigations relating to anything from missing persons to murder will agree that family – the spouse – becomes the first port of call. Comrade Sobs is nowhere, and his wife has disappeared. You have to take your pick whether you want this coming out in South African newspapers or if you let us get answers on our own terms.'

‘And what will you do with your answers?’

‘I don’t know. I only know that Joseph here will have to go back home and tell his family what has happened.’

Sis Violet levels Comrade Mbizo with a gaze. The latter, who has otherwise been firm in his approach, seems to have sunk into his *guayabera*. ‘Well,’ he says, looking around to ensure everyone’s support, ‘I agree with Comrade Violet. This has to be conducted with discretion.’

‘This’, Joseph understands, means the campaign to look for his mother. He is suddenly overcome with tiredness and sadness, that feeling of great weakness. It’s been a long morning, and the heat is now overwhelming.

‘Is there somewhere,’ he asks, ‘where I can lie down for a short while?’

‘Come with me,’ Robbie says.

‘Thank you.’

CHAPTER 9

Joseph Mabaso wakes up with a start and gets up from the sofa, woolly-headed. For a moment, before realising where he is, he thinks he's forgotten to pack his homework.

There's still some reluctant light outside, the period between daytime and night. Lit by an overhead bulb, everything in the lounge – the tables and chairs and the shelves of the kitchen dresser crammed with mismatched crockery, plastic plates and beakers behind glass – stands out as clear and bright as chitenge cloths at the marketplace. Sounds of a school soccer game filter into the room and bring back the memory of school and, with it, the fact that he actually yearns to be there, behind the desk. Hearing the shrill whistle and voices excited in triumph or irritation, Joseph knows he wouldn't mind the brawling during break time, the bullying or even the punishments. He recalls the banter, the ragging: *Your mother's so fat she...*

My mother. What, he thinks, remembering Violet's question, if his ma has really lost her mind and is blundering down the streets of Lusaka? He imagines her not knowing who she is and therefore incapable of recognising him or his siblings or any member of the family. What happens if she lurches into the township slums of Chaisa, Chibolya, George, Kanyama or Garden Compound where there is no running water and people build shallow wells and do number twos in pit latrines. What would ma do in that situation, she who takes pride in hers being one of the first houses to have electricity and running water in Helen Kaunda? Suddenly alarmed, he remembers that the reports of missing persons in the *Zambia Daily News* usually appear in the middle of the page; at the bottom is a section in memory of dead people. Smudged black-and-white photos accompany both sections of the paper.

Darkness falls with a lot of activity in the house, most of it behind closed doors. Seeing light coming from under the doors of both bedrooms, Joseph strains to hear what's being discussed. It sounds serious, but it's all a murmur.

Robbie comes out of a room. Smoke follows him, making it hard to see who's in the room however hard Joseph tries to get a glimpse through the crack in the door. Robbie smiles at Joseph's curiosity.

‘Wow, you were going like a Kraz there, Joe from Kilimanjaro,’ he says.
‘Uzizwa kanjan’emzimbeni?’

Joseph wipes his mouth with the sleeve of his jacket, assuring himself that, if he indeed had been snoring, at least he hadn’t been dribbling.

‘It was a good sleep, thank you,’ Joseph says.

Still tired, he knows he can’t just open up about everything. He’s wondering what to make of these people; they are warm but there is still something about how they hold themselves which he can’t quite pin down. It reminds him of the way Sobhuza holds himself. It’s like when someone is here with you but maintains a distance at the same time. It’s almost like the relationship people have with fire: it’s great to keep the house warm but dangerous if brought too close.

More and more people come out of the rooms, some with mugs in their hands and almost everyone holding, lighting, smoking or offering a cigarette, so that, as they range themselves around the table, their heads are in the clouds of smoke. Someone brings in the bench from outside. Joseph folds the blanket and places it on the armrest of the sofa, feeling awkward. Just then there is a sound of a car pulling up, the tyres spewing out a shower of gravel before the growl of a dying engine. Doors slam. There’s a knock on the front door and, followed by Pule, Comrade Mbizo enters, hobbling on his crutches, bringing in with him the smell of freshly turned earth. He is helped out of a leather jacket draped over his broad shoulders by one of the two serious-looking men with him, one so thin he makes Pule look like a fatty bombom, the other bulky, both wearing glasses. No Violet. Comrade Mbizo looks around, counting the number of people with his eyes as he lowers himself onto the chair at the top of the table. *‘Waar’s ou Charlie?’*

‘He’s outside,’ Robbie says. ‘On guard duty.’

Opening his briefcase and taking out a sheaf of papers and a notebook, Comrade Mbizo looks grim. He asks, ‘Okay to start?’

It doesn’t sound as if he actually wants permission, just something adults say to let you know they’re about to make a speech, the way Uncle Agrippa always clears his throat before telling a long story. When Comrade Mbizo’s briefcase lands on the floor, it makes a clunking sound. Fanning his face against

the smoke, he starts speaking, sounding a lot like Gogo Mulubwa. Gogo Mulubwa puts on her glasses when she tells the history of the Zambian struggle for independence. Even when not reading from a text, she has the glasses on as if they help her tell the story. It's the same thing with Comrade Mbizo, although his pair of glasses is in the form of a pipe, which he fills with strands of rum and maple tobacco from a pouch. He takes out a box of matches, rattles it but doesn't light up. Appearing comfortable with his unlit pipe, he tells the group that 'the leadership' will be arriving anytime in Lusaka. 'The chief has announced that something big is happening at home,' he says, 'and this will have an implication for the struggle.'

'What do you think will happen?' asks Pule.

Comrade Mbizo looks at him as if calculating the distance that the words have travelled before coming out of Pule's lips. Something flickers across his face. 'Comrade Pule,' he asks, 'have you been drinking?'

Robbie and the others exchange looks as if the question brings to light the reality of something they'd long known without realising it. Pule's eyes harden. He covers his mouth with his hand. Joseph remembers Uncle Agrippa when he's had too much to drink, wilting under the cold stare of Aunt Taona. The more his uncle pleaded his case, the drunker he looked. It is the same with Pule; he belches, and the room is suddenly filled with raw fumes.

'It was just a tot of *cachaça* with some *bras van my*,' he says, trying to fan the smell away with his hand. 'It just stinks an awful lot.'

There's a general unimpressed chuckle from some of the members of the group. This is stilled by Comrade Mbizo's even tone of condemnation. 'I want you to take your things and leave. This is a serious meeting here. Someone help him with today's password, else Charlie will take him for an intruder and...'

'Awu, Comrade Mbizo...'

'Please get out.'

Pule looks at Joseph, and there's something of a beaten dog in his eyes. 'What about the boy?' he asks. 'We brought him here...'

'Correction. *Violet* brought him here. We'll take charge, don't worry.'

There's silence while Pule prepares to leave. Robbie makes to stand up but Comrade Mbizo lifts his hand and Robbie sits back down. The others have

blank expressions; one of the women gives a long-drawn-out sigh as Pule goes out into the night. There's a murmured response to his *Goodnight, comrades*.

They aren't going to help him get any closer to knowing where his ma is. Comrade Mbizo, full of himself, perhaps another one of those revolutionaries despised by Mpungose, is carrying on about the Dutch settlers who arrived in the Cape in 1652. Two other women have joined the group, still no Violet; one of them is called Chuckles – Comrade Chuckles – who used to be a beauty queen way back when. Joseph wonders if her heyday was anywhere around the period of the arrival of the Dutch. He gets up and crosses through the kitchen, opens the back door and steps outside.

He catches his breath at the blast of evening air, which carries a tang of cooking smoke. He goes to sit on the makeshift swing, pulling up his legs, wondering if there are any snakes in the bushes. He feels light as the tyre swings to and fro, to and fro, a whirl of images, the house reeling, and the back door smudging: a runny watercolour painting. Caught up as he is in his play, he almost doesn't hear the hiss from the bushes, which sounds like gas escaping from a bottle.

There it is again, now followed by a whisper: 'Hey, Joseph?'

It's Charlie in the shadows where he has become one with the bushes. Joseph almost breaks out laughing when his eyes get used to the darkness. Charlie is crouched on his haunches, holding an AK-47 with the barrel pointed skywards. His eyes, white and wide in a gloomy field, remind Joseph of the coyote in the television cartoon the moment he realises he has once more been outsmarted by the bird and something horrible is about to befall him.

'I wanted to tell you to close the door quickly when you came out,' Charlie says. 'You know we have problems with rats and field mice?'

Joseph doesn't respond. 'Is this what guard duty is all about?' he asks. 'You stay in the bush until what happens?'

'I don't stay in one place.' Charlie seems to find the suggestion offensive. Shifting to one side, he gets to his feet. 'I have to move around to cover all points of the house.'

'For two hours?'

‘Yes. Until someone comes to relieve me.’

‘What happens if they don’t? If they forget?’

‘My orders are to be at my post until relieved.’

‘How do you pass the time?’ Two hours is a lifetime.

‘In the past I used to do some mental arithmetic, you know, convert the hours to seconds. Two hours is seventy-two hundred seconds. But then I’d frustrate myself. Now, I imagine myself on a slow march, going, *hop-one-two three-four*, and that’s one second, all the way until I reach seven thousand two hundred. Sometimes I let my mind go to the streets of my childhood, perhaps track the whole journey from home to exile. The people I’ve known, some who passed through my fingers like water. Often, though, I just empty my mind of anything, any thoughts connected with time. In a word,’ he adds with a small laugh, ‘I dream.’

There’s silence. The night sounds are loud. Joseph wonders how anyone would ever hear the soft steps of the enemy in this racket. ‘I see too many people smoking around here,’ Joseph says. ‘Don’t you smoke?’

‘You can’t smoke on the post,’ Charlie says. ‘It’s a sure-fire way to get yourself picked off by a sniper.’

‘A sniper?’

‘Someone who shoots from a concealed spot...ah, forget it.’ Charlie pauses. ‘Are they having an interesting talk inside?’

‘I left in 1912, the birth of the ANC.’

‘Oh, boy...they’ve got a long way to go.’

‘When,’ Joseph asks, ‘is someone going to take me to my mother? Where’s Sis Violet?’

‘You should ask Pule about Violet.’

‘They chunked him out. He was drunk.’

‘Pule? Chunked out. You know he’s one of the few of us who has actually fought inside the country? He might not look it, but he’s a real *nkalakatha* once he gets a gun in his hand.’ It’s like he’s talking to himself, his tone laced with scorn. ‘Mbizo and all the *matwetwes*, they all talk big, but they’ve never seen combat.’

‘How do you get to go and fight inside the country?’

‘You get chosen, and it’s an honour. Your father has been inside and back.’

‘Where’s he now? Is he inside? With ma?’

‘Kid,’ Charlie says, suddenly wary, ‘I don’t know. The big chiefs will give us a clue. Perhaps Comrade Violet will find out something more.’

The political lesson over, a few of the people linger, smoking and chatting. Comrade Mbizo and Chuckles share a joke, laughing with heads thrown back. The room is full of smoke but Comrade Mbizo no longer seems bothered by it. During a supper of chicken, *nshima* and potatoes, washed down with orange squash, the group huddles around a small transistor radio. Listening to a Radio Freedom broadcast, which is so full of static that Comrade Mbizo has to keep on turning the tuning dial to get a better reception, members of the group exchange glances and nod approval at choice words and phrases. Here, Robbie mouths, *OR*, putting a finger to his lips.

‘...and so,’ the voice says, clear now, ‘... as we review the resolutions of the Kabwe Conference, we have to bear in mind that we have to escalate our struggle and strike at the enemy, which has shown its brutality and callous disregard for life with the massacre of thirteen of our comrades and numerous Batswana nationals in the 14 June 1985 raid on Gaborone...’

Comrade Mbizo lifts his eyes from the radio and looks straight at Joseph. ‘Hey, Robbie,’ he says, ‘I don’t think the boy should be hearing all this...’

‘His father’s part of it, Comrade Mbizo,’ Robbie says. ‘Might as well know what kind of world we live in.’

Despite his words, Robbie leaves the lounge and returns with a bundle of linen, which he places in Joseph’s arms and points him to his sleeping place, a mattress on the floor of the second bedroom. There’s also a double bunk bed and a sofa bed along one wall on which ironed clothes are stacked. Joseph wonders why they aren’t packed inside the corner cupboard, which partly blocks the window. For a moment he sees Chanda standing framed in the doorway, one hand on the doorjamb, wrinkling her nose and tearing a strip off Charlie and Robbie. You’re men on duty but you don’t know the first rule of maintaining a house. Don’t you know that cleanliness is next to godliness?

Even though he knows she's far away, Joseph actually feels quite close to his ma, the distance giving him a chance to think about her and draw a picture of her in his mind. The quiet voice on the radio, which, Joseph knows, belongs to Oliver Tambo, filters into the bedroom in waves, soothing. In a moment it is substituted by someone reciting a long speech, or perhaps a poem, saying: '...yes, Mandela...we shall be moved...' sounding as if weary and from a place far, far away.

Robbie enters, shaking his head as though in disagreement with something happening in the lounge. Then, showing great athleticism, he jumps off the floor and lands on the upper bunk. Freshly relieved from guard duty but looking the worse for wear, Charlie also enters the bedroom, yawns and flops face down on the lower bunk. After some minutes of stretching, he props himself on one elbow, patting his pocket for cigarettes.

'There's a certain clarity after you've been on guard duty, Chumza,' he says, lighting up. 'You see things for what they really are.'

Robbie chuckles. 'And what great vision have you suddenly stumbled on, Oh Great Seer?'

'You joke, Chumza, but I'm seriously thinking of young Joseph here.'

'Yes?'

'And the fact that we've cut that link with our young selves,' Charlie says. 'We are guerrillas. We call ourselves *izinyamazane*, wild animals. But wild animals are also hunted for their meat, so we're fair game ourselves.'

'And so?'

'I'm not sure we really know what everything is all about.' Charlie seems to be speaking to something inside him. 'We left home years ago. We've seen so much horror, it's impossible for us to even dream normally. Joseph is looking for his mother. For us, a mother is just another woman in the marketplace or in a chitenge doing the *skokotshi* to welcome KK at the airport.'

'Chanda never danced for President Kaunda,' Joseph says.

The two men laugh. 'It's nothing to be ashamed of,' Charlie says. 'We've been in countries where nothing moves if the head of state is out of the country. No decision is made. And when he comes back – and it's usually a man – he

expects the whole of the cabinet to line up at the airport for a welcoming party. And musicians, women provide the entertainment.'

'What about the opposition?' Robbie asks, mischief glinting in his eyes. 'Do they line up too?'

'The opposition?' Charlie sounds genuinely surprised. 'They can't come to the airport as they are usually in prison.'

'Think that will happen to us?'

Charlie is emphatic. 'I don't think so, Chumza. OR hates pomp and ceremony.'

'Time will tell.'

In the quiet of the night, perhaps thinking Joseph is fast asleep, Charlie and Robbie talk about the trouble they've seen. It's a conversation that meanders, going east and west, no direction, each of the two men filling in words where the other has lapsed into silence or when pausing to take a drag on the cigarette. The silences, he can tell, are more important than the spoken word, in the same way that, in the days of peace and happiness, ma and Sobhuza would sit under the tree outside and in its shade say nothing but allow silence to do the talking, sometimes bursting out laughing at nothing. 'They're laughing at flies passing,' Emmanuel would say, he who can tell why anything happens under the sun. On one such occasion which stands out in his mind, Joseph and Emmanuel were spying on their parents when – suddenly – Sobhuza leaned forward and, gathering Chanda in his arms, he made a big show of planting a loud kiss on her mouth. From the way he was staring at the window from which the boys were peeping, a smile on his face, it was clear he knew the boys were watching. While Emmanuel gave a small, embarrassed chuckle, Joseph wished he could erase that scene from his mind.

Now, lying under a scratchy blanket, on the lumpy bedding spread on the floor, Joseph goes back to the men's conversation about what the future holds, whether they, too, will be forced to keep members of the opposition behind bars. This triggers a memory of Chanda and Sobhuza arguing about the fate of the hungry *kabalala* who was caught in the act of burgling the house. Chanda said something about pitying Tambo and Mandela because they, too, will govern a

country where hunger and poverty will drive some people to become *kabalalas*. Was this a curse on the part of Chanda, a wish that mirrored his own desire to see his father humbled? Chanda, he tells himself, has seen a lot and has swallowed so much that must have left a bad taste in her mouth. In an instant of panic, he wonders how he'll know if ma has come back. How will the family know where he is, to tell him, it's okay, Jojo, come back, ma's here, she'd just decided to call on Auntie Jemima in Ndola, you know how it is with ma, making snap decisions is in her nature. Except that ma is not like that; she's dependable. It's her constancy that decides him that, if she arrives and doesn't find him, she'll move heaven and Earth to get him back home. While this gives him a measure of comfort, comfort that, he knows, is based on fiction, on something untested, as he's never gone away from home before, he is suddenly struck by the realisation that he might never see her again.

The smoking men's chat resumes and cuts into a moment when Joseph is at his most miserable, tears rolling into his ears. Gulping, swallowing something yucky, he listens to them talking. The burning cigarette makes a regular journey between the bunks, momentarily flaring up and creating shadows under a smoker's face, going up and down. At first their conversation centres on various people, comrades, including some who were in the meeting earlier. He remembers Aunt Thelma saying that men gossip a lot.

'Hey, Jack,' Robbie says, lowering his voice to a whisper, 'do you think he's doing Chuckles?'

'No, Chumza,' Charlie answers. '*Daai* Chuckles, *sy's soos die* Sahara – hot and dry.'

'Hot and dry, hey? Have you taken your camel for a walk in there?'

'Everybody knows.'

They break out in laughter, and then quickly shush each other up. Then, dropping his voice and thus causing Joseph to prick up his ears, Robbie says: 'Seems like some of the women are up to no good in the movement,' he says. '*Die ouens van die* Green House *in Chilenje het 'n auntie toegesluit.*'

'Jailed?' Charlie whistles softly. 'Do you know who it is?'

'They call her Mother Goose. Those fellows with their code names.'

‘Mother Goose...’ Charlie says, wonderingly; sucking in his breath, he asks: ‘*Waar het jy daaie Kulikov gehoor, Chumza? Who told you?*’

‘Since when do you ask where people get their intel, Jack?’

‘Awu, Chumza,’ Charlie says, ‘*jy ken, mos. I’m not an impimpi.*’ He pauses for a while. Then he asks: ‘You think Mother Goose *is die laaitie’s...?*’

Joseph hears the shrug in Robbie’s voice: ‘Who knows? What do *you* think, Jack?’

‘I think I’m tired, Chumza.’

‘We’re all tired, Jack,’ Robbie says, something cold, like a warning, having crept into his tone. ‘Comrade Mbizo speaks of a shake-up after Kabwe, and the cockups in the front areas where our people have been dying like flies. And then there’s the *Mkatashiya* – the mutiny – in Angola. Back here, some of our security people have been arrested by the Zambians, with AK-47s, TNT and Russian landmines. So, yes, we’re tired, Jack, but we might have to move fast and find other safe houses.’

‘*Wat van die laaitie, Chumza?*’

‘I don’t know, Jack. The boy’s part of the whole thing now.’

‘*Die Here weet.*’

‘*Gaan slaap, Jack.*’ There’s a scratchy sound as Robbie stubs out his cigarette butt in a tin ashtray. Then he asks: ‘Hey, Joseph, you asleep?’

Joseph mumbles like someone deep in sleep. After a while, he hears Robbie breathing deeply.

Fully awake, he plays over in his head what the men were talking about, probing the language, the words aimed at keeping secrets, for anything that could help him get nearer to finding out where his mother is. Because, increasingly, he’s convinced that her fate is bound up with that of these people – his father’s people – whom he knows to be capable of strange behaviour, even violence. They have guns. They guard their houses at night against the enemy. Who is the enemy? The way they talked about the woman, Chuckles: he has heard Zambian men discussing women – when men talk, not realising that the children are within earshot – but not like this. He suspects he might just know a little more than what he’s supposed to know about men and women – and camels that walk in

the desert, a knowledge gleaned from his eavesdropping into ma and Aunt Thelma's exchanges. At school, boys talk about their conquests and fantasies, but do so with a measure of amazement, anxiety even, which comes, he suspects, from their limited understanding of what women are about. But the guerrillas' brief conversation, in those languages he can't understand, but which, curiously, he understood all too well, was full of scorn, something close to hatred. What would such men do to a woman...to Mother Goose?

In sleep, he dreams of boulders rolling towards him down a hill. As he pushes them away, he hears Emmanuel's voice. He can't quite tell what his brother is saying, but it sounds urgent. Then Mulubwa changes places with Emmanuel and, for a while, the two talk over each other in a language at once familiar and jumbled. He wakes up several times in the night, at first not really knowing where he is until the snores of the two men bring him back to the stuffy bedroom. He finally falls asleep with sounds of uneasy laughter still echoing in his head.

CHAPTER 10

The morning starts off on a bad note. From where he leans against the cream Peugeot 504, Joseph can hear Pule shouting. Even though not unused to Pule's moods, he can tell there is something different this time around. There's no doubt Pule is suffering.

The door bursts open and Sis Violet comes staggering back several steps before steadying herself. Standing in the doorway with his upper body pale against the interior gloom of the house, Pule waves his thin arms angrily as if beating an unseen drum.

'Buya la, wena,' he shouts, 'and explain this thing about the baby...'

'There was no *baby*, babes,' Sis Violet says, scraping mud from the soles of her trainers with a stick. Throwing the stick away, she steps towards Pule and puts a hand on his shoulder. 'I keep on telling you I *had* to do this.'

'This?' Meaning what? Pretending you are pregnant?'

'Yes, *babes*, I didn't want to go back to Angola. It's that simple. Can you imagine me in combat gear back in Caxito, Pango or Malanje? They don't send pregnant women to those places.'

'And so...*me?*' Pule chokes. 'I believed I was going to be a father, and now you pull this MCW stunt on me.'

'Pule?' Sis Violet is suddenly calm. 'Pull yourself together. We're in the struggle here. I love you, but we can't have babies, not here, not yet.'

'But I wanted this baby...'

'Want, want, you sound like a twelve-year old.'

'Argh,' Pule says, his voice thick with rage, *'sharmuta,'* and slams the door in Violet's face.

In the car, Joseph is full of questions, which he dares not ask. Sitting straight behind the wheel, Sis Violet wears an unusually grim expression. Even though Joseph senses she's far from chatty, his curiosity gets the better of him.

'So,' he asks, 'you're in trouble?'

Sis Violet keeps her eyes on the road. 'Mind your own business.'

‘He’s very angry.’

‘People always get angry when they don’t get what they want.’

‘Is that what’s happening with...with the revolution?’ Without waiting for the answer, he goes on. ‘With the struggle, people not getting what they want?’

‘It’s different. Pule thought he was going to become a father. But, me, I had to act pregnant to get out of situations.’ She gives him a look. ‘You’re full of questions today, aren’t you? But then, when are you *never* full of questions?’

‘Is that how it is with revolutionaries,’ he asks, ‘putting on an act?’

‘What do you know about revolutionaries?’ Then she cocks her head to the side and looks at him as if from a great height. ‘You sound just like Mpungose – Comrade Mpungose. What did he actually say to you?’

‘He just said you’re all a bunch of lazybones.’

‘He’s been driving that truck for far too long.’ Sis Violet says. ‘Diesel fumes are clogging his brain.’

‘But why does he have a problem with you?’

‘The old geezers are paying us back for our insolence,’ Sis Violet explains. ‘When we arrived here in ’76, ’77, we found all these sad old guys, *umgwenya*, spunkless and nostalgic for past glories, who’d left home in the ’60s, and we gave them a tough time, accusing them of being scared to go back home and fight the Boers. They just looked at us and shook their heads. The shoe is now on the other foot. We never imagined that in ’89 we’d still be cooling our heels so far away from home.’

‘And you hadn’t yet learnt MCW,’ Joseph says, tasting the letters in his mouth. ‘What’s MCW, anyway?’

‘Malawian Christian Workers,’ Sis Violet replies readily. ‘Why?’

‘I notice ANC people use abbreviations a lot – DLB, MIC – and now MCW.’

‘MCW is military combat work,’ Sis Violet says, ‘which teaches you how to work underground, in enemy territory, something you wouldn’t understand.’

‘And so, Pule...’

‘Comrade Pule to you...’

‘...Comrade Pule says you’re using MCW on him.’

‘Simply meaning that I’m applying training I received in the GDR.’

‘There you go again, GDR.’

‘The German Democratic Republic, where our people went for training in intelligence and counter-espionage.’

‘Espionage...like *Spy 13*?’

‘Yes. Although a little different.’ She pauses, considering, talking more to herself than to Joseph. ‘Pule just thinks you must make a baby to prove you’re a man.’

‘Would a baby have made Pule...Comrade Pule...very happy?’

‘All men are happy when someone else has to give birth, just as long as *they* don’t have the responsibility of pregnancy.’

Joseph wonders what it’s like to be pregnant. It’s not such a nice thing to consider. Babies are lovely, from a distance. He remembers Mulilo as a baby, all pumpkin-coloured and squishy with stringy hair; he’s not so sure he would have enjoyed being in ma’s shoes then, dealing with all that yellow *kaka* sticking to nappies like Velcro. He hits his head with his hand. Sis Violet glances at him.

‘What’s the matter?’ she asks.

‘I just didn’t want to think about ma,’ he says.

Thinking about ma fills him with sadness. All along he’s chosen to quieten her voice in his mind, but now, here he is, allowing her to crowd his thoughts. Remembering her now brings back the first time he felt the loss of her absence, the realisation that the person who’d always filled his world is gone. It’s being out of touch with everything, as if underwater with your feet not touching steady ground. Maybe this is how Pule feels, losing a baby who never was.

‘Then,’ Joseph asks, ‘all that other stuff. What’s a *sharmuta*?’

‘It’s Arabic for bitch. What you’d call a *hule*, words you should never use, Joseph.’ Sis Violet shakes her head. ‘Pule has gone through too many military camps of various countries where, besides experience, he must have picked up a lot of swear words. Other times, when he gets mad, he uses words like *kurva*, *puta*.’

Bitch. *Hule*. Images flit through Joseph’s mind. The faceless couple being brought out on a stretcher at the Kanyama Compound, the taunting crowd, all becoming one face, one mouth, one voice. Ma and Sobhuza fighting, their urgent breath carrying words that filter into the ears of their children. The *kabalala* with a puffed-up face and lips like inflated inner tubes of a wheel. The whole

world he has entrusted to the past returns into the space he occupies with Sis Violet in the car. Soon, there are the siblings, Mulilo, Banji and Emmanuel – and then Gogo Mulubwa's words ring in his head: *You must go find your mother*. He can almost feel the texture of the kwacha notes she gave him at their last meeting. And then the thought occurs to him again. What if ma has actually come back? How would he know? What if exactly at this moment, there's a hue and cry back home and everyone's out looking for him, Joseph? But, then Gogo Mulubwa has given him her blessing. *I'll take care of things*.

He is sure that if ma were to be found, he would certainly hear from Gogo Mulubwa, whose network stretches to all the nooks and crannies of Lusaka. *Come back, boy, my baby's back!* Aunt Thelma would look at him from those eyes that are always full of distances. *Mchimwene wanga, mwakhala kuti? Where have you been?*

'Come back, Joseph!'

Sis Violet's shout is all the more jarring because she is normally so soft spoken. He must have drifted off. It's early in the morning, and he's already feeling as if he's been hours on the road. He wipes the corner of his mouth with the sleeve of his jacket.

'I'm sorry,' Joseph says.

'You need to stay alert here, Joseph,' Sis Violet says. 'I'm taking a chance as it is, travelling with you. Zambia is not a red zone like some of the front areas, but there's still danger. I could be a source of great danger to you, purely by association, so you'd better buck up.'

She keeps the windows of the car closed to shut out the fumes and noise of traffic. Still, Joseph thinks he can catch the smell of meat roasted on griddles on either side of Sable Road, where vendors manning makeshift stalls also offer everything from car exhausts to peanuts. Schoolchildren run in the opposite direction towards Mtendere Primary School, and Joseph wonders if they, too, took part of the singing he heard – when was it? The days have fused together, and he can hardly tell if it's days or weeks that he's been away from home. He's a little scared of losing track of time. He takes out his watch and sees that it stopped at quarter past six. He shakes it next to his ear. Nothing.

Then they drive up Independence Avenue, past dignified buildings Joseph sees as if for the first time. Well-kept lawns and rock formations front the High Court, Lusaka City Council and Civic Centre and the cathedral. Uniformed police officers are posted at the entrances. As Sis Violet edges the car to the kerb, one of the policemen waves her along, pointing to a fenced-in parking lot. Before getting out, Sis Violet checks her face in the mirror and smiles at Joseph as he looks up at her with his own smile.

‘Come on,’ she says, ‘let’s go find your mom.’

Joseph walks a step behind Sis Violet along the stuffy corridors of the offices of the Civic Centre. It’s an open-plan office, and there are knots of people consulting clerks seated behind their desks. In the middle distance is a glass cubicle in which an older man sits. His desk and chair set on a higher level, it’s as if he’s on a throne. There are many other members of the public milling around, standing in queues and seeking service. Some shout, others speak in low voices, their general attitude meek in the face of the clerks, who, on the whole, appear bored and sullen.

The majority of the public are out-of-towners by their clothes, which are musty with travel. The women, laden even when seated, tend to children; one or two boys are his agemates, and, like him, they should be at school. Although not quite sure what day of the week it is, the neat and tidy appearance of the schoolchildren he saw earlier, coupled with the general Monday feeling he has that something bad is around the corner, tells him it’s early in the week. The dials on the wall clock tick-tick to form a ninety-degree angle: 9.30am. On the clerk’s desk, the digital calendar reads MON OCT, the day, month and date – which he can’t quite see – each stuck neatly in little squares. He wonders if the three changes to four exactly at one minute past midnight or if the clerk jiggles the figure with a ballpoint pen. With a shock, he realises how near it is to Independence Day. He’s sad because it’s quite unlikely that ma will be discovered soon, and this will be the first time he won’t be at home for the holiday.

He doesn’t have much time to dwell on his misery. For the second time this morning, Sis Violet’s voice rings out, loud and surprising in its vehemence.

‘No,’ she is shouting, pointing a finger at the clerk sitting at the desk across from her. ‘You won’t speak to me like that.’

The clerk gets to his feet, a tall fleshy man with a broad face. The overhead light shines on his shaven head.

‘Who do you think you are?’ he asks.

A smaller man in a white safari suit and matching white shoes emerges from his cubicle. As Joseph watches him approaching like a soldier, eyes flashing behind spectacles, he is reminded of Uncle Agrippa, furious after being forbidden by Aunt Taona to have another drink. But the difference here is that the senior official is obviously on the attack, and no one wants to get in his way. There is a scraping of chairs as the other clerks, who’ve been watching the row, scuttle back to their desks and busy themselves with paperwork.

Arms akimbo, the bespectacled man looks for the source of the commotion before his gaze finally rests on the big clerk facing Sis Violet.

‘Mr Funjika?’ he asks, ‘eh, eh, *vuto ndi chiyani apa?*’

Mr Funjika seems to shrink in size as if wanting to get to the level of the senior man.

‘I’m sorry, Mr Pemba, *sah*,’ he says. ‘It’s just that she made impertinent demands.’

‘What demands?’ Mr Pemba asks.

‘I just asked for the recent entries for deaths,’ Sis Violet says. ‘I wasn’t being impertinent.’

Mr Pemba turns to Sis Violet. ‘But are you authorised to get that information? Isn’t there someone from the Refugee Liaison of the OAU Liberation Commission?’

‘Exactly my words, *sah*,’ Mr Funjika says. He licks his lips.

‘The person I’m looking for is a Zambian national, this boy’s mother,’ Sis Violet says. ‘Married to a South African.’

‘And then,’ Mr Pemba asks, of no one in particular, ‘what seems to be the trouble?’

‘He was very rude, Mr Funjika,’ Sis Violet says. ‘Instead of talking to me, he told his colleague, “*Anthu othawa kwawo ndi ochenjela.*” I found that insulting.’

The other clerks, who've had their heads down during the exchange, look up at each other at Sis Violet's statement. All except the other clerk, Mr Funjika's colleague linked to Sis Violet's complaint. Hunched over a typewriter, this lean, rangy man in brown trousers and brown shoes seems frightened, dabbing his face with a handkerchief that looks whiter and larger than Kenneth Kaunda's. His shoulder blades form twin hillocks through the fabric of his yellow poplin shirt.

In that instant of detecting the man's fear, Joseph's heart skips a beat as he realises Sis Violet is in danger. Mr Funjika has sparked off this general feeling of dread. When Mr Funjika said refugees think they are clever, he hadn't bargained on being overheard or understood by the South African woman. But now, here it is, out in the open – and Sis Violet is bristling with anger. But, to what end? Seeing another no-nonsense and combative side to her, he notices she's quite small in build, no bigger than Mr Pemba, who, in any event, is protected by the authority he wields. The men around her, facing her, are big. And she is in this situation because of him. He tries to catch her attention, to contribute to the discussion, but she puts up a hand to reassure him that everything is under control.

The movement alerts Mr Pemba to Joseph's presence.

'Ah,' he says, beckoning Joseph over, '*bwera kuno, mwana*. How did you lose your mother?'

'I didn't lose her,' Joseph says, biting his tongue from snapping: *For God's sake, ma is not a bunch of marbles*. 'She's gone missing. And we're worried.'

'Come to my office,' Mr Pemba says, his sweeping wave of the hand inviting both Joseph and Sis Violet. He stops at Mr Funjika's desk. 'I want to see you once I've finished with my visitors,' he whispers. 'You and Dzonzi.'

Dzonzi, in the yellow shirt, scrunches even more, almost horizontal on the desk; his eyes dart like a dog on the lookout for boys armed with stones.

Mr Pemba's office is much cooler and quieter than the open-plan area; it's not clear where the air-conditioning is located, but Joseph can hear it humming somewhere. Here, Mr Pemba gets behind his desk and pushes some papers aside and then quickly seems to change his mind and lays his small hands flat on the desk surface. His fingers tap a tattoo on the wood. Is he impatient, perhaps?

Joseph wonders. Mr Pemba motions them to sit down across from him, their backs to the activity below.

‘My observation tower,’ Mr Pemba says, smiling.

‘It’s a nice office,’ Sis Violet says.

‘Now, where did you learn Chichewa?’ Mr Pemba regards Sis Violet with admiration. ‘Most of your people haven’t taken the trouble to learn our languages.’

‘You’d be surprised, Mr Pemba.’

He tells a little story of the time when he and a few Zambian students in Dublin were making rather cheeky comments in Chichewa about an Irish couple sharing the lift with them. ‘Seems you’ve made quite an impression on our young friends here,’ the elderly man told his pretty companion. Turning to the students, he asked: ‘*Kodi mukufuna mkazi uyu?*’

‘So he asked you if you wanted his woman?’ Sis Violet asks, first glancing at Joseph and then turning her eyes back to their host. ‘What did you say?’

‘What could we say?’ Mr Pemba asks, spreading his hands. ‘We wanted the ground to open up and swallow us. Turned out the old man had lived for years in Zambia, working in the copper mines in Ndola.’

Sis Violet laughs. Joseph has the sense she’s just being polite. She looks up as a young woman in a two-piece chitenge dress and a matching headdress, comes in with a tray of teacups, Marie biscuits and a teapot wrapped in a crocheted tea cosy. She flashes Joseph a warm smile and removes the tea cosy.

Everything that harks back to home brings a lump to Joseph’s throat. Remembering Gogo Mulubwa and her house where almost every surface is covered with crotchet work, Joseph wonders why Mr Pemba acts so kindly towards them. Then he catches the older man’s eyes washing over Sis Violet. She’s possibly unaware of this attention as her own eyes are fixed on the woman’s outfit with its ornate patterns.

As the young woman reaches for the teapot, Mr Pemba places his hand on her wrist. ‘Leave it to me, Claudia. I’ll do the pouring.’

‘Mr Pemba,’ Claudia says, rubbing her wrist, ‘you must please not forget your 11.00am meeting with the minister. It’s about tomorrow’s celebrations.’

‘Thank you, Claudia.’

They start again, Sis Violet doing much of the talking, coaxing out of Joseph the details that he wasn't able to give to Funjika and his teammate, Dzonzi. Even though Mr Pemba keeps on glancing at his wristwatch, he has to listen to Sis Violet, who tells him the real reason they came.

'We knew we'd have struck it lucky if Mrs Chanda Mabaso were on the list of the dead in the register, horrible as that might sound,' Sis Violet says. 'But our real hurdle, Mr Pemba, is with the red tape. We're told we can't get access to the records of patients or details about who's in the mortuary. We're also in need of someone to intercede on our behalf with the Zambian police.' She stops as if conscious of having spoken too long. Or pushed her luck. She turns to Joseph. 'Tell Mr Pemba about your grandmother.'

'Grandmother?' Mr Pemba asks. 'Isn't it the mother who's gone missing?'

'This is a special family, Mr Pemba,' Sis Violet says. 'I assure you.'

'Okay.'

Despite his unhappiness with Sis Violet for making him repeat what he's confided about Gogo Mulubwa, he tells the old woman's story. In the telling, he realises how little he actually knows her. She organised women in the fights against the British colonial police in the early 1950s. She was jailed while pregnant with Chanda. Chanda was actually born in prison. Together with female freedom fighters like Sylvia Msoka Chembe, Julia Chikamoneka and Chibesa Kankasa, Gogo Mulubwa pushed hard for the women's struggle to be recognised alongside the general fight towards political independence. *We are not the wallpaper of the struggle*. That was their slogan. Many of these women had also been imprisoned with leaders who ended up heading the first post-independent government, like Kenneth Kaunda and Simon Kapwepwe.

'It's my belief,' Sis Violet says, 'that Gogo Mulubwa paid her dues. These are the women who should be put on the kwacha banknotes. The least we can do for her is find her daughter, Chanda, who was born in jail at a time her mother was fighting for this country.'

Throughout Joseph's account and Sis Violet's appeal, Mr Pemba has sat with his eyes closed, head resting on the back of the chair, fingers interlaced

across his chest, showing no signs of life. It's only when Sis Violet has stopped speaking that he shakes his head as if startled out of a dream. Joseph wonders if the old man might have been having a nightmare. Mr Pemba sighs.

'Has it ever occurred to you that Chanda...Mrs Mabaso could be in the hands of your people?' He points at Joseph. 'His father's people...'

'We're exploring all avenues,' Sis Violet says. 'We thought we should start with the procedure to be followed when a citizen goes missing. If we draw a blank, we'll check with our people. So far nothing has come up.'

Joseph pipes up: 'What about...?' The look on Sis Violet's face stops him short. Only in his head does he completes the rest of the sentence, '*...Mother Goose in the house in Chilenje.*'

'Yes, my boy?' Mr Pemba asks. 'What is it?'

'He's got an idea that his school principal would find a solution,' Sis Violet says, beaming with great affection. 'You know how it is with young people. Principals hold all the answers.'

'The alpha and the omega,' Mr Pemba adds. He picks up the phone. 'Claudia? I will need you to prepare a letter for me. I'll give you the details of the name in question. And then, get Funjika and Dzonzi to come up here, on the double.' He laughs. 'Not *you*, but them; *they* should hop it, on the double. Ha ha.'

'Thanks, Mr Pemba,' Sis Violet gets to her feet.

'The letter must be handed to Gladwin Chona,' Mr Pemba says gravely. 'He heads the CID Directorate in Woodlands. I'll call to tell him you're on your way.'

'Many thanks,' Sis Violet says.

'Bye, young man,' Mr Pemba says. 'Hope you find your mother.'

'I hope so, too.' Joseph is already at the door. 'Goodbye.'

CHAPTER 11

Even though confident that Mr Pemba's powerful letter would open all doors, Joseph wonders if anyone will attend to them. There's chaos in the charge office of the Woodlands Police Station. Outside sounds equally hectic: engines revving, boots, most likely on the feet of the paramilitary police, clomping the ground as if competing with the indoor racket. Do the different units, each marked by its uniform, get along? Most of his classmates, especially the Mwila twins with their policeman father, hoped to grow up and, as they put it, join the force. Joseph's interest, however, isn't in police work, chasing thieves and pickpockets at the marketplace. It's the uniform – green, brown, khaki or even blue tunics and trousers with big pockets and high ankle boots – that really takes his fancy. He gets a thrill from seeing the armed mobile units who wear black berets slanted to the side of the head. However, he'd trade his watch for a peaked cap with gold braiding on the visor. It's much better than owning a whole set of marbles.

The thought of the watch brings back the memory of the evening of his birthday. It feels like something that took place in another era.

A long queue has formed behind Joseph and Sis Violet. Ahead, too, twelve or thirteen people shuffle sideways along the bench. A voice, that doesn't appear to come from anywhere in the hall, shouts, *Next!* Two, three people get to the service desk where two police officers attend to them. The police officers are both muscular and tall although one of them is flabbier, his big paunch pressed against the counter. People fan themselves with folded newspapers and send air blowing around like a wave. The pot-bellied policeman scowls as he looks up at a new noise – a lawnmower droning outside – which filters into the station. *Will someone get Sebastian to stop that racket!* His colleague looks sideways at him.

'Hey, Jumbe,' he says, 'this hot and dry season is a gift from God. Better accept it.'

Jumbe says: 'Sergeant Bishonga? Don't vex me with talk about God.'

But Sergeant Bishonga's attention has been drawn to the entrance where a uniformed colleague is trying to settle an argument among four men. One of them is accused of tricking his brother-in-law into eating lizard meat stew. The

complainant, tall and gaunt with a lively Adam's apple, keeps on inflating his cheeks like a balloon about to explode. Each time his head snaps forward, the people in front of him jump back. Shaking his head and redirecting his attention to the waiting public, Sergeant Bishonga shouts, *Next!*

Watching the scene, Joseph suddenly feels slightly ill. The taste of the morning tea and scones rises to the roof of his mouth. Sis Violet gives him a worried look.

'It's our turn soon,' she says. 'You all right?'

He nods.

'Do you want some water?'

'I'm okay.'

Just then a stocky figure in navy-blue overalls and gumboots peels off from a group of police officers and members of the public gathered near an adjoining office and heads to where Joseph and Sis Violet are sitting. Clean-shaven with an open face, he is carrying a bundle of files under his arm. His quick eyes search Sis Violet's face.

'I'm Chief Inspector Gladwin Chona,' he says formally. 'I head the Special Crimes Unit of the CID. I gather you've been sent by Arnold Pemba?' Without waiting for an answer, he turns and heads back to the open door.

While Joseph mulls over the fact that Mr Pemba actually has a first name, Sis Violet stands up and signals Joseph to follow suit. Above the door is a sign, CUSTOMER LIAISON OFFICE.

The room is no different from Mr Pemba's except that the older man's office was more orderly. Looking at everything using his mother's eyes, Joseph notices a tearaway desk planner covered in scribbles, newspapers, a paper punch, a stapler, two stamp pads and a wheel numbering machine, all of which lie scattered on Chona's desk. The room is also bigger, sunshine splashing onto more untidiness piled on top of the filing cabinets set against the wall. In addition to the desk and the clunky-looking chairs Joseph sees in every government office, there's a small coffee table in the centre of the room and three worn leather chairs. With elbows balanced on the armrests, Joseph looks around the room, probing for something he might have missed earlier, his curiosity set loose. Among the many pictures on the wall, which include a few of the Nkwazi

Football Club, the players posing with a trophy, there are framed pictures of a younger Chief Inspector Chona in uniform. In one other picture he's accepting a scroll from an important-looking man in a dark suit.

'That was our passing out parade at the Lilayi Police Training College,' Chona says. Seated at the small table, he carefully unwraps a huge sandwich stuffed with cheese, tomato and polony. 'Can you see who's also in the photo?'

Joseph, to whom this question is directed, looks at Sis Violet. 'No.'

'That's Dr Arnold Pemba. He was deputising for the commissioner.'

'No!' Joseph and Sis Violet say in unison.

'Yes. People change.' Chief Inspector Chona takes a bite of his sandwich, waves it around as if saying to his guests, *Fancy a bite?* There being no takers, he gives an *it's-your-loss* shrug.

'It's lunchtime and people are going to disappear. Young man? Could you go to the front desk and ask Sergeant Bishonga for some P46 forms?'

Glad to be part of police work, Joseph eagerly gets off the sofa and closes the door behind him. P46 forms are perhaps just the things a young David Doughty, also known as Spy 13, was sent to get before being introduced to undercover work.

The reception area is still crowded, although the traffic is thinning out. Uniformed policemen and women talk about lunch, a few already putting up Independence Day posters at a level just below the framed picture of the smiling president. A few of the men are not in uniform, but Joseph concludes that they must be detectives, undercover. Sergeant Bishonga has his back to the public as he speaks on the phone, the handset wedged between his neck and shoulder as he scribbles on a notepad. Nodding, *yes, yes*, he finally bids the unseen caller goodbye and hooks the handset onto the cradle.

'Yes, sonny. What's up?' His deep voice makes him even look even more authoritative.

'Chief Inspector Chona said to ask you for P46 forms.'

Sergeant Bishonga smiles, which makes him look like a little boy. Turning to his colleague, he asks: 'Sergeant Jumbe? Do you know where we keep the P46 forms? The chief wants them.'

At first Sergeant Jumbe looks confused. Then he smiles broadly. 'I think you'll find them at the canteen.'

'Okay. You hold the fort while I do this.'

Sergeant Jumbe waves airily, picking up the phone. 'Good luck with that.'

Sergeant Bishonga leads Joseph along a corridor between holding cells to a courtyard at the back, the day's heat getting more uncomfortable. They walk along a paved path, the lawn on either side patchy, to enter an adjacent building. It's a cafeteria where more uniformed and plainclothes police officers either bend over their plates of food or mill about near tables while chatting with others standing in a ragged queue to the serving stations. Above the hum of conversation is the clang of cutlery on aluminium plates.

Without thinking about it, Joseph finds himself shuffling behind Sergeant Bishonga, who has handed him a canteen tray with compartments. *They've run out of plates, sonny.* Ahead, after picking up a canned drink, the customer slides the tray along the countertop to have it supplied with nshima, nyama, pumpkin, and some once-green vegetables. The humidity, worsened by a sense of being hemmed in and the waves of conversation bouncing hollowly against the walls of the hall, coupled with a lingering smell of reheated cooking oil, bring back the feeling of nausea. Above all, however, there is for Joseph a sense that this is a waste of time.

'I'm sorry, sir,' he tells the burly police officer, 'but I'm not hungry.'

'That's all right, sonny, but I have orders to get you the forms.'

'But this is a canteen. There are no forms here.'

'The forms are with the woman at the till.'

The woman at the till reminds Joseph of someone's mother or one of the aunties from the church. She's perhaps older than ma, harassed from the looks of it, struggling to make change, one hand hurrying along the customer she's just served and counting the items on the tray of the next. She doesn't look like someone charged with the responsibility of keeping important forms. It dawns on him that adults are ridiculous. From last week – and even before that – they've been spinning stories that make no sense. Even those that say they are helping him are just hiding things from him. Even Sis Violet: why did she shut

him up when he wanted to tell Mr Pemba about what the revolutionaries had said, about Mother Goose in Chilenje? What does she know about ma's disappearance?

'I came here to look for my mother,' Joseph tells Sergeant Bishonga. 'I'm not sure that being here is helpful.'

Sergeant Bishonga turns and glares at Joseph, putting on his policeman's face and voice. 'Look...'

But Joseph has stopped caring. 'I'm sorry, sir.'

He takes the long route, avoiding the corridor and goes to stand at the front of the police station, leaning against the flagpole, the flag up above fluttering lazily in the baking heat. He realises he hasn't had a change of clothing for more than a week now. The collar of the jacket chafes his neck and he shudders at the thought of how smelly his armpits must be.

Looking up, he sees the building as if it's just sprouted out of the ground. The garish outside walls, the red roof that tops the two-storey building whose upper wall is olive green; there is a broad white band that separates the olive green from the dark grey and navy blue of the lower wall, a mix of colours that Ma'am Goma, the art teacher, would have criticised. Even the sign WOODLANDS POLICE STATION, in high white letters, seems to shout at the lawn whose greenness is bordered by a purple hibiscus hedge.

Sis Violet comes out the arched doorway walking alongside Chief Inspector Gladwin Chona. There is a grim expression on her face. For a moment the two stand to the side of the entrance. Still carrying his files, Chona leans against the side of a black ZP van, making a point. When they both catch sight of Joseph, they wave him over. The Chief Inspector has a smile on his face.

'Sergeant Bishonga says you left off in a huff...'

Joseph tells Sis Violet: 'I think we should go.'

'...and you have the right to be angry,' Chona continues. 'I should not have pretended I needed something just to get you out of the way. But there are certain sensitive issues I wanted to run past Violet, which I knew would cause you distress. Violet will fill you in on what's happening, what we have picked up, which has a bearing on your mother's disappearance.'

‘More to the point,’ Sis Violet says, ‘it’s about your father.’

‘My father?’ Joseph feels blood rushing to his head.

‘I don’t know how you people escaped being caught up in a curfew,’ Chona says. ‘But two weeks ago, the Inspector General ordered a countrywide *shishita* in the light of widespread banditry – house robberies, violent crime, car theft, hijackings, that kind of thing. You must have seen more than the usual volume of paramilitary activity on the streets.’

‘Now that you mention it,’ says Sis Violet. ‘I wonder why we haven’t received a general alert.’

‘Some ANC people are implicated in smuggling medical supplies, rhino horn and ivory across the border. This is wildlife poached in the Luangwa Valley. A syndicate of Zairians, Angolans, the South African military and rogue ANC elements supports the bandits.’

‘Those are enemy agents.’ Sis Violet is angry and deflated at the same time. ‘*Imidlwembe*, quislings...our president has always preached against corruption.’

‘Well,’ Chona says, ‘Tambo can rail all he wants against corruption. Fact is, the syndicates that support UNITA and FLNA pay in drugs and diamonds. It can’t get more lucrative than that.’

For Joseph, everything suddenly sounds unsafe. ‘I think I want to go home. I have to tell my gogo.’

‘You can’t, Joseph,’ Chief Inspector Chona says. ‘Violet will explain.’

Violet doesn’t explain anything. She looks angry, unapproachable, grimmer than in the morning. This afternoon as they leave the police station, the traffic is dense along Gizenga Road. They are heading towards town, the city centre, but he has no idea of their destination.

‘We’re going to UTH,’ Sis Violet says, answering his unasked question, ‘to do a final check there. If we don’t find her lying somewhere in the wards or the mortuary, then it’s clear, your father took her somewhere and got rid of her.’

‘Is my father an enemy agent?’ He can’t bear the thought of someone getting rid of his mother.

'I don't know what your father is. You'd think you knew something about a person, but, hey, this is the struggle. People show you the side of themselves they want you to see.' She glances at him, softening. 'I really don't know.'

She curses under her breath as a black sedan with diplomatic plates cuts in front of her at the third exit of the roundabout to Independence Avenue. A few metres into the crush of traffic, they come abreast of the car.

'Look at him,' Sis Violet says. 'We'll probably see him being pulled over by traffic cops at the next circle.'

Even though he is doubtful her prediction would prove true, Joseph still pictures his own wished-for end for the driver and his sleek black car. He imagines the brakes failing and the car skidding out of control at the next roundabout, straight across the lawn into the embankment at the centre, breaking the wall and sending the water from the fountain shooting up into the air. Judges and clerks from the high court run pell-mell in their gowns and wigs to see the accident. When they catch my father, he thinks, will it be before such people that he'll be appearing?

'What are you thinking?' Sis Violet asks. 'You're quiet this afternoon.'

'I'm just wondering when we'll get all the answers.'

The roadside sign points out that the hospital is some three kilometres away. Joseph feels his stomach lurching. 'I don't want to go,' he says.

'That's too bad, because we just have to.' She takes Mr Pemba's letter out of her bag and waves it at him. 'We have the permission.'

'Still...'

'Still nothing. You need to brace yourself now.'

There are scores of people at the entrance to the University Teaching Hospital, most of them women with a sprinkling of children. Vendors mill about, pushing their produce in front of the visitors, their voices high. An ambulance pulls up on the driveway and orderlies come rushing with a stretcher. The heat hasn't abated, and Joseph wonders what the inside of the hospital is like.

He does not have long to find out. Although the interior is cooler, it feels as if the heat has been substituted by a smell of sweat and disinfectant, a mixture so stubborn it seems to have coated the pale-green walls. Walking beside Sis Violet, he now and then stops to give way to visitors (some of whom look like

patients) coming from deeper inside the hospital. In the wards, male patients lie or sit in different poses of discomfort. There are more people sitting on benches in the corridor. Some of the visitors are seated on the beds, their backs to the patients who don't have anyone visiting them. He and Sis Violet stop at the counter of the nurses' station, their sudden presence interrupting three nurses drinking tea while a fourth makes an entry on a chart.

'Afternoon,' she says without looking up. 'Can we be of help?'

'Sorry to disturb you,' Sis Violet says. 'We're looking for a patient who might have been admitted here, ah, maybe a week or so ago.'

'Name?'

'Sorry,' Sis Violet says. 'I didn't get that.'

'What's the name...of the patient?'

'Chanda Mabaso.' Sis Violet pauses. 'Or Lisulo.'

'Is she Mabaso or Lisulo?'

'Lisulo is her maiden name.'

The nurse turns to her colleagues. 'Did we ever have a Chanda Mabaso or Lisulo admitted here a few weeks ago?'

There's a general murmur and shaking of heads. 'No,' one of the other nurses says. 'No one here by that name.'

'You can hear for yourself,' the young nurse says. However, she pulls some files from the shelf on the side and starts leafing through, murmuring, 'Chanda...Chanda...Mabaso...'

'What about mortuary records?' Sis Violet asks. 'Where would we get those?'

This time the nurse looks at Sis Violet and Joseph, her eyes widened as if she's registering their presence for the first time. Sighing, she slumps her shoulders in a gesture he remembers his mother adopting before making a long speech. But, deciding against something inside her, she points to a passage. 'Follow the sign and go down the stairs.' And then: 'But the boy is not allowed inside the mortuary.'

'I'm not a family member,' Sis Violet says, 'but it's his mother we're looking for. Here, see for yourself: we have a letter of authority.'

‘That may be the case, madam, but no minors.’ Shrugging her shoulders, the nurse continues: ‘You’ll have to clear it with Mr Banda downstairs.’

They almost miss the stairway because the corridor continues into a gloomier section of the hospital. Walking down the long underground hallway where weak fluorescent tubes light the route, Joseph half wishes the nurse had insisted underage kids were banned from the mortuary. But then, apart from his curiosity, how would Sis Violet identify someone she hasn’t seen before? Coming from behind and interrupting his train of thought is the sound of wheels rolling on an uneven surface. Sis Violet pulls Joseph aside to let an orderly pass with a double-decker stretcher on which lie two covered bodies. The sight brings about an old memory, something that kicks around in his head in search of expression. As the stretcher trundles past it leaves behind a smell at once rare and familiar.

A few more yards along a vinyl flooring of a colour between olive and dark green, a shade aimed, he thinks, to absorb any other colour, blood, vomit, or even body fluids associated with death. Inside the mortuary waiting area, the earlier smell, which has accompanied them throughout their trek, has ripened into something mouldy and oddly redolent of nail polish remover. Refraining from blocking his nose as this might offend, Joseph imagines the odour as minute bits entering his nose, ears, pores and even his tightly clenched lips. The combination of the day’s natural light and the cold electric illumination washing the interior of the mortuary weakens all shadows. It bounces off from the watercolour paintings of landscapes and calm scenes where objects give off their own light. The people around, especially a group of six, are almost all quiet and attentively listening to a clean-shaven man in a white coat telling them about the different sections of the mortuary.

‘All religions and denominations can use the prayer room,’ he says. ‘Although by this time everybody in there has no need for prayer.’ He beams, perhaps in an effort to lighten up the atmosphere, and meets blank stares. Raising his eyes, he notices Sis Violet and Joseph. ‘Excuse me a second.’

Expecting to be told off, Joseph starts sidling back and is stopped by the old man in the white coat. At first glance, he looks of medium height but is

actually quite tall. His plaid blue shirt is secured at the neck with a flowery tie in a big knot. 'You want to run away, young man?'

'No, sir.'

To Sis Violet, he's more formal. 'I don't know what brings you here, ma'am, but I hope you'll find the answers to your questions.'

'You must be Mr Banda,' Sis Violet says. Smiling, possibly at being called ma'am, she tells him of the long search for Chanda Mabaso – or Lisulo. Mr Banda listens attentively, interrupting only to get more clarification, his eyes darting from Sis Violet's face to Joseph's.

'I've been a mortuary attendant for ten years,' Mr Banda says, 'and I've done everything, including scullery detail at the tables where forensic clinicians and pathologists do their work. I've seen it all. I've handled thousands of bodies, washing them, preparing them for viewing by relatives. You know, most people are afraid to wash the bodies of the deceased. We do that. I've therefore come to know who has been here and, by extension, who hasn't. I know that Chanda Mabaso or Lisulo has never been here.'

Sis Violet presses on. 'But how would you be sure?'

'It's a spiritual thing. People believe that you need to be a practitioner of *zamatsenga* to survive here. But I use common sense and a belief that these bodies will one day speak, and so I have to treat them with respect. Oftentimes I commune with them, wishing them a better journey onwards.'

'Do they talk back?' Joseph asks.

'Not in the normal earthbound language. But they do talk.' He looks at Joseph for a long while. 'Your mother is somewhere. But not here.'

A sharp cry brings the discussion to an end. Two men support a woman who's writhing as if in great pain. She rocks back and forth, all the movement centred round her waist. Although her mouth is open, she utters no sound.

'Her child is dead, that's the worst part about this job,' Mr Banda says, turning. 'I've got to attend to this. Good luck.'

'Let's go home.' Joseph feels a great weight on his shoulders. 'We're looking for the wrong person. When we get to my father then we'll find ma.'

'You reckon?'

'I'm sure now.'

CHAPTER 12

In the late afternoon when they reach the house in Mtendere – an afternoon that feels strange to Joseph because afternoons are for returning home from school – Joseph and Sis Violet find Pule more relaxed. He has tidied up the house. Even the broken windowpanes have been replaced, the smell of putty lingering in the lounge. A meal cooks on the two-plate stove. Joseph's nose twitches at the combined smells of chicken stew, okra, garlic and fried onions. This removes the stench of death, which has been with him throughout the drive from UTH to Mtendere.

With the two adults now at ease with each other, he appreciates the homelike atmosphere, but there's still something missing. He'd like to share with Gogo Mulubwa, Emmanuel, Banji and Mulilo what he has decided. He feels their absence. Thinking back to the earlier discussion between Chief Inspector Chona and Sis Violet, he has many questions. Does the issue of smugglers mean danger for his parents? Is my father working with a band of criminals? He can hear his stomach growling. Mercifully, the three are soon seated with plates balanced on their laps, eating with gusto.

'This is very good,' Sis Violet says after a while. 'What prompted it?'

'I acted like a *mampara* this morning,' Pule says, grinning, waving a hand to dismiss his morning foolishness. 'How'd it go with the big chiefs today?'

Sis Violet gives a huge sigh. Then she reports the events of the day, now and then raising her head to look at Joseph – *Isn't that right, Joseph?* – and getting him to fill in the gaps. She gives a small laugh when it comes to the part where Joseph was sent to get P46 forms.

'P46?' Pule asks. 'That's new. What's that?'

'Just a bullshit ruse to get Joseph out of the room. And, boy, was he furious.'

'Maybe the Zambian Police form of MCW,' Joseph quips.

Pule laughs, giving Joseph a look of surprise. 'But why?'

'Yes,' Joseph asks. 'Why?'

'I argued with Gladwin Chona,' Sis Violet says. 'I said Joseph must hear it first hand, but he thought it would distress him.'

‘A week ago,’ Sis Violet continues, ‘your aunt, Thelma Lisulo, went to the police to formally report her sister’s disappearance. I suppose that’s what kicked off the probe into your father’s activities. Your mother is not the only disappearance reported. Two UNHCR Range Rovers entrusted to Comrade Sobs are missing too.’

‘And you got all that from *Gladwin*?’ Pule asks. He gets up and collects the dishes. ‘He must be plugged into a lot of agencies to have all that info.’

Frowning, Sis Violet pauses before replying, her eyes following Pule as he places the dishes into the sink. ‘You know that Zambia, despite its modest profile, runs one of the most effective intelligence operations on the continent. No surprise there – it’s a country that supports liberation movements and is in the crosshairs of apartheid South Africa. It also has explosive neighbours like Angola, which is at war most of the time. And, of course, sharing a border with Zaire, coupled with harbouring all sorts of political refugees, calls for extreme vigilance. Hence the *shishita*.’

Just then there is a knock on the door. Preceded by the clink of bottles knocking against one another, Charlie and Robbie enter carrying between them a crate of mosi, two bottles of J&B whisky and cans of various soft drinks. Robbie waves a plastic bag in the air.

‘And we even brought some chow from Monde’s Spot,’ he says. ‘Fried baby chicken and chips.’

Joseph says: ‘Monde’s Spot, that’s not far from our place.’

‘Bra Joe from Kilimanjaro,’ Charlie says, giving Joseph a hug. ‘*Jy’s nog* around, kiddo?’

‘He’s here,’ Pule says. ‘Vi tells me he wants to go home.’

‘Yes,’ Joseph says. ‘I want to go home.’

‘Have you found your mother?’ Charlie asks. ‘If not, you can’t go home: you’ve not accomplished your mission.’

‘I don’t want to accomplish anything.’ Today, he’s tired of adults. He remembers Lanky Boy and Sputnik and Leila and her one-eyed horses; Emmanuel and his cockiness; Banji and Mulilo, their absence an empty spot in his stomach. ‘Sis Violet, you said you’d tell me why I can’t go back home...’

‘There’s no one at your place now,’ Sis Violet says. ‘The children are under the care of both your aunt and your gogo. Least that’s what Gladwin Chona told me. The police went to search your place for Comrade Sobs, who’s linked to the smuggling syndicate we talked about earlier. They didn’t find anything. But they are keeping the place under watch, just in case he shows up. Or if one of his cronies puts in an appearance.’

‘Jesus,’ Robbie says. ‘Comrade Sobs...’

‘I hope,’ Pule says, ‘that this is just a false alarm, something will come up and explain why Sobs – and your ma – can’t be found...for now.’

The late afternoon turns to evening. Joseph is on the toilet when he hears a car pulling to a stop outside. There are voices, men, which convince him that the paramilitary police are coming to conduct the *shishita*. Somehow, he wishes the police would come because he’s got a lot of questions. Did you perhaps come across my father somewhere in your work? Do you know him, Sobhuza Mabaso, tall and muscular, works for the UNHCR? I hear he might have changed professions and is now a smuggler. And ma? Do you know a woman called Chanda Mabaso, perhaps she’s using her own family name of Lisulo. Do you know what has happened to Chanda Lisulo? Yes, some of them might even have been her classmate and hold fond memories of her in her school uniform, singing the lead part in the school choir or being the trusted scorer in netball during the interschool games.

He can feel tears burning inside his eyes. When he steps out of the bathroom, he finds a party in full swing. Marvin Gaye is singing about sexual healing – *Baby, I think I’m capsizing/The waves are rising and rising* – in the room that’s suddenly crowded.

Joseph recognises some of the new arrivals from the Miramar residence, the women glittery in dresses and the men somewhat more groomed and less revolutionary-looking. They include Comrade Mbizo and Comrade Chuckles. Head tilted to the side as he taps his one good foot to the beat, Comrade Mbizo says it’s always stumped him why these singers sound as if someone’s squeezing their balls, to which Comrade Chuckles answers that it’s probably those tight pants they wear, ‘Don’t you think?’ In the centre of the floor, Pule does a lively,

hip-swinging dance with a woman while Sis Violet and Robbie play the hosts, rushing about with trays of glass tumblers and soft drinks. The best way to stay sober at a party, Charlie is telling someone that Joseph can't see, is to volunteer to be the barman, and then asks, 'But why on Earth would anyone wish to stay sober?'

Weaving in and out of groups and ducking under arms spread in sympathy, Joseph finally escapes the adults and their discussions, which are getting more and more confused by the minute. He's seen this change with Uncle Agrippa, where everything becomes unpredictable. One minute a person is the life of the party and the next he's being pulled off from attacking Aunt Taona. Shaking his head, Joseph finds a spot at the back of the house where he can sit and think. He's surprised that the darkness has so deepened that, even with the light spilling out through the kitchen window, he can only see a limited part of the backyard. Something scurries in the bushes, probably a mouse. He wonders if Pule has organised anyone for guard duty.

The door opens and splashes the backyard with yellow light; music and voices float in the air briefly before being cut off as the door closes. Drink in hand, Robbie stands, swaying but managing to maintain his balance. Slowly, carefully, he edges to where Joseph is seated.

'*Wat gaan aan?*' he asks, 'you got the blues?'

Joseph doesn't quite get what Robbie is asking, but it doesn't matter to him because there's so much he wants cleared up.

'What happened to Mother Goose?' he asks. 'Is Mother Goose my mother?'

'Where'd you get that idea?' Suddenly stone sober. 'Anyway, this was a young woman who's responsible for a few deaths on the East Rand at home. She changed the fuse mechanism of hand grenades given to the Young Lions at home. They blew up in their faces, killing them.' He makes a sign of an explosion with his hands, the drink remaining miraculously unspilled.

Joseph remembers the grenades in his *Spy 13* comics, the stick-like ones with knobby heads, favoured by both the Japanese and the German troops as opposed to David Doughty's small pineapples that went *ka-boom!*, the flashes of lightning scattering the enemy.

‘We went to the mortuary today,’ Joseph says. ‘There were lots of dead people in the drawers. But they didn’t open them for us.’

‘You’re lucky. Dead people aren’t pretty.’

Joseph looks at the pinpoints of light in the darkness and squints at the little stars twinkling in the inky distance. Actually, the sky is not black, more like deep blue and dark grey mixed together. He wonders if ma, wherever she is, sees the same sky.

‘I’ll go find my father.’

‘Oh. I thought it was your old lady you’re searching for. Now it’s your *toppie*.’

‘She must be where he is.’

‘And you’re ready to go find him? Wherever?’

‘Yes.’

‘What if he’s back home?’

‘Then *I’ll* go home. Shouldn’t take me that long.’

‘No, I mean *home* home...’

‘Then I’ll go there.’

‘Kiddo, do you know how far that is?’

‘If he managed to get there, I’ll go there, too. He’s got two legs like me.’

‘You’ll walk?’

‘I’ll follow in his footsteps.’

A new group of seven men has arrived. They are quieter, three of them eating chicken wings, which they must have brought with them, using their fingers, crunching the bones. The other four are seated in twos with elbows resting on the table, from where they watch the party, now and then whispering among themselves and breaking into quiet laughter. Coming from the toilet, hitching up his pants, Comrade Mbizo joins them at the table and gets them to huddle, their heads almost touching. Edging nearer, Joseph strains to hear what is being discussed, believing it might have something to do with Sobhuza. But the noise of the party drowns the whispered conversation. Sitting on her knees on the floor amid tangled tape reel, Sis Violet is tightening the slack of a cassette with a pencil. As the tape reel snaps, she bunches it up in her fist and, with a frustrated

cry, throws it back into the untidy pile. Looking up at Joseph, she laments: 'That was my favourite tape.'

'Who is it?'

'The Four Tops, *Just Walk Away*, Renee.'

'You've been drinking...'

'Now you sound just like Pule.' Then, suddenly serious, she says: 'I have to tell you something.'

He waits; his heart kicks at his ribcage. 'What?'

'I'm leaving early tomorrow morning,' she says, jerking her head in the direction of the group clustered around Comrade Mbizo. 'With those comrades.'

Joseph opens his mouth but can't make a sound. Sis Violet says: 'This is what we joined for, to fulfil the mission at the heart of the liberation struggle.'

'But those...those are guerrillas.'

'I'm also a guerrilla, Joseph. And a revolutionary. You've been banging on about revolutionaries, yes, this is us.' She pauses. 'You'll have to stay with Pule to continue your search.'

'Where are you going?'

'I'd rather you didn't know.'

'I'm coming along.' It's suddenly clear to him. 'I know you're going home. *Home-home.*'

'You don't know what you're talking about.' She's about to explain but shakes her head instead. 'We gave it a try, looking for your mother. The trail ends here, Joseph.'

'It ends at home.'

'Well, you figure how you get there. Best of luck. And, Joseph?'

'Yes?'

'I'm not your mother. Better get that into your head.'

'I hate you.' He struggles for words, insults, something that she'll remember him by. '*Sharmuta.*'

Later, Sis Violet finds another cassette tape of the Four Tops and sings along with the chorus – *You won't see me follow you back home* – over and over until Pule tells her to change it. Enough already. Sullenly, she gets up to attend to an

emergency: one of the guerrillas has become feverish and stands at the corner of the lounge, his eyes bulging out as he shakes like a leaf. Pule takes over the duties of nursing him. Joseph follows them into the bedroom where Pule covers the man with a duvet and coaxes him to lie down on the mattress. Each time the man feels the fabric of the duvet on him, he throws the duvet off, makes an attempt to get up and snarls like an animal when Pule lowers him onto the mattress.

‘What happened to him?’ Joseph asks.

‘He’s just come back from Angola and must have caught malaria.’ Pule is worried. ‘They’ve got a bad strain of malaria there, the cerebral type that scrambles your brains.’ He feels the man’s brow with the palm of his hand and released a low whistle.

‘It’s not good?’ Joseph asks.

‘No. Could you get me some water from the fridge. Bring as many ice cubes as you can find.’

The party is still going on and Joseph’s repeated to-ing and fro-ing between the bedroom and the lounge has become a source of anxious amusement, where someone – Charlie or Robbie, to be sure – asks: *How’s the patient, Dr Joseph?* and Joseph, in lieu of a verbal answer, gives them a thumbs-up sign, more out of a need to reassure than from an understanding of the man’s real condition.

‘Comrade Pule?’

Joseph regards himself as a good person. He respects his parents and attends school; has not played truant even on days when he knows that some form of punishment awaits the class. He has gone to church in the company of Chanda and even attended Sunday School. He’s never wished anyone ill, of course, except BG, who would stretch the last nerve of even the most forgiving monk in a monastery. He hopes God or whoever rules the heavens will overlook the bit of trespass he’s planning to do.

‘Comrade Pule?’ he calls again.

Possibly picking up something in Joseph’s tone Pule, bent to apply a wet rag on the man’s brow, raises himself and actually looks at Joseph. ‘What’s up, sonny?’

‘How come you never told me Sis Violet is going home?’

‘What do you mean, going home?’

‘She’s going home with the guerrillas. First thing in the morning.’

‘She’s never -’ Pule starts talking and then calms himself down. In an instant, his face has gone through a series of expressions; from disbelief, rage to acceptance. It’s hard for Joseph to see defeat in a man’s eyes. Giving the sleeping man a fleeting look and slowly turning his back on Joseph, Pules stares into empty space.

‘I’m sorry if you didn’t know,’ Joseph says.

‘It’s all right, sonny.’

‘If it’s all right with you, Comrade Pule, I’d also like to go home and look for my parents there.’

‘Ja?’

‘And I need your help.’

‘What do you want?’

CHAPTER 13

Gripped by the superstition that he's been so close to death, he hopes the sick man in the room will make it. Pule, despite the disappointments attaching to his life, has been a careful and caring nurse, staying with the man for the best part of the night, giving up on going back to the party even when invited to by the other partygoers. Something in him has shrunk and, although he laughs and jokes with the comrades – including Sis Violet – it's as if he's allowed a distance to grow between himself and the rest of his colleagues. Unbidden, he tells Joseph – unburdening himself possibly in the belief that they'll never see each other again – that it is every guerrilla's dream to go home and fight the enemy there, that opportunity is one of the greatest honours that the Movement can bestow on a guerrilla. It's even more humiliating for him, Pule, that Sis Violet, his life partner, is chosen ahead of him; it's not because she's a woman, no; they are beyond that macho shit. It's just that everyone knew, and they kept this secret tight from him.

Later, when everyone is asleep and he, Pule is on guard duty, he helps smuggle Joseph into the back of the car. 'This is crazy, kid. If they catch you, you're on your own.' It dawns on Joseph now that, of the many reasons that drive Pule to getting him set on the journey home with the guerrillas, the most pressing one is his aversion to playing baby-sitter. Despite his revolutionary protestations, this is his way of paying Violet back. Let her deal with it.

He hears her voice outside, the wind snatching some of what she's saying, but it sounds like a roll call.

Blade? Present, komandir.

Gwaza? Present, Camarada Violet.

Tekere...where's Tekere? *Ngikhona*.

Charlie? *Ek is hierso*, Violet. So, Charlie is part of the group? She didn't say.

Malume? Present.

He can't quite make out the rest of the names called because someone snaps the boot open and throws more bags inside, burying Joseph even deeper; a petrol container clangs quite near his head, the fuel sloshing inside and bringing about thoughts of fire. The car doors open, and there's a shuffling and squeak of

leather as people ease into their seats. Just as the car pulls out, someone lets out a fart – that must be Charlie, Joseph reasons – that's followed by a nervous titter. *Sorry*. Someone says, 'Jesus,' and there's a sudden blast of night air into the car. *Shut the fucking window!* 'What's our ETA?' Sis Violet asks. 'Zero-seven hours,' someone answers. 'Everything checked?' 'Yes, komandir.'

There's something changed about Sis Violet's voice. She sounds happier, freer and totally in control, no longer anxious like when she was dealing with officials. She asks for something and it's responded to quickly, as if with the snap of a finger. He wonders how long he will stay under the blankets and the bags. The smell of petrol and grease and rough canvas and stuffy old clothes fills his nostrils. He has no illusions about what he'd finally have to do if overcome by the urge to piss; he immediately rejects the possibility with an inner shake of the head. But then, he needs to scratch a fiendish itch in his crotch. *Mulungu wanga*, this is torture.

Unable to see from his nook in the boot, he estimates the progress the car is making by the remarks of the driver and his passengers. Although the voices are muffled by the muted roar of the engine and the whoosh of outside air, he can still get snatches of the conversation. Someone keeps a running commentary of the places being passed and laments the length of the kilometres to cover from Kafue Road to Mazabuka. From his own geography lessons, Joseph can tell they are heading south, to Monze, the route to the border in Kazungula. He pictures the spread of the country as it's shown on a map, blue, red, green, brown, purple, black and white – colours that represent the land's various features, natural or manmade. He wonders why the revolutionaries didn't just take the train. There is one from Lusaka to Livingstone, but how would tourists feel travelling with people carrying weapons on public transport? Perhaps it would have been easier if the destination was Tanzania, as the guerrillas could have masqueraded as members of the ZDF. The Chinese built the Tazara railway linking Kapiri Mposhi in the north of Lusaka to Dar es Salaam. On its completion, President Kaunda thanked the Chinese for not having abused Zambian women, saying he hadn't come across a single 'Chinese coloured' child on the streets of Lusaka. A Chinese coloured: the schoolboys had a field day imitating KK.

There is silence in the car, and he can hear the rasp and crunch of the tyres eating up the uneven road, the unevenness becoming a pattern with an internal rhythm. In time – with him cosy in his hiding place – it lulls him to sleep. Snatches of the guerrillas' conversation become part of his dreams. He finds himself in the training camps in Zambia, doing rangers' survival courses with Zimbabwean freedom fighters in Mkushi in the Central Province, a place of mountains and streams and gorges. He's running, chased by something he can't immediately see and is then startled when his mother emerges from a bush; behind her, someone is pointing a rifle at her. Just as he's about to shout out a warning, the gun goes off – *bam!* – and it's not clear if Chanda has been hit.

With the gun report still echoing in his head, he wakes up being flung from the floor almost to the roof of the boot's interior. The impact is cushioned by the bags, blankets and canvas sheeting. The petrol container makes a loud clang against the back window and misses his head by an inch. Winded, he hears a ringing in his ears that rises in volume in relation to flashing lights and the absolute darkness inside him, which makes him wonder if he's just died. Just then there's another sound of a heavy vehicle approaching. Then someone, emerging out of mist and flashing lights, opens the boot and a pair of hands yanks him roughly and throws him to the ground. The complete silence in his head is broken by a voice.

'Comrades,' his assailant calls, 'come look what we have here.'

From the ground, still aware of the mist swirling above him like a lace curtain, Joseph takes in the smell of petrol before he sees the liquid trickling from the underside of the Land Cruiser. Dust swirls and lights stay steady on the walls of the ditch, the scraggly bush forming the rim. Shod feet shuffle backwards and forwards, raising the dust even more. Someone is groaning in pain. Then, as another vehicle slows down to a stop, Sis Violet and the man called Blade shine their torches on his face. There is a sharp intake of breath.

'Joseph?' Rage and something he can't describe fight for control in Sis Violet's voice. In a moment, rage gets the upper hand where she straddles him but, as she raises a hand to strike him, Charlie comes up from behind and pulls her back. She manages to swing a retreating leg to kick him on the shin. He thinks his shinbone is broken. Another pair of hands pulls him up to his feet and, with

his hands pinned to the back, he is marched limping to the side of the Land Cruiser, whose front part hangs over the ditch.

From the lights of the vehicle that's just arrived, which create long shadows, he sees the cause of the accident: the horse cut into two, with eyes still aglow, the trunk lying on the side, the legs in the air. Could this be Leila's horse, but what would it be doing here so far from Lusaka? Leila's horse has one eye, and this one has two eyes. They didn't help it see the danger coming though.

Joseph feels strange, one part of his mind telling him this is a continuation of a dream and the other that he is in trouble. From the conversation of the guerrillas, who have been joined by a group of ZDF soldiers on patrol, the driver of the Land Cruiser didn't see the horse crossing the road until he smashed into it. Jesus, they're lucky no one was seriously injured. Only Malume has hurt his leg, which he shrugs off, but time will tell if it needs medical attention. In all this, Joseph is thinking of running away into the darkness but recalls that the guerrillas have guns, even though they're not carrying them on their person. And the army people, would they shoot him?

The army people are in a discussion with Sis Violet and the guerrillas, the officer ordering both teams to clear the road of the dead horse. Soon, the army truck, which also looks like a huge insect with square dark windows behind wire meshing, revs into action, pulling the Land Cruiser onto the road. Sis Violet, Blade and Charlie approach Joseph. He starts pedalling back. Charlie shouts above the noise of the roar of engines and the men's excited yells.

'*Ek sê, kiddo,*' he says, 'you must understand. We spoke to the captain. They'll take you back to Lusaka.'

Sis Violet takes him by the hand. 'Listen, Joseph, I have all these men here. I'm their commander and have to guide them through danger. They can't be hampered by having to take care of a kid.'

'I'm not a kid.'

'Okay, of a civilian. If anything happens to you, it's on my head.' She turns to Charlie. 'Go see what's the progress back there.'

'Joseph,' she goes on, speaking quickly, urgently. 'I already have them grumbling, the men, saying what kind of commander is this who can't even have the final say on personnel to go inside the country.'

‘Ah, so you’re going home!’

‘I am. We are. But your being here weakens my case. It undermines my leadership.’

‘If it was your mother who’s missing,’ Joseph counters, ‘would you leave it? Wouldn’t you grab any chance to know what has happened to her?’

‘I would, of course. But I wouldn’t endanger others in the process.’

‘Okay. As soon as we get into South Africa, you leave me on my own.’

‘It’s not as simple as that.’

‘Drop me at the border, then.’

In the half-light of the emerging morning, there is a sign that previous guerrillas or villagers had struck camp in the wooded area, where the roar of the Zambezi can be heard. Someone, speaking softly, says Victoria Falls is about fifty miles above them. Malume says that during the Sipolilo crossing of the joint ANC-ZAPU guerrilla force in 1968, the fighters depended on Tongan canoeists, who knew everything about the river. He is voicing the hope that someone, a remnant from the past, will be there to assist. His despairing tone is caused by the fact that there no was no reconnaissance report. They are going into this, in his words, cold. Sis Violet counters his pessimism. No one knows about us; no one can inform on us.

As they walk on, Joseph wants to see the border. But there’s no border, just a confusing stretch of land covered with trees, not really a forest and not a bush either, just scraggy vegetation standing alongside proud wattle and weeping willows; here and there are trees that maintain their anonymity, ganging up on smaller growth to create a semblance of a forest; inside them, brooding, there is a sense of something living and watching, unseen, the branches and leaves and creepers extending their fingers, like something lonely for company, wanting to claim something lost or somebody once loved. The beaten track is a surprise, already full of smooth stones that lead to the river, a river that stammers in its hugeness, stretching all the way from one horizon to another. It murmurs, crashing and gurgling, like the images he has seen on TV of a rippling sea, except this time there are no bathers, just five men and he, a boy, trailing, afraid to be a

nuisance, all led by a woman who has opted for silence in a place where all speech feels inappropriate anyway.

The other man in the group is the driver, who, because he has papers, stayed behind to cross the border on a ferry when the border station opens. Even though no one says anything, he knows – he can tell – that they are all overawed by the river. And out of it, out of the water as if he belongs there, like some aquatic animal in the fauna and flora section of his school biology primer, a man in shorts and a torn vest drags the dinghy boat and tells them he's ready when they are for the crossing.

He warns them in a singsong voice, the warning belying the laughter that dances in his eyes and his snaggle-toothed grin and purplish gums, that those who fear the river should best stay behind; those who have recently committed abominations must not cross, because the river respects only the pure of heart. He speaks of Nyaminyami, the river god who stains the water red when he swims past, and who was last seen by Mkulu Sampakaruma many years ago and has been in hiding since the arrival of the white man in the country. The man with the broken smile says he has helped many hundreds across, from the time when *amachinda oMkhonto* went to join the *chimurenga* in Rhodesia, men and women who had become *nyama zakutchire* themselves; and he has watched many go under and many more rise again, which is why they call him John the Baptist. He has a special rapport with the hippos and crocodiles. The hippos will not bother you, he says, as long as you don't bother them or steer the boat towards where their calves are swimming; the crocodiles, well, who's to know what the crocodiles are likely to do? Sometimes, from the Zimbabwean side, some fool fires shots into the water and enrages the beasts, but perhaps, it being so early, the fools are asleep. Now I learn one of you is nursing an injury, perhaps the healing waters will do their magic or you're going to face hell on your journey home. As in the song by our leader, *tiyende pamodzi*.

The downpour in the early afternoon dampens their spirit. They have been walking for hours, keeping behind a screen of trees and shrub; the morning was a revelation where all the birds and insects and unseen game broke out in various versions of songs of praise, even the hidden hippos whose cousins in the

water had snorted as the dinghy boat sailed past now sounded almost happy. But now, it's coming down in torrents; Sis Violet – Commander Violet, komandir – puts a brave front on it, saying that the rain helps shield the unit from prying eyes. Moreover, it keeps things cool; the sun started off being pleasant in the early hours but later, the heat had become intense, sweat pouring out of the men and the one woman like the river they had just crossed. It's here that Joseph sees why the men really respect Sis Violet as their commander. Even when she walks in the bush, her walk – although not very different from the others' – is more assured, as if she's been here before, her upper body rigid and yet flexible enough to be in line with the movement of her rifle on the side. Her backpack looks heavy, but she carries it without a wobble. Keeping his head down during the trek, Joseph told himself that if he doesn't make a sound they'd forget about him; when the going got hard, he still plodded on, stepping into the footprints left behind by Charlie, who is the last but one person in the unit walking single file. When the rain came, he rejoiced inwardly. Now, however, sloshing in the mud slows him down. Mercifully, Violet signals a stop with a raised hand. There's a clump of trees forming a canopy ahead.

'Let's bivouac here,' she says. 'Blade, check Malume's leg, will you?'

Sighs of contentment greet the order. Blade, the commissar, whom the men also call the medico, fishes into his knapsack and produces out of a first aid kit bandages and salve, which he dabs on to a spot on Malume's leg. Joseph can't see the wound but supposes from the way Malume is grimacing that he must be in pain. Standing guard, Tekere, who is quite stocky and sweaty, even in the rain, and Gwaza, slight, wiry, with quick squinty eyes that don't seem to focus on one spot for long, keep shooting sharp, worried glances at their comrade. All of them are armed with different types of rifles, which they keep close to their bodies. Sis Violet and Blade, as commander and commissar respectively, also carry pistols.

Although in pain, Malume won't stop ribbing the other members of the unit, starting with Blade, who suffers from a certain skin condition where acne and pockmarks occupy every available inch of his face.

'You know,' he says, still wincing, 'I was half hoping our dinghy would capsize so that commissar's face would be washed by the river.'

Charlie stokes the fires. 'Awu, Malume,' he says. 'You mean the commissar needs a whole river to have his face washed?'

'The waters of the Zambezi would have healed all hills and valleys.'

Blade laughs cruelly. 'You two cowards were shitting yourselves in the dinghy. Now you can fart with your mouths.'

Sis Violet clucks her tongue. 'I don't expect this kind of talk from all of you, especially you, commissar. You're supposed to be exemplary.'

'They started it.'

'Listen to yourself; they started it, you sound like a seven-year-old.' She pauses while the others laugh uneasily. 'What kind of example are you setting for Joseph here?'

Joseph says: 'It's all right with me if they fart with their mouths.'

Sis Violet glares at him and shakes her head. 'You? What d'you think your mother would do if she caught you talking like that?'

Charlie pipes in, 'Wash his mouth with soap?'

'Most likely with sheep dip.'

In the men he starts to get a sense of his father's world and, knowing – wondering – that Sobhuza must also have spent nervous time in the bush, armed and attuned to danger, just like this unit of men and the lone woman. He senses their anxiety, hears it in the conversation – *What time do we expect the lift? What if he's been picked up along the way? Or got lost? No, he's a pro – he's done this gig a hundred times...But...No buts, wait; it's an order.* It's an order. It dawns on him that this world is graded like in a kingdom, where one person gives an order and the rest have to comply. Did Sobhuza, who has always shown independence? How did he act in such a situation? It's likely he's the one who gave orders and the others acted on them. What's he doing now, at this moment?

'Comrade Charlie?' he asks. 'Where would my father be right now?'

'You're asking me, kiddo?' The rain stops and the sun comes out again. Sis Violet and the others wring their folding mats and roll them back into their rucksacks, the movements brisk. Charlie takes his time getting ready. 'I don't know.' Then, quietly, almost sadly, he shakes himself as if from a deep sleep. Joseph has a sense of something changed in Charlie, the wild boyishness gone from his eyes.

'I was at the camp in Malanje when we had to go on a rescue mission to Cacuso,' Charlie says. 'This was about two hours' drive on a GAZ truck from base camp. Our food convoy had been ambushed by UNITA bandits, and we had a casualty, a woman comrade. Sobs had already fought off the attackers, but they had captured four of our injured comrades and dragged them into the bush. We followed the trails of blood until we found ourselves under heavy artillery fire. The four comrades had been executed by the bandits. We had small arms but returned fire, concentrating on a spot in the bush where most of the shots came from. Sobs, carrying a PKM, stood up and fired as he ran, spraying the bush and routing the enemy. It was a single-handed act of bravery. And stupidity.' He pauses, shaking his head at the memory. 'Much later, when asked, Sobs said that he was *gatvol* with life.'

'*Ga...gatvol?*'

'*Siek en sat*, tired, fed up.'

'With life?'

'With life. Perhaps he meant the life of danger.'

'But he seemed to enjoy that life.'

Since all this happened a year or two ago, Joseph reasons, his father was acting rashly in the face of danger, most certainly aiming to get himself killed. He would die and leave them. Leave ma with the children. Perhaps he was grieving for the woman comrade who died in the ambush, maybe she was his *hule*.

'Was he like this...' Joseph asks, jamming his two index fingers together, '...with the woman who died?'

Charlie gives him a sharp look. The others, even Sis Violet who has sat throughout with her face turned away, jerk their heads like pigeons. Two or three of the guerrillas laugh. Charlie says: '*Miskien*, I don't know. *Hoekom*, kiddo?'

Joseph shrugs.

A gust of wind ruffles the bush. Tekere motions everyone to keep still. Above the sound of the steady hum of insects is the distant roar of a four-wheel drive. As alert as goats, the guerrillas collect their equipment and crouch on their haunches, their eyes on the two sentries. Gwaza straightens up and creeps through the wet foliage towards the road. Maintaining a position above him,

Tekere aims with his rifle. Joseph wishes for action, anything. Just then, Gwaza's urgent whisper: 'It's our transport.'

Even though the engine is more audible now, Sis Violet calls for patience, getting on one knee to examine the bush at the beginning of the trees across the wet and muddy road.

'Okay,' Sis Violet says. 'Let's move.' She stays behind, letting them run to the Land Cruiser one by one, until all of them have clambered inside. She looks at Joseph who's stayed behind, feeling useless with his empty arms. 'And you,' she says, 'we should leave you here to contend with the animals.' And then: 'Go!'

He runs, feeling naked in the empty stretch between the bush and the vehicle. He skips over a puddle on the rutted road, the smell of wet vegetation and upturned soil in his nostrils. Charlie helps him up to the car.

Sis Violet opens the passenger door, greets the driver with a pat on the back. She counts the men with eyes that move from face to face. 'All set?'

'All accounted for, komandir,' Blade says.

'It's a long way to Pretoria, comrades. Someone will have to help keep up our morale with a song.'

'Let the *pionero* sing,' Gwaza says. '*Of hoe sien jy die ding*, Charlie?'

Charlie laughs. 'Ne...Bra Joe from Kilimanjaro only sings the Zambian national anthem.' He punches Joseph on the arm. 'Am I right or am I right?'

Still overwhelmed by the events, Joseph smiles, accepting being the butt of the joke. Surprise them with the songs he learnt from Sobhuza? No.

'Awu,' Sis Violet complains from the front, '*kanti*, what kind of guerrillas are these who can't sing. We're going home, comrades. Commissar?'

Someone, maybe Malume, starts the song, slow and hesitant, parts of it getting snatched by the wind as the car picks up speed. More voices join in.

'*Siyay'ePitoli, siyaya!*'

CHAPTER 14

The stretch of emptiness stares at them. It is relieved by oddly shaped rocks, boulders and termite mounds on the ground, bleached the colour of khaki by the sun. A clump of rocks standing atop others screw their faces like human beings tasting something bitter, here a bent old man with a crescent-shaped beard, there an old woman balancing a calabash on her head. With every mile travelled, the shadows grow longer and longer. It's now late in the afternoon. The sun peers redly over the hills and wisps of clouds are tinged with orange. Scraggy bushes sprout up in places that look impossibly dry, a desert; a small whirlwind sucks up papers and twigs and other objects and sets them dancing before freeing them into emptiness. Far in the distance shimmers a lake, which Joseph knows is just a mirage. The road stretches on and on and disappears behind low hills to emerge even narrower than before, tapering into a memory on the horizon.

The guerrillas, even Sis Violet, are bloodshot from the travel. His own eyes are gritty, and he's afraid to scratch them, remembering ma's warnings: don't mess with your eyes – you have only one pair.

The guerrillas have been taking turns driving, the first driver now occupying Joseph's former position in the back. Snoring and coughing, he mutters inaudible words. Once in a while, he laughs and then lapses into a long silence. To general laughter, one of the guerrillas says, 'Hey, someone check if Guduza hasn't popped it.' Only the snoring tells Joseph the man is still alive. It's now Malume driving. Charlie, fidgety, has been wanting to light up, but the others don't allow him. Joseph has a sense that Charlie is itching to punch someone.

'Where are we?' Joseph asks. He's bolder now that he knows they won't chuck him out. At least for the moment.

'Out in the sticks of Botswana,' Charlie says. He peers at the desolation flitting past. *'My ma hoor my, die Botswana van julle is net een fokken gemors.'*

'Ja,' Gwaza says, 'it's desolate, but at least they're independent, the Batswana. They have a country and a flag, *gemors* or not. And you...you're just a stateless guerrilla.'

‘At least I’m fighting to win back a developed country. *Die ding die...*’

Charlie points out to the spread of scrubland where a piece of farming machinery stands rotting in the sun. Further into the middle distance, a couple of huts and lean-tos have risen from the ground. A group of curious children watch the car, thumbs jammed into their mouths. ‘*Kyk net daar.*’

‘Charlie,’ Sis Violet says, ‘have you ever considered that the development you’re crowing about comes at a huge cost?’

‘Or,’ Gwaza cuts in, ‘that people might actually prefer to live in dust bowls on their own terms rather than in your developed sections of the country?’

‘Charlie is a city animal,’ Blade says. ‘Botswana is more than seventy percent wild. There must be a reason its people are in no hurry to change that.’

‘You forget I did the rangers’ course at Mpushi,’ Charlie says. ‘And I stayed out in the wild for days on end without food or water. But this bush...gimme a break.’

‘But,’ Gwaza comes in, ‘isn’t it that all of us have roots in some bush – a village, an ancestral home...’

‘Not me,’ Charlie says. ‘My parents were from Sophiatown. Kofifi. *Daar, ons wietie, nie die’s shalambombo van julle.*’

‘And since they destroyed Sophiatown,’ Gwaza continues, ‘where will you go?’

‘I hear you guys are now disclosing your true origins,’ Sis Violet says from the front, ‘which is a breach of security. Commissar?’

‘Yes, komandir...’ Blade answers. Joseph has an idea that he was about to nod off.

‘Any idea where we are?’

‘We’ve passed Nata. Our ETA is four hours. Five hours max.’

‘Let’s concentrate on the mission, please.’

‘Yes, komandir.’ He turns to Charlie. ‘Once over the border, we’ll have to set up a base camp in the sticks, as you call them, while we explore a safe route home.’ Blade seems to relish giving Charlie the bad news. ‘After that you can always indulge that little urban guerrilla beating inside your breast.’

‘*Fok jou*, Blade.’

‘Charlie...’

With a resigned sigh, Charlie settles deeper into his seat, closes his eyes and pulls his cap over his face. This robs Joseph of the chance to ask him more questions about the struggle. The windows, earlier opened to let in cool air, are closed again against the blasts of warm evening air that have the passengers fanning themselves. All this achieves is to recirculate the air. As the heat rises, it worsens the mood. There is something angry and coiled inside the car; Joseph feels it hanging like an overripe breadfruit at the end of a slender stalk, ready to drop and burst on the ground. Uneasy, he falls asleep and dreams of Charlie running across a field carrying Blade's head cradled under his arm like a rugby ball.

He wakes up, stiff and sore, his buttocks feeling as if he's been sliding up and down a rough surface. The guerrillas' song about going to Pretoria rings in his head, and he feels a jolt of apprehensive glee that they might have actually crossed into South Africa. But, even in the twitching shadows sprinkled with flashes of orangey light, he knows this cannot be Pretoria. He might have been poor in geography, but everything about the place, the smells of the night and dung and trees that pant as if out of breath – not to mention the sounds of crickets and sleepless birds – means they are still in that seventy-five percent wilderness called Botswana.

He's never been to Pretoria but imagines, from what he has heard and read, the city has a different rhythm, possibly very loud with the hum of traffic, for instance, people walking at all hours, speaking in different languages, the air full of smells of petrol and the perfume of women in high heels. He imagines the trains and cars and wonders if his ma would ever take the train; he has seen the pictures, the sleek interior, wood panels and wide sliding windows – but aren't those for white people only? How are his parents dealing with a place where there are no-go areas for black people? But then, being already illegal, Sobhuza would be making double sure he's never within range of the law. His ma is not illegal; no trouble there. But his father? Where the hell would they be, now?

Late at night, under a moon that freezes everything under a cold light, the car enters an area where the air is thick with mosquitoes and flying ants. It's a little like Chilenje with the difference being in the sizes of the houses on either

side of the broad unpaved road. They are huge and would qualify as mansions were it not for the fact that, even in the hesitant light, they are so old and covered with dried creepers; old, although not in the same way as Chilenje houses, which just shout to you that poor people live here. These are houses like Gogo Mulubwa when she puts on an ancient coat with animal fur on the shoulders and dares anyone to comment – more of a choice than something forced.

‘This is Tšaba Ntša,’ Gwaza says, his voice croaky, ‘at least that’s what the locals call it.’

‘Why such a lousy name?’ Charlie never seems to be asleep at any point. *‘Die’s mos ’n mnca plek.’*

‘Exactly,’ Gwaza says. ‘but one which seems to have collected all of Botswana’s dogs.’

As if to confirm his words, dogs of all shapes and sizes rush out of their gates or crawl under fences to trot alongside the Land Cruiser. Malume accelerates, leaving them in a noisy cloud of dust.

‘Jirre, I hate dogs,’ Gwaza continues. ‘I hope we don’t hang around too long in this town.’

‘If we’d arrived earlier,’ Malume says, ‘Hubert’s dogs would have been used to us by now. But we had to take the back roads...’

‘Why don’t you leave the explaining to me, Malume?’ Sis Violet asks. ‘Hubert must know we don’t have a radio to report progress.’

‘What happened with the radio?’

Sis Violet snorts angrily. ‘What happened is what always happens when people have to go on an operation. You ask for certain items and you get gimcracks. I had to threaten people before they could give us these AKMSs and extra magazines. All along we’d have had to make do with stupid AKs from Yugoslavia. They said they don’t have F-1s and wanted to palm us off with RGD-5s, and I said no dice. We’re going to war; we don’t want anti-personnel grenades; we want offensive grenades, the real McCoy. They held out on us until I personally went to get the material from ordnance. By then I was exhausted with the haggling and couldn’t push it for the radio.’

‘You tried your best.’ Malume pauses. ‘You think there’ll be any other people at Hubert’s?’

‘Who knows? Maybe some units out of Dukwe.’

We’re going to war: these words stay with Joseph and lodge at the back of his mind. He thinks of the meaning of war as the Land Cruiser turns into a side street where the houses are spaced even further apart, standing on large plots. Cleverly placed lights shine on the legend *Tšaba Ntša* beneath an image of a dog with dripping fangs. Rumour has it that in Lusaka, the Zairean *kabalalas* found these signs a source of great amusement. To gain entry, they simply fed the guard dogs poisoned meat and sent whole families into dreamland with fumes from a blend of herbs and the hair fibres of a hyena.

Under the moonlight, the windows of the dark houses stare onto the street, watchmen guarding the castle that holds all the treasure. The dogs bark from behind the low fences; now and then a cat mews, the cry as sharp as a claw. Steering the car slowly along the road, Sis Violet peers at the crude numbers in front of the plots, mouthing something until she exclaims: ‘Aha!’ And then, pulling to a stop in front of an unmarked gate, she says: ‘Gwaza? Tekere? You know what to do.’

The two men clamber out and open the gate. They close it behind the Land Cruiser after it’s pulled up the gravelled driveway. There is a clump of smaller, thatched buildings towards the back of the property and a small terraced garden dominated by a bunch of bamboo trees that partly hide another car, a Toyota Cressida. Standing bent, speaking to someone in the car, is a white woman with a shock of grey hair, which, caught in the sudden flash of light when the car door opens, looks like fiery filaments. She helps someone out of the car, an elderly man who walks with a stick. Low yelps announce the appearance of about six dogs, all different breeds, sizes and levels of excitement. They almost knock the old couple over but back off somewhat when scolded by the woman. Turning to glare at the newcomers alighting from the Land Cruiser, the dogs give a combined growl that sounds like the rumble of distant thunder. Joseph thanks his lucky stars he’s in the company of armed people. The old woman barks another order and the dogs slink off to the back but return to heel at her feet, still keeping a dutiful watch.

'*Dumelang*,' the woman says, waving at Sis Violet while murmuring to her companion. She seems genuinely happy. 'I'll take Hubert in and then lock the dogs up.'

'We'll wait, Aunt Emma,' Sis Violet says. 'Hi, Hubert.'

Giving a bad-tempered hello, Hubert walks in lockstep with Aunt Emma down a paved path to the open door at the back of the house.

'He'll be okay once he gets his medication,' Sis Violet tells her guerrillas.

As he comes in through the kitchen door, Joseph is struck by how differently the *mzungu's* kitchen smells from his ma's. The nearest he's come to entering the house of white people was when he went looking for ma in Kabulonga and encountered ma'am, Mrs Shakalongo – and Lizzie, with her lizard eyes. In that house, there was an unwritten rule that he should never knock anything over, so he walked in the way he suspects a mouse does in a field full of traps. This one is less a residence than a place, like a museum, dedicated to the safekeeping of valuable articles. These objects have their own smell, breathing out, as it were, their satisfaction with their place in the world. Ma's kitchen would be a mixture of smells from yesterday's cooking: juicy fruit – mango, banana, pineapple and guava – all overlaid, perhaps, by the sharp, sickly tang of the blood of a freshly killed chicken. The kitchen here holds the lingering smell of travel, places visited, some of them represented in postcards and postcard-sized photographs from destinations that only exist in dreams, white liners on endless blue water, white sands and palm trees, snow-capped mountains, young and old people on skis, their smiles reflecting great joy. There are cookbooks and curios, music instruments fashioned out of gourds and fishing line, grass mats and tapestries affixed to the walls, bric-a-brac – stuff that ma would have thrown out as junk – given pride of place. There is also the inevitable odour of dogs, confirmed by the presence of bristly tufts all over the place.

Wishing for a long shower, itchy and restless, with his armpits – and, he knows, his crotch – rank from days of neglect, he follows the others along the short passage into a lounge full of books, magazines, bound and loose manuscripts and folders stuffed into every niche. The newspapers are mostly all

in English from South Africa although there are also Setswana ones like *Mmegi* and *Dikgang Tsa Gompieno*.

When she hears the dogs scratch at the kitchen door and whine their eagerness to join the humans, Aunt Emma turns back and lets them in, telling the group of guerrillas that the dogs just want to sniff at them as a form of greeting. Joseph stiffens as a German Shepherd nuzzles him in the region of the groin. He puts out his hand and the dog licks it, the tongue hot and rough against his skin.

‘He likes you,’ Aunt Emma says.

‘Emma,’ Hubert says in a tone of weary irritation, ‘please...’

‘Okay, okay,’ She gives a shrill whistle and the dogs almost knock into each other in their haste to exit the kitchen. A drink in hand – perhaps the medication Sis Violet mentioned earlier – Hubert seems surer in his step and, although still grouchy, he’s a degree pleasanter. But Joseph still finds him cold, noticing the thin lips that sip at the glass, the eyes moving from one face to another.

‘So,’ Hubert says, settling into a sofa, putting his drink on the small side table, ‘how’s the journey been?’

Sis Violet sighs. ‘It’s been long.’

Emma, who looks a little younger now in the light, returns from dog duty and embraces the guerrillas, starting with Sis Violet. When it’s Charlie’s turn, he giggles, squirming as if ticklish. Hubert looks on with a slight smile on his face. Dressed in a plaid shirt and a pullover, baggy khaki pants and moccasins, he looks like someone’s grandpa.

‘I’m being a bad host,’ Hubert says.

Getting up from the sofa and propping his walking stick against the wall, he shuffles to the cupboard. He works surprisingly quickly, bringing down a few glasses from the shelf. A bottle of brandy appears in his hand the way a magician plucks an object from someone’s ear. Smiling, satisfied with himself, or perhaps just happy to have company other than Emma’s, Hubert puts everything on the table.

A little apart from the dining area of the lounge, every wall space is taken up by bookshelves that go almost up to the ceiling. Malume and Blade go outside on guard duty and to move the Land Cruiser away from the public eye. While the

guerrillas and their host are talking and drinking, Hubert regaling them with stories of the time he clashed with the minister of education, Emma gives Joseph a tour of the bookshelves, pulling out a couple of musty books signed by the authors.

‘Bessie Head was here from Serowe,’ she says, ‘coming to calm herself after fights with Tshekedi’s people. Oh, they could be difficult. She wasn’t an easy one to get along with herself.’ She blows into the open book, dust flying. ‘This was the time she was writing letters to publishers in the United Kingdom and in the United States. Do you know she tried to get Toni Morrison to help her publish *A Question of Power*?’

Joseph, who knows neither Bessie Head nor Toni Morrison – and whose eyes are fixed on the dog-eared Collins’ *Botswana Map for Motorists* – shakes his head, ‘No, ma’am.’ Even in saying this, he has a sense that the old lady is not really interested in his opinion; she seems to ramble on and on, latching onto anyone within range but actually indifferent to the effect of her words. And so, making suitably agreeable noises, he busies himself with the maps and travel books, excited that he can still recognise the symbols for the different geographical features.

A record player is going, some soft jazz tune, a woman singing in the background. The guerrillas are sitting or standing with drinks in their hands, hanging on Hubert’s every word, some nodding now and then. He wonders what they are talking about, but curbs his curiosity, wishing to minimise his presence as much as possible. They should just forget about him.

Emma puts her hand on Joseph’s back and propels him out of the lounge. ‘I’m sure you want something to eat and drink.’ Sitting him at the kitchen table, she pours him a glass of a fizzy drink whose bubbles tickle his nostrils. ‘I’ll warm something up.’

Sitting alone at table, having watched Emma’s bent back disappearing into the lounge, Joseph wonders what the new hosts know about him. Another pair of hands. He picks at the food, his stomach unsettled by the journey. It’s chicken and rice as bland as dishwater, but he’s too shy to ask for condiments, which he can see behind the glass of the kitchen dresser. Insects buzz and knock themselves against the mosquito netting at the windows. He thinks of home.

He finds he can actually follow parts of the conversation in the lounge, catching stompies again. Hubert, sounding angry and mystified, asking, '...but in truth, how could you be so reckless, bringing a child on a mission like this?' Someone, Sis Violet and Tekere talking over each other in a hasty attempt to explain, which Hubert cuts with a curt, 'No. You listen to me.' And then, as if conscious that Joseph might be listening in, there's a sudden hush. Then Sis Violet calls:

'Joseph?'

Joseph closes his eyes with his head resting on his arms on the table. He's surprised to feel he's actually very tired and can really fall asleep in this position. From the other side of the wall, chairs scrape back followed by footfalls on the wooden floor. Someone grabs him by the shoulder and gives a shake. 'Joseph?'

'Wh...' he mutters, drooling, 'what?'

'Time for bed,' Sis Violet says, sounding like ma. 'Come with me.'

In the dark, the sheet chafes his skin. The heat of the day causes the zinc roof to crackle and he half expects something, a sleepless lizard perhaps, to drop down on him. He pushes the covers to the bottom of the bed, thankful the other bed is still unoccupied. Getting up, guided by the main house's outside light, he studies the interior of the cottage, a single room that doubles as a storeroom and emergency housing for a chance visitor like him. There are boxes, trunks and suitcases shoved into the corner and stacked to the ceiling, fishing rods, toolboxes and tyres. It smells exactly like the back of the Land Cruiser under all that stuff.

If Leila were here, he thinks, perhaps she'd advise him on what to do. Or even Lanky Boy, although Lanky Boy had no time for anybody. But Leila, she warned him about adults: anyone over twenty, steer clear of them. Now, here he is. He's dodged two attempts to send him back to Lusaka. The third time he won't be so lucky. He's sure the little conference in the house, the low tones and averted eyes, are all about him and how to get him on the next transport back to Lusaka. Once back there, all his plans to find answers about his ma will go up in smoke. Sis Violet: he remembers Gogo Mulubwa telling him that you can't tempt

a dog to jump on your lap while wielding a stick. That's exactly what she's doing. Giving him a sense of safety while working to frustrate his plans.

Getting up, he dresses and tries the door handle, grimacing against the creak that sounds like a firecracker going off. The sentries take two-hour shifts before the changing of the guard; how much time has gone by since the last two were posted? He has no idea but knows a mistake could cost him his life. The door opens onto a paved path that leads to the garden. Using the bulk of the parked Land Cruiser, he inches his way around a clump of plants, a manicured shrub shaped like those bearskin hats worn by the guards of the Queen of England, more hibiscus and bougainvillea, which he saw earlier on arrival. That is most likely the spot where the guard would sit. He knows that absolute darkness, where all light has been swallowed by the night, will not work for him. He might end up kicking some stray can or stumbling on an obstacle. The near dark is his best bet. Then a sound sends a chill down his spine, the low growl of a dog. He thought the dogs have been locked up. But it makes instant sense; why have dogs if not to bark at an intruder?

He stands still, his back against the wall, his head just below the kitchen window and his left shoulder rubbing against a steel downpipe. The kitchen door is flung open and yellow light forms a rectangle on the ground. Emma stands in the doorway and calls, 'Rover? Rover... ah, there's a good boy,' and places a dish on the side of the stoep. Rover hesitates, his tail wagging but his eyes fixed on the intruder, until Emma, impatient, pulls her housecoat tighter around her, and grumbles: 'Goddamnit, Rover, I don't have all night.'

Remembering being told that dogs can smell fear, Joseph holds his breath, praying that Rover, a shaggy mongrel of sorts, finds his supper more appealing than a chunk of Zambian – well, Zambian *and* South African – flesh. Go on, Rover. Just as Emma closes the door, cutting off the light, Blade strides across the yard on his way to the darkened part of the garden. Joseph wonders where Malume might be. One thing is for sure, this is his only chance to make good his escape. Rover makes slurping and crunching sounds.

Voices and high-pitched laughter come from inside the house – Hubert most probably regaling the guerrillas with more stories. Tiptoeing, still hugging the wall, Joseph comes up to an open window, the lace curtain billowing in the

wind. A strange emotion takes hold of him and he wishes to see, as if for the last time, the faces of people who have been part of his life since his mother's disappearance. He curses this moment of madness as he steals a look into the lounge and sees Sis Violet. Chatting with someone who has his back to the window, she gazes into Joseph's eyes and then quickly looks away.

Joseph carries on, walking crabwise until he gets to the corner where he studies the stretch to the hedgerow that borders the neighbour's yard. Malume, wherever he is, could easily take a bead on him and blow him away in mid-flight. He sees himself flapping like a bird and collapsing in a pool of his own blood. And then he hears Rover approaching from the side, the scratchy steps loud on the paved pathway.

The escape doesn't make sense. Rover will invite all his brother and sister dogs to attack him. Slowly, he edges back to the cottage. Malume, who must have been watching him from a hiding place, calls out softly: 'Hey, sonny, what are you doing out here?'

'Going for a piss,' Joseph says. He suspects Malume must have dozed off.

'Stay away from the fence. It's electrified.'

'Oh.' He swallows his disappointment, which tastes of bile.

'Get back to bed.'

'Okay.'

CHAPTER 15

He wakes up in the morning from a dream in which it's unclear whether he's playing with a pack of dogs or if they're chasing him, but he can hear them panting and feels their hot breath fanning the nape of his neck. The dogs come as a jumpy series of images: forelegs and muzzles and bared teeth. His heart thumping from either effort or fear, he hears the dogs barking and someone scolding them. The voice is new, strange and talks to the dogs in a rapid-fire Setswana. There is the sound of a blow follow by a dog whining.

Now that it's daylight, Joseph gets to see what he missed of the cottage's interior when it was lit by the wobbly electric bulb. Coils of cable are packed upon tyres alongside a generator and jerry cans, all covered in dust. Sunbeams strike Prinz-Bräu beer bottles at an angle, sending patterns of yellow light onto the wall. In the corner is a stack of cardboard boxes topped with books and faded newspapers. A smell of tobacco wafts into the cottage. He remembers his father warning him about fire, that it takes no time at all for a building to go up in smoke. Quickly, he slips into his trousers and shoes and lingers at the door, gathering his thoughts. It's already too hot for the jacket, which he throws back on the bed. He'd have liked to step out with it slung over his shoulder like his father. Today, he's feeling different, almost like a grown man.

Intent on not showing fear for the dogs or any form of unease that might make the guerrillas and the hosts suspect he overheard them discussing his return to Zambia, Joseph steps out into the morning sunlight. It strikes him that this is actually the first time he's accepted that he's in another country.

He remembers Gogo Mulubwa talking about her involvement in the struggle, how, in those days, the borders separating countries were meaningless, and the freedom fighters crossed them without fear of being challenged. Because, she would say, we are one people. Here, feeling the heat that is as merciless as if he were still in Zambia, seeing the vegetation in Hubert's and Emma's garden that is no different from what adorns his mother's backyard, he wonders at the sense of countries and their borders. The sky and the ground of his country look the same as the sky and ground of Botswana. The chickens clucking and goats bleating in the distance are familiar sounds, as is the buzzing of insects. Although

the insects here sound louder than their Zambian counterparts. Maybe they have an extra set of lungs.

Followed by Emma, Hubert appears at the doorway and stands with a hand cupped over his brow against the glare of the sun. He calls out to one of the two men walking the dogs with a tangle of leashes coiled around both wrists. His appearance reminds Joseph of an ancient Roman charioteer in a movie he once saw. Wondering which of the dogs was the one yelping with pain earlier, Joseph suspects the dog's crying has brought Hubert out of the house.

He marvels at the dogs' determination to rush to their masters as they strain at their bonds so wildly that their handler is almost pulled right over. He pats them to try to calm them down. An angry Hubert limps forward, the stick seeming to propel him while also almost tripping him. Emma worriedly keeps pace, one hand raised as if to ward off a blow.

'Makgatho? Vuthela? What are you doing?' Hubert asks. He snatches the two sets of leashes and shoves himself between the two men. 'How many times have I told you the dogs have to be walked first thing in the morning before being fed?' He points at the dogs' empty bowls set along the sink. 'Do you want them to bloat?'

Vuthela, the dog handler, looks like someone who's just had his crutches taken away. He's a wiry man of an age that's hard to guess. He takes a khaki hat out of the back pocket of his overalls and starts crumpling it in his now-empty hands.

'Ke kopa boitshwarelo, rra,' he says. 'The dog, he say he's hungry.'

Shaking his head, Hubert releases a sound that voices a mixture of laughter and surprise. 'How can a dog tell you it's hungry?' Spreading his arms and raising his shoulders, he searches around for someone, anyone, to help make sense of Vuthela's explanation. 'What did Rover say? We want a full English breakfast this morning, *rra*?

'Makgatho?' Hubert continues, handing the leashes over to the other worker, also in blue overalls and a matching bush hat, 'it's your turn to take control of the dogs today. You,' pointing at Vuthela, 'you're coming with me in the car.' Giving Joseph a sidelong glance, he goes on: 'And you, young man, we're going on a drive this morning.'

‘Drive?’ Joseph asks. ‘Where are the... where’s Violet and them?’

‘Joseph,’ Emma says, ‘I meant to tell you in the morning. But you were so fast asleep, I didn’t have the heart to wake you up. Your friends are gone.’

‘Gone?’

‘Yes,’ Hubert comes in. It seems to Joseph that he has never really seen a white person up close. He remembers during the reading of *Things Fall Apart*, the whole class chuckling over of the reaction of the Nigerian villagers at their first sighting of the visitor from Europe. Since the Christian missionaries’ feet were covered in leather shoes, the villagers believed it meant the strangers didn’t have toes. Well, Hubert has toes, all right, all lined up in his sandals like a squad of small pink soldiers.

‘Where?’

A ripple of irritation flits across Hubert’s face. Joseph finds these quick changes from humour to sternness interesting. The blue-grey eyes on either side of a nose that hovers over a set of thin lips like a sickle are crinkled at the corners as if Hubert is used to scrunching them against the glare of the sun. Tufts of hair peep out of one ear. The other one is fitted with a hearing aid, which brings to mind a flat insect.

‘I beg your pardon?’ Hubert asks, turning his gaze on Joseph.

‘I was trying to find out where they’ve gone.’

‘They are free agents. I heard them talk of taking care of some important business in Extension Ten.’

‘And they left me? Why didn’t someone wake me up?’

‘They’ll be back for you,’ Hubert says. Something about his eyes, a faraway look, convinces Joseph he’s again being turned around by an adult. They are all the same, black, white, young, old.

‘I’ll wait for them then,’ Joseph says.

‘Ja,’ Hubert insists, ‘that may be the case, but I have to take you with.’ He digs at the loose sand with his cane. ‘Those are the rules here. All visitors must be reported to the authorities.’

‘I thought such rules applied only in South Africa,’ Joseph says. ‘At least that’s what my father told us.’

‘This is the law here, I’m afraid.’

Emma nods, smiling somewhat sadly. 'The police have introduced a system of permits, we think to control the influx of poachers from Zimbabwe. Or Zambia, who knows?' She pauses, searching the young man's face. 'Before you go, however, don't you wanna eat something?'

For a moment there, she might have been Gogo Mulubwa, in that strange way of grandmothers who'd whisk you from the playground to stuff you with food. Gratefully, he follows her back inside, giddy with hunger. As he bites into a slice of steamed bread, savouring it and knowing he can't get enough of it, he watches her pottering about proudly, retrieving a square plastic box from the kitchen dresser. Blowing into it like *ma*, ensuring ants haven't made their home in her lesser-used kitchenware, she lines the inside of the box with wax paper before stuffing it with buttered bread, a wedge of cheese, two bananas and mango pieces. She covers her handiwork with a sheet of foil and snaps the box shut with a satisfied sigh.

'Some *mofagô* for you,' she says, handing him a carrier bag sagging with the weight of the box together with a large bottle of orange squash. 'It's a long wait at the offices, and you'll probably get hungry.'

'This bread is so tasty,' Joseph says. 'I'll just gobble it all up.'

'You'll never believe that it was Violet who taught me how to bake it,' Emma says, wiping her hands with a tea towel. 'This was eight or so years ago in Luanda where Hubert was a Reuters correspondent. We would visit the ANC offices in Villa Alice to get a lead on a story, and one day we came across this wonderful young woman who invited us to the ANC residence in the suburb.'

'They allowed you?'

'Who'd stop us?' For a moment, Emma becomes young again. 'Hubert was already a legend. And everyone knew he was on the right side of history. There were other people, journalists, aid workers – and I would like to believe quite a number of spies. I remember Mike Wolfers, Jane Bergerol, Markku Vesikko, a crazy Finn who ran the ANC's print shop in Viana, and many others.'

He watches her as she dabs at the corner of her eye with a cloth. She looks at him and past him, talking to him and at the same time, to something else, a memory. The expression on her face makes him think of Gogo Mulubwa recounting her time with the freedom fighters.

‘Did you ever come across my father, in Angola?’ To him, she is part of a close-knit group of people involved in the struggle, which now includes journalists, aid workers and spies. No one’s made any mention of smugglers and bandits. Perhaps this old woman will know something helpful.

‘What name did he use? People had many names, sometimes it’s difficult to know who’s who in the revolutionary zoo.’

Joseph laughs. The last bit sounds like a song or a poem he’d most likely end up knowing by heart. The old woman was not so bad. ‘Sobhuza. Sometimes called Comrade Sobs.’

‘Why name someone Sobs?’ Emma asks. ‘Did he use to cry a lot?’ She laughs at her own joke, then shakes her head. ‘I don’t think I’ve had the pleasure.’

‘I’m trying to find him. And my ma.’

‘I heard the story last night. But you’re just a boy. Where would you start in this great big world?’

He thinks for a moment. ‘Is there transport from here to Pretoria?’

‘Are you serious?’

‘How do people travel to Pretoria?’

‘You’ll never make it. Forget it. For what it’s worth, there’s a train from Francistown to Gaborone. From Gaborone to Lobatse, then you’re at the border.’

‘Does it run every day? The train?’

‘I don’t have those details.’

‘How long do you think it would take? The journey?’

‘A lifetime.’

He’s mulling over the exact duration of a lifetime when the air is shattered by the angry blast of a horn. ‘Emma, for God’s sake,’ Hubert shouts, ‘we’re baking out here. Get Joseph to come out here on the double. We’re running late.’

‘Thanks for the food,’ Joseph says, a little unsettled by Hubert’s outburst. Perhaps, he thinks, when legends stop being legends, they develop short tempers. He takes a long draught of the glass of milk on the table.

‘Ah,’ Emma says, ‘you have a milk moustache.’ She leans forward and wipes his upper lip with a cloth that smells of soap. ‘We have to go. I’ll come with you.’

No one mentions Sis Violet or her group of men. He tries to conjure up their images, Charlie and Sis Violet are most vivid – the others are beginning to fade away, like old photographs. He feels a sense of loss, knowing that he might never see them: Gwaza, Malume, Blade with his indestructible pimples, Tekere or even Guduza, who always chose to be in the shadows. He does a mental roll call. Pule, Comrade Mbizo, Chuckles, Robbie, Matrosov and Mpungose met much earlier, in fact, they're the first people from the ANC, apart from his father, the smuggler, whom he's met – these people who don't operate in the daytime. They were all at ease with the dark.

Even though the revealing light of day would help him locate ma or Sobhuza, he prefers the shelter of the shadows. Right now, he can feel the sun's vibrations through the glass of the car's window. It's strange that the pane, which is cool under his hand, is untouched by the heat it lets inside.

When they set out earlier, he in the back seat with Emma, Hubert at the wheel alongside Vuthela and Rover – stupid Rover – between them in the front, he started to roll down the window but stopped when Emma said dust would blow into the car. Your teeth will be on edge by the time you meet the officials, she said, and you wouldn't want that, would you? He was about to say something in response when Rover turned his head away from nuzzling his master to stare at him with amber eyes. He remembered the dream, incomplete and sketchy, the menace real in the short distance between the animal's muzzle and his own face. He had heard of dogs lunging for victims' faces. Sensing Joseph's unease, Rover growled from his stomach and followed up with a series of sharp barks. Vuthela got hold of Rover's collar. Perhaps the grip was too tight because the growl was suddenly at a lower, hoarser pitch. As if mimicking his dog, Hubert orders Vuthela in a croaky voice. *'Hela, rra wee, tlogela ntsâ ya me.'*

The sight of red dust swirling out on the road and the throbbing heat gluing his back to the plastic seat cover unlock a detail for Joseph. One Sunday afternoon he overheard his father and Uncle Agrippa talking about the good old days. It was one of those lazy afternoons after a heavy meal, the children noisily at play while Gogo Mulubwa, ma and Taona and – sometimes – Aunt Thelma were either collecting the dishes or just sitting a little apart from the men and chatting. In a

rare, talkative mood, Sobhuza was answering Uncle Agrippa's questions about his experiences as a very young man in Umkhonto we Sizwe. *Tell me this one, Mlamu, did you know how to use a gun?* Sobhuza laughed and took a sip of water. *That's usually when people follow up with: have you ever killed a man?* Then he told the story.

On a hot day in August 1967, he and a party of seven or eight men had been separated from their platoon after a confusing battle with soldiers of the Rhodesian African Rifles in the Wankie area, deep in the bush. 'We'd killed a few of the enemy,' Sobhuza said, 'unfortunately many of them were black like us from the Rhodesian African Rifles, and one white commanding officer, a Lieutenant Something. One member of our section, Jeqe, was wounded. A bullet had shattered his leg, the white bone shining through the blood.' Harassed by spotter planes and a helicopter, they decided to retreat southwards to Botswana, intending to make their way home from there. They took turns carrying Jeqe's dead weight – he had fainted.

After a few days marching in northern Botswana, their supplies were finished, and their uniforms were mere rags. They were challenged by a Botswana paramilitary patrol. The orders from Lusaka were that there should be no fighting with the Batswana; Botswana was a member of the Organisation of African Unity and was duty bound to help the South African freedom fighters. By then they were so tired and hungry and weak from days of marching, they couldn't have offered resistance anyway. Disarmed, they were transported on the back of a truck straight to police cells in Francistown. Jeqe slipping in and out of consciousness. The rise and fall of the sound of his groans pointed to the condition of the road.

As unit leader, it was Sobhuza's duty to complain to the station commander. Under the Geneva Convention, the Batswana had to treat them with care. They were hungry and one of them needed medical attention. 'Although the troops were mostly Batswana,' Sobhuza said, 'what was worrying was they were commanded by British and South African officers, *azungu*.' They didn't show any sympathy, save for taking Jeqe to the infirmary. Their cell, which was cramped with Batswana and Zimbabweans prisoners, cutthroats and petty thieves, was filthy and stank of human waste.

‘Around 10.00pm at night,’ Sobhuza said, ‘one of the policemen whispered to us, *Heyi, nina ma-freedom fighter, amaBhunu azoni-kibnetta eb’suku*. I still don’t know what drove him to help us, but he was a Kalanga and probably had his own fight with the Batswana. Without him, we wouldn’t have managed to escape. We had to rough him up and tie him up with his other colleagues. We locked them up in a cell and collected all the weapons.’

‘What happened to the wounded man?’ Agrippa asked. ‘The comrade.’

‘Well, we had a debate about it, whether to leave Jeje behind, but we knew the Batswana would hand him over to the Boers. We’d been warned they were coming to kidnap us. So, we took one of the police vans. But Jeje had lost too much blood, and he knew he was holding us back.’

‘So?’

‘We shot him and buried him in the bush.’

Joseph wonders, looking at the scrubland on either side of the road, where exactly Jeje is buried. Soon the car joins others in a built-up area, a town where the houses and the people and even the goats nibbling at the shrubs on the side of the road are all covered in dust. ‘We’re soon there,’ Hubert says, addressing no one in particular, perhaps feeling the weight of something that has entered the car, an expectation.

‘Yes, dear,’ Emma says.

As they near a roundabout, Hubert curses under his breath. Joseph looks on as an old man makes his way across the road, walking slowly with the aid of a Zimmer frame, pushing the walker forward, taking three steps, stopping to hitch up his pants and then resuming the walk across. For a moment it’s as if Hubert is considering stepping on the accelerator and shooting straight through, but he, too, seems captivated by the old man’s progress. For Joseph, it’s like watching a chameleon trembling along a branch, inching forward but also taking a step backwards.

When the bent old man is within touching distance of the car’s bonnet, he stops, takes out a khaki handkerchief and blows into it. Then he turns his face and looks at Hubert’s car idling next to him, smiling as if ashamed to be holding things up. Hubert mutters, ‘Get a fucking move on.’ Rover starts growling again

and then bursts into a barking fit, not heeding Hubert's pleas for calm until Emma leans forward and strokes the back of his neck and the side of the head. It's when she tells Hubert, 'See how easy it is?' that Joseph grabs the handle of the door, twists it once, opens the door and jumps out in one fluid motion. For a second, he stumbles and, arms extended, falls to the side of the road. Something, the stump of a roadside plant, hits him a glancing blow on the side of the head. He grazes his knuckles on the road, tearing but still holding onto the plastic packet and praying the bottle of squash isn't broken. Getting up, momentarily dazed, he sees everything happening as if through distorting glass, all sound and movement slowed down: a wide-eyed Emma, her lips moving as if in prayer; Hubert turning his head, his hands moving frantically as the car starts to reverse, nearly crashing into a pickup behind them before rocking forward; Vuthela scrabbling to open his door. He doesn't wait to see if Vuthela will give chase. Or Rover. One by one, the vehicles that have formed a line behind the Cressida let loose with their horns, *pap-pap-paa-app-pap!*

Still lightheaded, Joseph shakes himself and starts running, going back the same way they came, passing lines of vehicles, the windows blanked by the slanting sheet of light and the headlights staring accusingly. He thinks he can hear the sound of urgent footsteps coming up behind him and a voice calling out, *Joseph*, and he picks up speed. He springs over a fence and finds himself in a field that slopes towards a patch of green pumpkins, the flowers bright yellow. He jumps over a stream and his shoes sink into the soft ground, slowing him down. His breath comes in short pants, his chest about to burst, but he runs on, never once looking over his shoulder, putting as much distance as he can between himself and Hubert's world.

Eventually, he slows down, turning to see if there are any pursuers, sure he's made good his escape. The sun suddenly disappears behind the clouds. He walks along a trodden path leading to an old playground with broken seesaws and lopsided swings and a slide resting on broken stakes. In the quiet he can see the silent traffic along the road down below. He imagines he can hear the voices of children. There's a rotting timber bench where the parents must have sat to watch toddlers at play.

Feeling stiffness in his limbs, he resumes his walk, taking the path into the bushes, stamping his feet hard on the ground to deter any snakes. A gust of wind whistles past his ear. He turns and sees the figure of a man coming up the path. Joseph starts running again, crashing through the bush, unmindful of the small branches that whip his face, the vegetation smelling ripe. He runs, feeling tears streaming down his face and his nose running, not stopping to wipe himself. 'I've got to get out of here,' he thinks. The shadows assemble into general darkness. He runs, hearing the insects chirping and something else, a howl or laughter he can only credit to a hyena – are there hyenas in Botswana? Botswana is seventy-five percent wild, who said that? He stumbles and falls. Winded, he raises his head to get his bearings and looks straight into a tombstone. In the near-dark of the late afternoon, he can't make out the inscriptions but can see, a few metres beyond, many more mounds, a few paved with cement.

There's a rustle behind him. A ghost. Jeje.

A hulking man, whose greatcoat makes him even bigger, wearing a woollen hat out of which spills coiled strands of hair, stands straddle-legged looking down at Joseph. From Joseph's position on the ground, the man looks like an upside-down tree with huge, leafless branches that end in a pair of scuffed boots. Although Joseph saw him as a small dot a while back, his appearance is startling, as if he's materialised out of thin air, like a hairy ghost. Everything about him speaks of hair, a full beard and moustache, deep-set eyes that shine, an amused smile. He reaches inside the folds of his coat and produces the plastic box, Emma's parting gift.

'You dropped this,' he says in a curiously gentle voice. 'Get up. You're pressing down on a famous Morolong.'

He introduces himself. 'I'm Elias Chikwedere. I'm a Mokalaka stonecutter and manager of this fruit garden.' Seeing the puzzlement on the boy's face, he looks around, waving a proud arm to embrace the field. 'These are all my children.' Then he asks: 'What are you doing here?'

Still nervous, Joseph gets up and dusts himself down. 'My name is Joseph Mabaso. I come from Zambia. I'm going to Pretoria.'

'And the way to Pitori is via a cemetery?' There is amusement in Chikwedere's tone.

Joseph sighs. 'I had to get away first.'

'Ah, a boy on a mission. Come with me, Joseph, and tell me your story.'

Joseph is thankful that the bottle is still intact in the broken plastic bag.

'Thanks for bringing my *mofagô*.'

Night falls as Joseph follows the stonecutter. Suddenly very tired of old people and their endless questions, he wonders if Mr Chikwedere has any children, perhaps a boy of his age. If he's a Mokalaka like his father, what language would he speak? Sekalaka? Setswana? English? It would be easier, even fun, planning how to get to Pretoria – *Pitori* – with a younger person.

CHAPTER 16

Joseph tries without much success to keep up with Mr Chikwedere. Going up the slope is taxing, all the more as the path gets increasingly hard to see, with grass tufts tugging at his legs. He thinks of Emmanuel. He considers asking the older man to slow down but accepts that asking will not be to his benefit – why are you a cry baby? He notices – and wonders how he could have missed it – that Mr Chikwedere is carrying not one but two large canvas sacks over his shoulders. For a moment, outlined against a grey sky, it's as if three misshapen figures are plodding into a deeper darkness.

His situation stinks. He is a runaway. Perhaps the police are already looking for him, and the longer he causes them trouble, the more severe the consequences. At home, ma's irritation tended to increase in relation to the time it took for him to submit to punishment. Would Hubert report him to the police? He begins to doubt the wisdom of running away but quickly rejects this line of thinking. 'I'm scaring myself to death,' he thinks.

'Are you coming, young man?' Mr Chikwedere asks, placing the sack on the ground. He stretches backwards. 'Stop wool-gathering and help me with this.'

The bag is heavy but not unmanageable. Its bulkiness throws Joseph off balance until he presses it to his back with his arm. Now I've got the hang of it. Mr Chikwedere's own sack looks heavy, but he carries it with ease. What's in them? Joseph wonders. Something chafes his shoulder blades, and there's a curious metallic clink from inside.

'What are we carrying, Mr Chikwedere?' he asks.

'Odds and ends,' says Mr Chikwedere, halting, one hand on his hip. 'You'll tire yourself with all the questions.' He mutters something about lawyers.

'Do we still have a long way to go?'

'We're almost there.'

We're almost there. He's often heard this said by country dwellers when the destination is actually many kilometres away. Resigned to the possibility of a long hike, Joseph tramps along, keeping close to Mr Chikwedere while cursing the night. What would Emmanuel have done in this situation? Most likely he'd

have dropped the bag and sprinted into the woods, glasses or no glasses. What the hell am I doing here?

The land mercifully starts sloping downhill. The bush crackles and emits smells of fresh foliage. Mr Chikwedere keeps turning around to guide his charge. He warns him to watch his step as a walker is likely to fall into animal burrows. This also means that *phokojwê* are not far from here. 'They're always waiting for an opportunity to pounce on livestock.'

'What about snakes?'

'Can you smell something?'

'Raw potatoes,' Joseph says. 'I smell raw potatoes.'

'That's the smell of a python. A big one was caught near Francistown Dam. It had already caused a lot of harm.'

'What happened to it?'

'We wanted it killed. White people said no dice. It must be preserved.'

'Where is it now?'

'They released it into the bush.'

'So, it could be somewhere around here?' White people, Joseph thinks.

'Who knows? Keep going.'

Suddenly, feeling as if he's just come out of a tunnel, Joseph sees with surprise an old rickety wooden bridge over a silent stream that shimmers in the moonlight, which comes in waves as it emerges out of the cottony clouds. 'This is the end-of-October moon,' Mr Chikwedere says, sniffing the air as he strides decisively ahead, his boots clomping on the wood. He's perfected the art of carrying something heavy and making it look easy. When the first fat drops of rain start falling, Mr Chikwedere lets out a yell, startling Joseph, who wonders if the older man has injured himself. It's a yell of appreciation: 'I should have known from the moon,' he says, 'that we'll be blessed with the first rains of the year.'

As they walk, neither one of them hurries to find shelter from the forceful downpour. Joseph now hears the stream finding its voice. Another voice comes out of the water, ma calling, the words snatched by wind and rain. His guilt returns at having forgotten about her in his struggle to survive and keep away

from being caged up – or worse still – returned to the nothing-happening suburb of Helen Kaunda. Sure, Emmanuel, Banji and Mulilo would rejoice. Perhaps Mulubwa would heave a sigh of relief. ‘At least you came back in one piece, *mdzukululu wanga*.’ As for Aunt Thelma, he can’t tell what her reaction would be. Possibly she’d just shrug the whole undertaking off. ‘You never stop-o with your mischief-o.’

Strangely, he finds it easy to think of Aunt Thelma and see her in his mind’s eye, alive, full of the mischief she accuses him of, dancing to a favourite song playing on the radio. He’s never been a dancer, but he’s always admired people who can, whose bodies are able to make sense of the feelings in the tunes and translate them into movement. He’s half welcomed the possibility of going to initiation, where, he’s heard, boys do their boyish things and learn what they have to learn to become men. At the end of it all, to round everything up, they have a huge, noisy dance around the fire. He can do with a fire right now; he’s soaked through. It’s all quiet, even the funny grunting sound inside the sack has stopped. He thinks it could be a big rat. He’s heard people eat rats in these places. Right now, hunger gnaws at him, a giant *khoswe* with beady eyes and whiskers, eating the lining of his stomach.

By the time the downpour subsides, they have entered a built-up rural slum of thatched mud huts and shacks whose wet roofs shimmer in the moonlight. It surprises Joseph to see some children still playing, chasing bad-tempered chickens woken up from their roosting. Dogs pace around restlessly. Two of them rest their heads on their forepaws at the feet of four or five men warming their hands before a fire that flares up from inside a huge drum. Mr Chikwedere raises his hand: ‘*Dumelang, borra*.’

A bearded man on whose face dances light and shadow grunts a response and then, pointing at Joseph, asks: ‘Hey, Elias *monna*, *yo ké mang?*’

‘*Monna Modise yoo ke Pitori, o tswa Zambia*.’

Joseph wants to protest that his name isn’t Pitori but concludes that Mr Chikwedere knows what he’s doing. Can he sense the men’s barely hidden unfriendliness, especially the one called Modise, whose eyes shoot sparks?

‘*Mozambiya?*’ Modise asks, spitting into the flames. ‘*O batla’ng mo?*’

Cursing Mr Chikwedere for delaying them by chatting with the men, Joseph feels the weight of the sack. Water has made it heavier. Could he set it down? No. The ground is wet, and the dogs have steadied their united gaze on him. They growl when Mr Chikwedere pulls himself to his full height as he steps towards the fire.

‘Listen,’ he says, pointing at Modise and still looking each man in the eye, ‘what the boy wants here is none of your business. He’s in my care. That should be enough.’

‘Are you sure he’s not a zombie?’ Modise asks. ‘We hear so much about *dipheko*.’ He breaks into a hoarse laughter that ends in a long hacking cough.

‘Don’t worry, *monna* Modise. I know zombies. By the way, the way you sound tells me I might soon be of service to you...’

Modise laughs harder. His friends join him. Clicking his tongue, Mr Chikwedere bids the men goodbye, ‘*Salang sentlê, banna*.’ To Joseph, he says: ‘Hand me the sack, young man. We’re going.’

The air is heavy with the promise of more rain. Although his legs are stiff and cold, Joseph is grateful they are moving again. Why does Mr Chikwedere waste time with jokers? As they walk, Mr Chikwedere chuckles, shaking his head. ‘Hey, Pitori?’

‘Yes, sir, Mr Chikwedere?’

‘Modise thinks your life’s in danger.’

Joseph waits for the older man to explain. But Mr Chikwedere doesn’t. He is deep in thought, panting a bit, possibly from the sack now carried with one hand over his wide shoulders. As he strides forward, quickening his step, he reaches into his pockets and retrieves a noisy bunch of keys. He turns into an ill-lit alley between the shacks. Further down, the houses are made of bricks. Even the shacks stand on concrete slabs. Halfway along the alley, Mr Chikwedere stops in front of a house that looks similar to the houses in Helen Kaunda. Four steps lead up to a paved verandah.

‘Come up, Pitori,’ he says as he inserts a key into the lock. ‘We’re home.’

His heart leaps at the sight that greets them at the entrance: he counts at least six children, boys and girls, ranging from a toddler, who waddles in a nappy sagging

from its load, to a young man of his own age. There is a smell that reminds him of a long time ago before Mulilo was toilet-trained, when he stunk up the whole house. Here, the smell feels permanent. Standing beside the toddler is a set of twins about Mulilo's age, trying to catch the attention of a young girl in a Girl Guides uniform who reminds him of Banji. She, in turn, is throwing a tantrum at having to wash the dishes.

'I refuse,' she says, pointing to her elder brother. 'Thabo, *ke turn ya gago go tlhatswa dijana.*' The resemblance between the two is striking. In fact, Joseph notices, from the toddlers upwards, every one of the children is clearly Mr Chikwedere's. There's something wrong with Thabo, however. He is about Joseph's age, but he's stunted with a big bony head and thick lips that still fail to contain his front teeth, which could belong to a rabbit. Thabo glowers when he sees Joseph staring at him. He might seem strange, but there's no doubt he's his father's child. Joseph remembers the old saying in Helen Kaunda: a man who denies he's made a woman pregnant ends up with the child being a spitting image of him. From the proud smile on his face, though, there's no way Mr Chikwedere would disown his children.

Suddenly, everything happens all at once.

Mr Chikwedere has hardly laid the sack on the floor when a small dog comes dashing from somewhere in the house and nudges the sack with its nose. The grunt that Joseph thought he had heard earlier becomes a thin squeak, something scared of the dog. Having established the presence of a strange life in the sack, the dog lets out a series of excited barks. The young man, Joseph's agemate, who's been arguing with his sister, rushes forward and slaps the dog on the side of its head. It gives a yelp and darts into the corridor, its tail between its legs.

Mr Chikwedere regards all this from an amused distance. Joseph has a sense that, apart from looking like their father, all the children, the dog-slapper included, are not only respectful towards Mr Chikwedere but also afraid of him. This he gathers when Mr Chikwedere tells his son to take the sacks to the back. 'Be careful, Thabo.'

Thabo starts with the sack left by his father at the door. He tries to lift it and his knees buckle from the heft of the load. 'Boitumelo?' he calls to his sister. '*Nthuse, tlhee.*'

Boitumelo, clearly still unhappy, says: 'Promise you'll you do the dishes?' 'Okay.'

Feeling awkward and useless, watching Boitumelo struggling with one corner of the sack, Joseph gets to his feet and, nudging her aside, holds a fistful of canvas and follows Thabo's lead in carrying the load across the dining room, along a passage with closed doors on either side. Thabo doesn't once let his eyes stray from Joseph's face. Hostility has now replaced the earlier alarm. Thabo walks carefully backwards to the open door leading to the back outside.

'Careful of the steps,' he says, casually, not sounding like he means it.

'Thanks,' Joseph says. It's dark outside, the earlier moon has disappeared behind a cloud. 'What are we carrying?'

'You'll see,' Thabo says, reversing down the stone steps. 'Careful.'

Joseph knows that Thabo's more concerned about what's in the sack than about him. Outside, the yard is spread out and fenced in with barbed wire, scraggy trees, sheets of roofing metal, broken strips of hardboard, old tins of paint and drums. There are sheds, long like squashed train coaches, forming a U, the side walls constructed from breeze blocks and the roofs from asbestos and zinc. They were probably modelled on chicken coops. The doors consist of wire mesh nailed onto wooden frames, secured from the outside with hinged hasp and staple locks. Although it's dark, Joseph can see there's life in the coop-like units. Where there's no movement, there's ragged snoring. In the last-but-one unit they pass, the sack heavier than ever before, an animal – for it must be an animal – is huddled back against the wall, its eyes wide.

'*Chikuchitika ndichani?*' Joseph asks, for a moment, back in his native land.

'What?' Thabo asks. 'Don't come with your *tlhakatlhakanyo mo.*'

'*Tlha...?*'

'Forget it. Help me with this.'

Working with practised skill, he snaps open the lock of the last unit along the first row and drags the sack so that it opens inside the unit. Carefully keeping his fingers away from the opening, he peels back the canvas material, rolling it

until what is inside can be eased out. From the side, Joseph sees a pair of scaly feet landing on the surface with a scratchy sound before there emerges a long snout that shoots out a tongue, which reminds him of a chameleon. Slowly, the scaled animal comes out, snorting. Joseph holds his nose against a gust of something strange and wild. Thabo watches his reaction with a malicious smile.

‘You heard papa?’ he says. ‘Well, these are the animals he was talking about.’

‘A pangolin...’

‘It’s called a *kgaga* here, Joseph,’ Thabo says. ‘You’ll have to speak Setswana here if you want to have an easy life.’

‘A *kgaga*, then. Why is your father bringing it here? And the other animals?’

‘This one,’ Thabo says, ‘this one will bring in a lot of money.’

‘Your father sells them...’

‘What do you think?’

Somewhere, in the dark distance, Joseph hears the sound of bells clinking, the cattle in some kraal possibly grateful nighttime has come. He shudders, uneasy. He can’t quite tell what has shaken him more: the terror in the eyes of the animal or the uncaring attitude to the pangolin. He feels Thabo’s eyes on him.

‘Let’s go back inside,’ Thabo says. ‘Tomorrow is another long day.’

Four weeks later, it’s the middle of November before Joseph realises it. He’s surprised at how swiftly time has passed. He’s heard it said that time flies when someone is having fun. But he can’t think of a single moment of fun in the period he’s been at the Chikwedere household. Everything gets mashed up in the confusing routine where, in the midst of doing something, he’s stopped and commanded to do something else. It is as if he’s been holding his breath, overwhelmed by the absence of normality, the novelty of dealing with animals in and out of their pens – and the weary thought that their days are numbered. Or that they all have a price on their heads.

Although the house looks small from the outside, it’s roomy within, with passages that take him back to the day at the mortuary. The light is dull; the passages smell of paraffin and candlewax. He’s mulling over this when, moments

before bedtime, while getting a glass of water in the kitchen, Joseph is startled almost out of his wits by a dog suddenly jumping out of nowhere. He wonders if Boitumelo is already asleep. She's quiet. He thinks she avoids him. Who wouldn't avoid an unknown stranger? Tomorrow, to break the ice, he'll ask her about what happens at the Girl Guides. Are they ever encouraged to make friends with Boy Scouts?

It all starts on the morning after the night of his arrival. It's still dark when he's woken up in the bedroom he shares with Thabo and the twins.

'Tsoga, monna,' he hears an urgent whisper in the dark. This is followed by strong fingers digging into his shoulders, shaking him. *'Pitori? Time to wake up.'*

Groggy, he looks around. *'What? Where's Thabo?'*

Thabo's gone to school, so has Tumi. He berates himself for oversleeping until he sees the time, it's seven-something in the morning, time to wake up already? He mumbles something, a protest. But Mr Chikwedere is no longer smiling, no longer the travelling companion who made light of an escaped python and stood up to ruffians making fun of a Zambian boy. No, this is a new Mr Chikwedere. His breath holds the sour smell of stale liquor, eyes a little funny in the half-light of the early morning. He watches as Joseph changes, whistling something tuneless through his front teeth, seemingly here and elsewhere at the same time.

'So that we understand each other,' he says, steering Joseph outside, down the steps to the cluttered courtyard where the dew has collected on the roofs of the animal pens, *'everything happens for a reason.'*

Joseph hugs himself against the cold morning wind blowing from the veld, nibbling at him through the thin fabric of Thabo's borrowed t-shirt. He wants to understand what Mr Chikwedere is talking about but can't quite get a sense of it. He just hears words pouring like a tap out of the older man's mouth. *'And so, when I saw you on the grave,'* Mr Chikwedere goes on, *'I knew that my prayers have been heard.'*

'What prayers?'

‘That I be provided with someone to help me on the farm here,’ Mr Chikwedere says, pointing at the collection of pens, ‘someone who won’t betray me.’

Joseph thinks that the best way out of this is to humour the man. ‘But you have a son, Thabo. He wouldn’t betray you.’ Betray, Jesus.

‘Thabo?’ Mr Chikwedere looks distracted for a moment. ‘Thabo has to attend a special school. You saw for yourself. Also, he doesn’t have the stomach for what is needed here. You’re young, but you’ve already experienced so much from your travels. You’re hardened enough to deal with unpleasant tasks.’

‘I can’t stay,’ Joseph says. ‘I have to go to...’

‘Pitori,’ Mr Chikwedere says, finishing the sentence for him. His eyes have hardened. ‘But we all have to get somewhere.’ He pauses. ‘For all intents and purposes, you have nowhere to go.’

‘I have my parents in South Africa.’

‘You *think* your parents are in South Africa. Your parents are probably dead as we speak. South Africa is a violent country.’

To even start thinking of his parents as dead is – he struggles for the word – is a betrayal. ‘They’re alive. They’ll welcome me with open arms.’ Joseph wants to cry.

‘Time will tell.’ Mr Chikwedere straightens up and wipes his brow with a handkerchief. It’s not yet 8.00am, but Joseph can smell the alcohol pouring out of the man’s pores. He goes into the house and returns with a bucket.

‘Here,’ he says. ‘For the pangolin. You have to scoop with your hand.’

Joseph looks into the bucket and almost drops it on the ground. Swirling three-quarters to the brim of the bucket is a mass of insects, termites, ants, crickets, some still alive, others being pushed around by live ones, the earthworms stretching and contracting in the mud like baby concertinas. An unimaginable stench that feels like it’s carrying little mites blows up from the bucket and hits Joseph in the face. He thinks he’ll die from the nausea. ‘No.’

‘*Wa reng? O tla nnyela*, Pitori,’ he hisses. ‘You hear me?’

Without waiting for an answer, Mr Chikwedere grabs Joseph by the scruff of his neck and marches him across the courtyard where he forces him to kneel before the pen and unlatches the door. Joseph can hear the pangolin making *huff-*

huff sounds and wonders if the animal is about to strike. How do pangolins defend themselves?

He has no time to wonder, though, because Mr Chikwedere takes an aluminium bowl and pushes Joseph's hand into the bucket. Gaggling, Joseph scoops up a handful of the wriggly slime and deposits it into the bowl. Eyes closed, he can hear the pangolin feeding, slurping, the tongue scraping the sides of the bowl. Mr Chikwedere puts the empty dish back on the ground. *Clang!* Joseph does not need to be told what to do. Again, and again, disconnected from himself but completely at one with his hand, where he can feel each creepy-crawly on his fingers, he continues feeding the pangolin until the bucket is empty.

'You see?' Mr Chikwedere says, locking the pangolin inside the pen, 'that wasn't so bad, now, was it? And you've even made a new friend in *kgaga*.'

Even though it's late afternoon now – despite having scrubbed himself raw under a running tap – he still feels bugs crawling across and underneath his skin. He knows it's not real, as unreal, perhaps, as Mr Chikwedere's remark that his parents might be dead. But then, suppose, for whatever reason – South Africa being a violent country – there was truth in that. What is he to do? He feels a great sense of indignation. First your parents disappear without notice, and then they die. Where's the justice in that? He's heard it said that it's illegal for parents to leave a child who's under eighteen without adult supervision. Well, he's fourteen years old and his parents left him – and not only him but his brothers and sister, who are much younger. How long would their sentences be if the cops caught them and charged them with abandoning their children? Mr Patel, Leila's dad, he should be in jail, too, as well as Lanky Boy's folks and the parents of Sputnik and the other children. Seems like there's going to be no space in prison cells with all these absent parents crammed into them. And death is not an excuse. Parents have no right to die and leave children behind. That's just being reckless.

'What are you doing in my brother's t-shirt?'

Having walked round the house, Boitumelo has come up behind him. 'The front door's locked,' she says, seemingly forgetting her question.

From the top step he's perched on, Joseph notes how different she looks out of the Girl Guides uniform. She's dressed in what must be her regular school uniform, a blue tunic, white socks and black shoes, an old, battered school bag slung over her shoulder. A pair of glasses gives her an air of education and adds years.

'I didn't know you wore glasses.' What a stupid thing to say. He's lost touch with young people, having to deal with fuddy-duddies.

'Where's everybody? Where's papa?'

'I don't know. I worked with him for a while and then he left.'

'Are you replacing Sebastian?'

'Who?'

'Sebastian. The boy from the camp. He worked with papa.'

'Where was he from?'

'Don't know. South West Africa. He was also a *letlolerata*.'

She must have read the confusion on his face. 'He was a refugee. He also had a funny way of talking. Like you.'

'Where's he now? Sebastian.'

'He left.'

'Mr Chikwedere, your papa. Does he know?'

'Nobody knows what papa knows.'

The rain comes again, quietening the insects. He wonders about the animals in their cages, how they feel about the rain beating down on the roofs. Does it disturb them? From Boitumelo – she prefers being called Tumi – he has gathered there's quite a list of animals on papa's farm, and the ones in cages are due to be transported. There's a caracal, a bat-eared fox, a serval, a large-spotted genet and even a cheetah. You can't see some of them because they hide, slink within the woods that stretch all the way to the back. What's papa going to do with them? Give their skins to Mo-China, whose boys ran the *fah-fee* game in the village. And what did Josefa think of the pangolin, the *kgaga*? Did you see that tongue, *ghaa*!

CHAPTER 17

The rains continue into November, falling hard on the fifteenth, a Wednesday afternoon. Mr Chikwedere hands Joseph an old oversized raincoat and tells him to accompany him outside. The overcoat is useless. It's awkward to wear and lets in as much rain as it keeps out. In the end, Joseph hangs it up on a pole and, wearing unasked-for castoffs from Thabo, joins Mr Chikwedere, whose head and shoulders are covered with his everyday coat, the sleeves dangling emptily to make it easier for the hands to work with sheets of plastic, a hammer and small nails.

By now there is a rhythm of silence in the way Mr Chikwedere and Joseph work. He calls Joseph his *sepannere* boy, and Joseph tries to keep out of harm's way. While still upset by feeding the *kgaga*, Joseph has come to accept there are things he can't control. He has as much a chance of winning a fight with the man who's made him a spanner boy as he has of stopping the rain. He has to bide his time if he's to make it to Pretoria. For him, the absence of aggression from the big man is the nearest thing to an apology.

The work is simple, although often made harder by the rain. Standing on a short stepladder, Mr Chikwedere drapes sheets of clear plastic over parts of the roof where earlier, shoddier workmanship has left holes around the screws fastening the asbestos roof to the crossbeams. Then he folds the edges and nails them down. Some of the nails are clenched between his lips, making him resemble the caged animals. *Tap, tap, tap*, goes the hammer.

'This should hold for a while until we get some roofing tar,' he says. 'Pass me that plastic roll.'

This goes on for about an hour as the man and the boy work in the rain. The children, Boitumelo and Thabo, return from school, Boitumelo running hard to escape the rain, Thabo hesitant as if thinking of going to lend a hand to fix the roof and then deciding to dash into the kitchen. Boitumelo appears at the door again and, cupping her hands around her mouth, calls out. 'Papa?'

Mr Chikwedere doesn't look. '*K'eng*, Tumi?'

‘Can Josefa help me with my geography homework?’

‘Josefa? You mean Pitori?’ Mr Chikwedere asks, smiling like a wolf. ‘What would a *letlolerata* know about geography when he can’t even find his way home?’ He spits on the puddle before telling Joseph gruffly: ‘*Tsamaya o ye go thusa, monna.*’

This is not the first time Joseph has had to play tutor to Boitumelo. A few times it’s been maths. When he first sat with her, he had to swallow the indescribable emotion that came from the act of opening the books, the smell of paper, its texture. He’s seen how meticulous girl students are, covering their exercise books and decorating them with pictures of pop stars or film stars, most of them with long hair, shiny eyes and red lips parted coyly. Thabo covers his books with brown paper, his name written in block letters, no flourishes, no decorations. It pains him – Boitumelo confides in Joseph – that Thabo’s doing the same grade as his sister, having failed two years in a row. He would be in grade eight by now if all had gone well, but Thabo, you know, *wa kula mo tlhôngông*, he’s unwell. The remark is emphasised by a circular motion of the index finger at the side of her head.

Thabo sits apart, sometimes glancing at them with blank eyes, often paging through his own books, the dog hanging around him, looking for love. Dogs forget easily. Joseph still remembers the echoing slap the night of his arrival. He wonders how the dog deals with the presence of wild animals in the cages. It must drive it crazy. He’s still mulling over this when he hears the sound of gumboots sloshing in the puddles along the side of the house. There are voices. Joseph catches Boitumelo’s eyes when she looks up from the book, closing it but keeping a finger on the page. She holds his gaze before turning to her brother, her look questioning. Then, someone screams outside.

‘Papa!’ Boitumelo exclaims, clapping her cheeks with her hands, dropping a ballpoint pen to the floor. Joseph shoots to his feet and, without waiting for Thabo and his sister, runs outside. Thabo is on his heels. The rain has stopped.

Two men, one of them Modise and the snaggle-toothed one who laughed a lot around the fire, are helping a third man up from the muddy ground, a coatless Mr Chikwedere standing above him, knees bent, fists bunched up. They are all

dressed in old overalls, gumboots, hats and jackets. Their clothes are wet. The dog lunges at Modise who aims a kick at it, almost losing his balance.

‘Elias, the dog,’ Modise says. Steadying the man who must have been felled by a blow, he looks imploringly at Mr Chikwedere. ‘You didn’t have to hit him like that.’

‘*Motho o o makgakga,*’ says Mr Chikwedere, chest heaving, ‘how can he talk about my wife like that?’

‘*Maroba o dirile phôsô, monna* Elias. We know you’re still sore about Dipuo.’

‘Leave her out of this. *Le batla’ng mo?* I have work to do.’

Joseph whispers to Boitumelo. ‘His wife? Your mother? What happened to her?’

‘It’s a long story.’ Boitumelo glances at her brother. Joseph gets the impression that Thabo has responded with a warning in his eyes. ‘Tell you one day.’

‘But she’s around here? In Botswana.’

‘Can’t talk about it now.’

Modise guides a dazed Maroba to sit on an upended paint tin. ‘*Monna* Elias,’ he says, ‘you know we started off together, building things...’

‘Yes,’ Mr Chikwedere says, ‘and we all got a start from Mo-China, but you people drank up all your share.’

‘Not all of us drank our share, *monna* Elias. You were lucky, you have had a wife with a head for business.’ Modise looks around, but his friends watch glumly without adding anything. ‘Remember, also, that we became the best hunters, finding the animals. We helped you build all this.’

Mr Chikwedere sighs. ‘Modise? Just tell me how I can help.’

‘You saw us the other day, *monna* Elias. We now eat out of dustbins. We drink what others leave us in taverns.’

The seated man, the skin of his swollen lower lip cracked, calls out: ‘Hey, Modise, *monna, tlogêla go sotlha Lekalaka wabatho.*’

Mr Chikwedere stiffens. ‘What did you say?’

Modise scolds his friend: ‘Maroba? *O seka wa bua matlakala.*’

Joseph asks Boitumelo: ‘What did he say?’

Boitumelo, her eyes flashing, says: 'He called papa a *lekalaka*, as if he's a thing. My father's very proud.'

'What must he say? What must he call your father?'

'My father is a *Mokalaka*. A human being. We're all human.'

Moved by something, perhaps wanting to claim his right to being respected, Mr Chikwedere makes a grab for Maroba, who's now sprung to his feet like a cat. But Modise and the bearded man – moving as if they've long foreseen the action – spring forward, blocking him, the two men working in such harmony they appear to be one body with two heads and eight limbs. They wrap their arms around the big man. Roaring like a bull while pinned against the cage, Chikwedere tries to kick Maroba, who jumps away and lifts up a spade, holding it by the shaft.

For Joseph, while all this happens quickly, it is simultaneously slowed down, stuttering like the images from a faulty film projector, at once clear and blurred as though from snatches of a dream. He watches in horror as the spade rises and hovers in the air as Maroba wavers, perhaps fearing to hit the wrong man. When the blade finally whistles barely an inch above Mr Chikwedere's head, it clangs against the lock, knocking it aslant.

There is the near-human sound of animals in misery in the other cages. It takes Boitumelo's scream to jolt Joseph out of his daze. Not knowing what has possessed him, he jumps into the tangle of flailing arms. He sees Maroba's hand forced into the air and hears the spade clattering to the ground. Joseph tries to whisk Mr Chikwedere from the scene, hoping Thabo will help his papa, who looks slightly confused, out of the way. But Thabo is rooted to the spot, tears streaming down his face.

There is a frustrated grunt from inside the cage. The cage door crashes open and for a moment everyone stands still. Then all hell breaks loose.

'Josefa,' Boitumelo cries, 'watch out!'

Joseph jumps to the side as a brown hulk leaps out of the cage, landing on the wet ground, its cloven hoofs the first sign it's a pig. It sends Modise, Maroba and their bearded companion scattering, its mobile snout pointed mostly to the ground. Although seeing it from behind and above, Joseph marvels at the tusks, which jut out like overgrown fangs turned the wrong way around.

Someone shouts, '*Ke kolobe!*' The scream and the dog barking send the bush pig into wild lunges. It turns, squinting, seeming to keep Modise, who's the nearest to it, in its sights. There's a sound of something, fabric, tearing, and Modise screams in pain. He leaps back, hopping on one leg, pressing his hand on his thigh, which is stained with dark red blood that spurts over his trousers, down to his knee. As he lands on his back, the bush pig comes charging again – again that tearing sound – and gets blocked by the bearded man who jabs the spade at it. Meanwhile, quivering with excitement, the dog nips at the bush pig's hind legs. The hulking beast turns and snaps at its pursuer. The dog yelps with pain, its suffering jarring Thabo into action. He picks up his papa's forgotten hammer. Chasing the bush pig, he yells, '*Ema, kolobe, ema!*' the way aunties cry for help after being pickpocketed at the Chilenje market. Modise's companions are also running. Maroba, now and then jumping and glancing behind him to see if he's in danger, slams into the fence, dislodging the galvanised iron sheets. Kneeling as if in prayer, he bellows in pain as the bush pig butts him in the face again and again until, disturbed by Thabo, it bounds through the opening in the fence. Joseph cannot expel from his mind the sight of the animal's snout red with blood.

In the back of the bakkie, he thinks he can still hear animals crying in distress. He doesn't know who raised the alarm, probably the bearded man – the only one to escape unharmed. He must have got help from the taxi rank. Modise and Maroba share the front seat with the driver, who works for Mo-China. Mr Chikwedere has opted to sit in the back, reclining with a shawl covering him from the chest to his stumpy legs. It took everyone a long time to realise he had a stab wound in his back. Now breathing hard, he manages to put on a brave face for Boitumelo's sake.

'So, Pitori,' he says, 'what you'll tell your *batsadi* about the time here?'

'Papa,' Boitumelo warns, 'don't talk.'

'Mostly to stay clear of animals,' Joseph answers. He peers through the back window of the cab and sees Maroba. With his head covered in a bloodied sheet, he leans on Modise's shoulder. 'What will happen to those two?'

Mr Chikwedere gingerly raises himself on his elbow. 'Maroba will have to get a new face,' he says carelessly. 'The one he had wasn't a thing of beauty at all, so the *kolobe* has done him a favour.'

'*Papa!*' Boitumelo is scandalised.

'Don't worry, these are strong men. We all learn from our mistakes.' He's quiet for a while. 'I'll get them to drop you at the station. You shouldn't come to the hospital.'

The leave-taking makes Joseph happy and sad at the same time.

'There is a night service linking Francistown with Gaborone,' Boitumelo says, her Girl Guide experience coming in handy. 'It reaches Lobatse in the morning.'

'I hope you find a better teacher,' he tells her.

'*Muyende bwino,*' Boitumelo says and laughs at his surprised reaction.

'Okay, Pitori, *monna,*' Mr Chikwedere says. 'You make my girl cry, and I'll get up and give you a good hiding.'

'*Zikomo kwambiri,*' Joseph says.

He's found a corner seat in the third-class coach. An elderly couple and two young men in BDF uniforms have taken up the rest of the seats in the section. He's adopted the passengers as his family and imagines himself through their eyes, a somewhat dozy, quiet boy. The curious will think of him as strange, *o kula ka tlhôngô*, like Thabo. A little worried about his lack of luggage – everyone seems to be moving to a new house – he resolves to stay as low-key as possible. If he could retract into himself and live in a ball of his own skin like a *kgaga*, he would avoid having to answer questions. He's got many of his own, but knows they'll have to wait. He has to wait.

He recalls the time with the animals, Mr Chikwedere dishing out pieces of information. Animals see us even when we don't see them. They stay out of sight because the fight with man is not worth it. He felt sadness when he couldn't ask Mr Chikwedere why he held the animals cooped up at his place. What about his own father? Is Sobhuza also like this? Boitumelo, who knows more than she lets on, closed herself off from the animals, never getting to know them. But they know us, she said. He has learnt, then, in that uncertain period in which he

depended on a speedy reaction to people's intentions, to read their gestures, the same way animals do. By the time you lift the leg to kick the dog, it's long left the room. Much more importantly, he has learnt to trust silence.

Strangely, music piped from a speaker somewhere, along with the wheels' rattling, lulls Joseph to a fitful sleep.

The group that boards the train at Serule, some two hours later, is loud. The men's careless gestures eat up space and remind Joseph of Modise and his friends. A handful of women with bundles and babies hurry to settle equally burdened children on the seats. Three teenage girls who could be Tumi's age keep a sullen distance from the adults. Some boys hastily unpack a case and take out a guitar. There's a twang of lazy strings. Bread and cold chicken surface. Greasy hands break off pieces of white flesh, knead it into the bread and stuff the balls into the open mouths of the young. A few flasks and plastic cups do the rounds, the slurping and smacking of lips stressing the enjoyment. Some of the men share beer and the homemade *khadi*.

A shrill whistle, made lonelier by the lateness of the hour, blasts the air and, the second the wheels start moving, there's a long screech of metal against metal as the train shudders to a halt. *Ntsiiii!* A man curses because he's spilt his precious brew on his lap. Just then the door bursts open, letting in the night air, and a khaki-clad, thickset man with a voice like gravel, enters, shouting, '*Go nkgabômô.*'

A bomb! Panic spreads quickly among the passengers. Joseph wonders how Sis Violet would handle the situation. He remembers when the Land Cruiser hit the horse on their way to the Zambezi. Without knowing how he knows this, he concludes she must have been terrified, even more with the arrival of the Zambian military. But she didn't show it. Of course, when she slapped him, there must have been an element of panic, but, he tells himself, that's another story. There are others, a few, who must have been thinking like him. While almost everyone scrambles to get out of the train, pressing against one another at the door, mothers slapping a suitable degree of fright into their sleepy children, the young women decide to settle deeper in their seats. A woman stops at the door, half of her already dangling over the pavement. 'Bontle? Dikeledi? Keletso? *Tla'ng kwano!*' No response.

The alarm must have sounded throughout the train. There are scores of people on the tracks, some already scaling the perimeter fence, their faces looking gaunt and troubled under the yellow lights of the train's interior. Someone with a loud hailer comes down the pavement: 'Go back, there's nothing wrong, go back.' Looking scruffy and sheepish, some of the fleers trickle back in. The spreader of the news is shoved from behind by a man in a police uniform.

'*Bua, monna,*' the policeman says. 'Where did you see this bomb? Tell the people.'

'I didn't see it.'

'What happened?'

'I smelled it.'

'Ah, you smelled a bomb. What does a bomb smell like?' The policeman, a tall young man sporting initiation scars on his face, turns to someone behind him. Back to the passengers, he holds up a gas canister. 'Is this the bomb you smelled?'

Although still shaken, most of the passengers burst out laughing. Joseph knows he wouldn't want to trade places with the man who's become the object of everyone's ridicule. What was he thinking? The relief has opened people up to chat and tell jokes whose punchline is the refrain, *go nkgā bômô*. There's the smell of a bomb.

Another whistle, assured this time. The train rumbles and quakes and squeaks into motion.

CHAPTER 18

As the train pulls into the Lobatse railway station in the morning, Joseph sees the people on the platform as a streak of muddy shadows. The fuzziness and lack of clarity match his own feeling about himself. He's nauseous and light-headed. He asks himself how he's come to occupy the body of a very old man. He feels pain everywhere. Stretching the stiffness away, he hears something creaking, a current running down the nape of his neck to his tailbone. As people collect their belongings, he ducks his head and avoids possible eye contact by shuffling some papers on the wooden seat, outdated newspapers and magazines someone's left behind. He then follows the passengers filing out of the coach onto the platform, keeping at once a close and an unattached distance to the few clusters of families. If you walk between groups, he thinks, either one of them concludes you're a part of the other. 'Only to whoever watches these things from the sky must I appear like an ownerless puppy confused about whom to approach,' he thinks.

There's noise everywhere.

The air carries the smell of wet, upturned earth, pointing to an earlier drizzle, now puddled and steaming in the folds of canvas covering the market stalls. There's always a market around a station, attracting young and old, children who look homeless and those who look like they would rather die than mingle with the homeless-looking ones. Here, hand in hand with the rising heat is the persistent smell of mangoes, oranges, bananas, pineapples, watermelon, tangerines. The path leading to the noisy taxi and bus rank is littered with orange peels, plastic and watermelon pulp. Feeling light-headed with hunger, Joseph first checks if anyone's watching before stopping at the side of the trodden path to check a cardboard box of fruit humming with insects. Even as he feels his gorge rise from the memory of feeding the pangolin, he brushes ants off an apple and rubs it against his sleeve before taking a bite. He instantly spits out a mouthful of rotten flesh, imagining he has bitten a worm in half. A woman vendor gives him a dirty look and he sidles off towards the crowded rank where

vehicles idle noisily. Touts who double as conductors – sliding door controllers – scream the qualities of their minibuses, bakkies or horse-drawn wagons, expounding the know-how of their drivers and guaranteeing the safe arrival of passengers. There's one in a Prinz-Bräu lager t-shirt, as thin as a rake, with a head shaped like a rugby ball, yellow-brown skin stretched tight across the bones of his face, the mouth two slabs of liver-like lips. 'Janeng, Goodhope, Mmathethe, Welbedacht, Ramotswa, Phitshane-Molopo, *tla kwano, monna*, come one, come all. My friend, with this one, you'll never be late even if you're visiting someone who's already late. I tell you my friend, this horse is from the same stable as Sea Cottage, 1976 Durban July.'

The wares on display in the market stalls, the meat sizzling on the iron griddles, the fat-cakes bubbling in pots, all go to his head, increasing his faint feeling. He stops at a tap and turns the handle. Water will help with the hunger, but there's a hollow sound of air being sucked from miles away. Nothing. Now, bags of grain, open, a man pouring powder onto a scale, a stall selling bolts of cloth, readymade dresses, handbags, a chicken run with white hens and cocks with red combs squawking, peppers, onions, more meat being roasted, this time on long skewers. A rough-and-ready barbershop. Women plaiting hair in a salon busy with boards showing photographs of different hairstyles and beauty products. He sees his reflection in a mirror, dirty, his cheeks hollow, his eyes not like his own. Ma will kill me. A sandwich, slices of brown bread and cheese and cold meat on a tray, no one looking, a couple of women carrying on with their conversation, inspecting one another's nails, sipping soft drinks out of cans. Running and at the same time outside of himself, watching his hand stretch out slowly, grabbing the sandwich, feeling it in his hand, his heart thumping as he runs, not waiting for a place to stop and eat but stuffing the bread in his mouth, running. The noise behind him, buzzing in his head, everyone yelling at the top of their voices, even, he imagines, the tout in the Prinz-Bräu lager t-shirt, stop thief, knowing he's not a thief, dodging outstretched arms, weaving between minibuses, upsetting a bucket of water, sending a sheet of it splashing against a car, someone shouting, 'Hey!'

'Hey, Joseph. Bra Joe from Kilimanjaro.'

Someone grabs him, strong arms pin him against a brick wall, his mind going, no, no, this is a dream, a nightmare, the bread and meat not filling but forming a lump in his throat. The face in front of him, Charlie, what's Charlie doing here?

'So now,' Charlie says, 'you're not only a terrorist but a thief into the bargain?'

'Charlie?'

'Come. Let's get you out of here before you get killed.'

That it's raining in a region where it's scarce is a good omen, a sign of the gods' approval of the mission of the unit of nine fighters, seven men, a woman and a boy, which now awaits the hour of darkness. The goodbyes are being said in a two-roomed house made of stone, thatch and wood, which belongs to an old man, older than Mulubwa, who seems blind but can tilt his potato-bald head to both recall useful events of the past and see what the future holds. Ntate Lerumo praises the young people and wishes he could go with them but knows he'll be more of a hindrance – 'Oh, no, you wouldn't,' Sis Violet says, in a voice that really means it – and thinks he'll die happy that people are now serious about fighting for freedom. It's happening.

'And so, you must go,' he says, 'not to fight anyone but to give strength to the millions who have lost hope. To remind them that, even though the masters of the land don't regard us as people, and who think of us, if they think of us at all, the way we think of insects, pests, useless things to trample underfoot, they must remember that we matter. That some man and woman rejoiced when they heard our first cry at birth. Some will die in the fight to reclaim that shred of dignity. It's all worthwhile.'

Joseph feels overwhelmed, dwarfed by the loftiness of the task Sis Violet and the seven men have to fulfil. The memory of the crossing of the Zambezi comes back to him, the man emerging out of the water, like the Sunday school story of Jonah vomited up by the whale. What was his name? John the Baptist and his tale of Nyaminyami and Mkulu Sampakaruma. Does the old man know John the Baptist? The old man looks away into the darkness as if willing it to come, his face glistening with sweat or tears – it's difficult for Joseph to know. He

follows the old man's scary, near-blind gaze that seems to probe a place that must be far, far away.

Sis Violet starts to clean the house, sweeping and packing, putting ammunition boxes in the corner, her movements quick and energetic. Since Joseph's arrival she's said very little, letting the other ones – especially Charlie, Gwaza and Blade – argue it out. The boy will be a hindrance. Military headquarters will have their collective skins for this breach of security. The boy is a civilian, for fuck's sake. Her eyes smoulder, but she maintains her silence. The old man, bringing into the room the smell of age and something unidentifiable, says if the boy is not working with the enemy, then the unit should adopt him as its mascot. The very fact that the gods have decreed that he meets again with the group is itself telling. At this point, Sis Violet snorts derisively but keeps her mouth shut, even when all eyes turn on her. Ultimately, she shrugs. It's not resolved but, at the same time, it's settled.

In his mind, though, it's not decided. The weapons – he's come to know an AK-47, two hand grenades, an F-1 and RGD-5, a Makarov or Tokarev 9mm pistol – simply confirm people are going to fight, whatever the old man says, and in the fighting there's no telling who'll come out alive. These men being led by Sis Violet – Sis Violet herself – are real, made of flesh and blood, and they are some mother's children; someone rejoiced when they first cried at birth. They are going to face an enemy of hardened men trained for years in schools and special centres, even in other countries, where they have become indistinguishable from the weapons they use. They are equipped with tanks, armoured vehicles and spotter planes and helicopters. They don't see Sis Violet or the men with her as human beings but as little, annoying insects to be trampled underfoot, the mash or pounded puree you mix with grain to feed a pangolin. He harbours a suspicion, no, a superstition, that he, Joseph Mabaso, fourteen-year-old half-Zambian, half-South African boy who has lost his parents, is shadowed by bad luck and cannot be anyone's mascot. All the soccer teams he supports – Lusaka Dynamos or Mufulira Wanderers – tend to lose against any opposing team if he, Joseph, is at the stadium, watching the match on television or catching the broadcast on radio. It happens so often, he prefers to do something else for the

ninety minutes of the match and then asks what the final score was. What chance does this unit have if they field a jinx like him as their mascot?

‘I’m not going,’ he says.

‘You’re coming, Joseph,’ Sis Violet says and pushes her face into his. He breathes the air she exhales, sees her nostrils flaring, beads of sweat on the tip of her nose. There’s something in her tone, in her eyes, which tells him she no longer sees him as he is but as an enemy. ‘You’re coming or I swear to God we’ll be burying you in the field outside.’

‘But why?’

‘Because that’s how it’s meant to be.’ She glances at the old man. ‘Isn’t that right, Ntate Lerumo?’

Instead of answering her, Ntate Lerumo addresses Joseph. ‘You say you’re sure your parents are home in South Africa?’

‘Yes.’ Joseph is not sure, but he’ll be damned if he’ll admit he might be wrong, at least not within Sis Violet’s hearing. ‘If not...’

‘Yes? If not?’

‘Then that’s where I’ll stay.’ He can’t see himself trekking back to Lusaka. The gap left by his siblings’ and Gogo Mulubwa’s absence has become a permanent feature of his soul. He can accept his inability to be with them the same way he accepts a headache or a visit to a dentist. He remembers, with a pang of guilt, that Sis Violet was also fourteen when she left home. Now, much older – although much younger than ma – she’s preparing to go back. He wonders what awaits her at home. Will she find her people, and will they recognise she’s been a member of a movement, a people, trying something that’s almost impossible to achieve? This feeling, being part of something big and baffling, is sharpened when the old man hands him a green overall, the uniform he’ll wear from now on, ‘so the Boers don’t see you’.

Sis Violet looks at Joseph, eyes squinted, head tilted to the side the way ma does when checking if a new school uniform fits well. ‘You’ve grown taller, Joseph.’

‘Is that a good or a bad thing?’ Joseph asks.

‘Depends,’ Sis Violet says. The other men laugh. ‘Someone get him Jerome’s boots. And a pair of socks.’

The boots are a size too big, so Joseph stuffs wads of crumpled newspaper into the toe and walks around, stamping his feet like a kid trying out his new Christmas clothes. He wonders about the absent Jerome whose clothes he's now getting used to wearing. He hopes he's not wearing the clothes of a dead man.

'We wore drab khakis when we fought the Boers and the Rhodesians in Wankie,' Ntate Lerumo says. 'Even OR.'

'OR was in Wankie?' Blade asks.

'He came down with us right down to the embarkation point of the Zambezi, where we took the dinghies. He saluted us and wished us Godspeed,' Ntate Lerumo says. 'Now, that's a real commander. Not these cowards who conduct operations by remote control.'

An hour later at 9pm, after matching the time on their watches, the unit sets out. Possibly still feeling the spirit of OR if not to prove he's still got it, Ntate Lerumo accompanies them from the house. Although limping slightly, he manages the brisk pace, walking next to Sis Violet confidently, as if his near-blind eyes work better in the dark. He's giving her final instructions, passing her a piece of paper with the map showing where they will meet the bakkie with their provisions. Someone, Blade, sounds worried about the size of the unit – nine people. But Sis Violet says nine is not too bad. It heightens the chance of being discovered but then the more fighters under arms, the more capable they are of defending themselves. During a skirmish, she says, they'll split up and harass the enemy from a number of sides. No one says anything about Joseph, who's not armed. For his part, Joseph feels short-changed by the unit, by Sis Violet, because, as he's come to accept his newfound status of mascot, it stands to reason he should be at the head of the line or, at least, walking beside Sis Violet.

He thanks his ancestors, however, when the rain comes down, now accompanied by the wind, sending needles of wetness across his face and splatting his rucksack. He knows he wouldn't have known how to proceed in this murk and can well imagine Blade or Gwaza – Charlie has been strangely quiet – chortling, 'Some mascot, hey, comrade?' The noise of the rain is soon drowned by the river. They halt.

'This is as far as I can take you,' Ntate Lerumo says, and gives Sis Violet a big hug, which looks kind of clumsy because his arms have to go around the

knapsack strapped to her back. Joseph can't see her face in the dark – she's facing away from him – but he thinks he sees her body give a small shudder. The old man shakes hands with the rest of the members of the unit and, when it comes to Joseph, he bends his knees a little to enfold Joseph in an embrace. Joseph gets a fusty odour that brings back moments with Gogo Mulubwa. The old man murmurs something Joseph can't catch and releases him. They watch him walking back, not turning once for a final wave, until he disappears in the darkness.

They walk for over an hour, the boots crunching on the loose stones along the trail. The rain has let up, the clouds releasing a hesitant moon that gives Joseph a glimpse of the terrain. It's flat, here and there scattered stone and mud huts and rude shelters speak of sleepy settlements. Further along, behind the once-whitewashed walls of a ruined church, is a disused mill almost totally surrounded by umbrella-shaped thorn trees and a mimosa, wattle and eucalyptus. Beyond that, lit by powerful electric lights, runs the thick ridge of a fence interwoven with trees, bamboo and various tangled plants topped by a continuous coil of razor wire. It's so sudden and impersonal, it strikes fear into Joseph's heart. He wonders why the people of Botswana were so eager to keep South Africa out that they erected this barrier. It's only when on a higher plane that the full picture emerges. The elaborate construction is on the South African side. The Botswana side consists of a wire mesh fence not even crowned with barbed wire.

'Change of plan,' Sis Violet says, squatted on her haunches as she studies the fence with binoculars. At short intervals a Land Rover rolls along the road on the South African side, slowly, obviously patrolling. Its yellow light contrasts with the bright lights of the border post.

'What's up, komandir?' asks Blade. 'Thanks.' He accepts the glasses and trains them on the activity below.

'Jerome.'

'You think so?'

'Charlie was supposed to fetch him from the train station. He didn't show.'

'No one has given an explanation?'

‘I think the only explanation we have to work with is why there’s so much activity down there.’ She pauses. ‘Jerome knows of our crossing point. We have to find an alternative.’

‘We can’t go back to base.’

‘There’s the river.’

The going gets harder as the unpaved road snakes between dongas where big puddles shimmer with broken pieces of the moonlit sky. Suddenly the group is silhouetted against the lights of a vehicle coming from behind, a van from the sound of the engine. Joseph follows them in hitting the ground, getting a mouthful of roadside grass and mud. He wonders if it’s the mysterious Jerome. The car gets nearer and pulls to a stop, the engine still running. Past the glare of headlights of the Isuzu panel van fitted with a canopy, Joseph sees loose rocks like bleached skulls on the side of the road. For a moment nothing happens and then the driver’s door opens and a smooth-faced, youngish white man in a priest’s black robes steps out. As he walks around the front of the car, he shields his eyes from the brightness of headlights.

‘Come on out and put your guns away,’ he says. ‘I saw you a long way off.’

‘Father Columba,’ Gwaza says, getting up and brushing patches of mud off his overalls. ‘What are you doing here? At this hour?’ There’s a certain awkwardness among the rest of the unit, people not really sure how to act in these changed circumstances. But Father Columba’s relaxed manner seems to put everyone, including Sis Violet, at ease. Gwaza introduces the priest. ‘We’ve stashed stuff at his place now and then.’

‘That’s great to know,’ Sis Violet says. She doesn’t sound happy. ‘But we have to go now.’ She’s impatient and uncomfortable with any continued contact with the priest and the seeming loss of authority with the men. She glares at Gwaza as if blaming him for putting them in a sticky position.

‘I know you’re on your way to cross the border,’ Father Columba says gently. ‘Believe you me, I’ve helped many to cross into Botswana from South Africa and many from this side into Mafeking. So,’ he continues, ‘let’s go. I know a spot that is not being so heavily patrolled.’

‘So,’ Sis Violet asks, ‘you saw there was some activity along the Ramatlabama border post?’

‘There’s always activity there,’ Father Columba says, ‘but the patrols are rare in the stretch along the river some kilometres from here because of the terrain. The Batswana cross there to go shopping in Mafeking and their countrymen cross into Botswana to see relatives.’

‘Komandir?’ It’s Blade.

‘Yes?’ Sis Violet asks.

‘I think we should do it. Saves us time. Remember, we have to meet our transport on the other side, and we’ve lost time already.’

‘Okay,’ Sis Violet says, turning to Fr Columba. ‘You’re a man of the cloth, Father. There’s a special place in hell for priests who sell their flock for pieces of silver.’

‘Nowadays,’ Fr Columba says, ‘it’s all via dollar-denominated accounts in exotic locations. But,’ he continues, opening the back door of the canopy, ‘your struggle has always benefitted from the religious sector. I consider myself a member of the royal fellowship of ecclesiastical freedom fighters.’

‘Whatever.’

CHAPTER 19

'Hey, ma-comrades, we're home!'

Sis Violet's raised hand stops Blade. 'Commissar? Behave!'

Although silenced, the cry hovers in the night air and sends a current through Joseph's body. Momentarily distracted, he loses his footing as he gets over the fence and lands hard on the packed ground. Blade, the first to climb over, quickly examines Joseph to see if he is all right. Satisfied there are no broken bones, he steadies the others and assists them with their equipment, arms and ammunition.

'Is everyone present and accounted for?' Sis Violet asks. 'No injuries? We've got a long way to go.' There's an excitedly whispered, 'Yes, komandir.'

'Let's go.'

Everything is done at a brisk pace. They dash across the unpaved stony road to a line of trees looming like a solid slash of darkness out in the middle distance. Joseph's lungs are already complaining as the group enters the forest. He controls his breathing, taking lungfuls of air, marvelling at the fitness of the people who are laden with knapsacks of weapons and equipment. As they walk, Joseph realises that, if he listens carefully, the footsteps of the unit are of a single person, much like the sure-footed *mganda* dancers from Lundazi taking their lead from a *jitedi*. The guerrilla unit's *jitedi*, Sis Violet, tells them the map is now a security risk. She has to depend on the azimuth compass to get to the meeting point. She finds a route within the different shades of darkness, dances around obstacles while weaving through the undergrowth with remarkable ease.

Under the moonlight, the main land feature is a scraggy bush growing out of the hard earth, strewn with loose rocks. The night air is dry with motes of unseen dust irritating the nostrils. After a few hundred metres of unchanged terrain, the flatness of the land gives over to a gentle slope. The crackle of vegetation points to the effects of a day that must have been very hot. Now and

then the quiet of the night is broken by something rustling in the undergrowth. Even though this has happened at every kilometre they've covered, the members of the group still tense up. Their guns are pointed up except for Sis Violet's in front, who carries hers in a ready position. Joseph imagines the barrel of the gun is a steel antenna, probing the area for an enemy presence.

He wonders what the whole mission, as the guerrillas called it, is all about. Do they have a specific target? Are they going to shoot the first person, a soldier, police officer, whoever, from the enemy camp? Who's the enemy? He wants to ask but knows he's not even supposed to be here, let alone bother people with questions. He counts the group members off in his head: Sis Violet, Blade, Gwaza, Tekere, Charlie, Malume and Guduza. These he knows. There's one more person, Comrade Ananias, who, like Charlie, has remained quiet the whole time. He is thin and walks as if the boots are too big for him, managing, however, to keep the rhythm of the marchers. All the people have their speciality. What's Ananias's? Enough with the questions. Walk!

'What's the destination, komandir?' someone – Gwaza again – asks. 'And the ETA?'

'The destination is home, and the ETA is when we get there,' Sis Violet says with a snap in her tone. After two hours of trekking, they reach a natural shelter formed by huge boulders growing up from a clump of bushes. Just when Joseph feels his legs can't carry him any further, Sis Violet raises her hand, bringing the march to a halt. '*Desyati minutnyy pereryv*,' she says.

'*Kharasho*,' Blade says gratefully, squatting on his haunches with his back to a boulder. The others follow suit. Malume and Guduza get guard duty. Turning to Charlie, Blade asks: '*Hoezeit*, Charlie?'

'*Julle moet die Russkie-kak van julle los*,' Charlie says, curtly. 'We're at home now and someone might overhear you speaking Russian.'

'Ah, Charlie, are you still angry that we stopped you from bringing your shoes along?'

'You must agree they are too clunky, Charlie,' Tekere says. 'You don't have that much space in your knapsack.'

'Those weren't "shoes". They were Florsheims. Genuine leather, made in the USA.'

'So, for clothes you don't mind the imperialists?' Blade sounds genuinely mystified. 'You know the CIA tipped off the Boers to get Mandela arrested?'

'Ja, but what was he doing disguising himself as a chauffeur?' Charlie asks, snorting. '*Daai's 'n moegoe se disguise.*'

'Are you calling Mandela a moegoe, Charlie?'

'Mandela is a moegoe. You see the way he wears his hair? With that side part?'

'What about OR?'

'A double moegoe. Also, *met daai* side part of the hair and tribal parallel bars on his cheeks.'

'Charlie...' Blade shakes his head. '*Monna*, just admit you're in love with imperialists.'

'Soon,' Tekere says, 'he'll be singing their national anthem.'

'Never,' Charlie says. 'My clothes might be from the US, but my political direction is from socialist countries.' He pauses, thinking. 'Have you seen those awful imitation Levi's jeans from Czechoslovakia? The zip for the crotch is so short you have to pull your pants all the way down to have a piss.'

Under the stars, which press down upon him, Joseph listens to the unit, which lies sprawled in restless, watchful sleep. Charlie and Ananias have taken over from the previous guards. Crouched behind boulders or termite mounds, they keep watch. The only time he hears Ananias say anything is when he has to chide Gwaza who wants to light a cigarette. 'Just don't,' he says, his voice surprisingly soft, which makes it scarier. Gwaza doesn't ask why; he stows the packet away.

Silence. Sis Violet earlier called for radio silence. Voices carry at night. And smoke carries further.

He goes over the day, realising that the night will soon come to an end. He looks forward to this because he imagines that, scrubby and scraggly as the place might be, he's experienced it in the distorting veil of darkness. Perhaps it will turn out to be beautiful.

It isn't.

He wakes up to the glare of the hot sun. Something rustles under his knapsack, and he sees a tail of a large lizard disappearing into the bush. The landscape is dotted with a series of termite mounds sitting side by side with thorn trees which, at 7am, have lost the power to provide shade. The only saving grace from the blanket of steam pressing down from the heavens is that the group is on a higher part of the rolling acreage of scrubland. There's a breeze that wafts across like a blessing, but that, too, is short-lived. Looking down the rolling stretch of nothingness, Joseph is amazed at the ground they have covered. In the middle distance, through a drabness screened by a haze of bouncy heat and smoke, is a cluster of houses nestling under green trees. He wonders if it's a mirage. Sis Violet ambles over to where he's sitting. Settling down with her head resting on her bent knees, she gives him a long sidelong look. 'How are we doing here?'

'I'm okay.' He wants to say more but contains himself.

'Still gung-ho about seeing ma and Comrade Sobs, if they are there, that is?'

He studies her face, to see if she's mocking him. There's an old scar just above her right eyebrow. One of her sharp eye teeth presses against her lower lip, giving her a wolfish grin. It's this imperfection that makes her beautiful.

'They are there.' He would like to touch her, shake her hand, emptiness welling up in him.

'You know what I like about you, Joseph,' Sis Violet says, her tone containing surprise at this discovery, 'is your resolve and belief in the correctness of your cause.' She sighs. 'You'll make a great leader one day. Or dictator.'

After a minute: 'Are you hungry?'

'I am,' he admits. 'But I guess the rations are for the guerrillas.'

She laughs. 'You still call us guerrillas? After all this time. We have names.'

'What happened to you? After Francistown?'

'We had to spring Ananias out of prison in Gaborone.'

'Had he been kept long in isolation? Ananias.' The name amuses him.

'No. Why?'

‘My father told me people kept in solitary confinement take time before they can speak normally when they come out.’

‘Ananias is just the silent type. He’s our best shooter.’

‘Shooter?’

‘Yes. Come on, we’ve got to get moving.’

In the late afternoon, after a hard five-hour trek under a sun that has now lost its harsh edge, Joseph becomes aware of how the ground has become overgrown with hard tufts of grass. Some twenty metres ahead, a timber and rusted steel frame stands tilted to the side as if frozen in its journey to the ground, a water pump keeping it company. Here, the guerrillas’ careful treads crunch on loose slate and gravel. Twin tracks on either side of a ridge of grass mean heavy vehicles used the path in the past. Right now, though, all is dead and dry.

At Sis Violet’s direction, Malume and Tekere break off from the group to scout the area. Minutes later, they pronounce the perimeter safe.

‘This must have been a manganese mine,’ Tekere explains. ‘Lots of them in the Western Transvaal, right down to the Ramatlabama border.’

‘There’s nothing there,’ Malume adds, ‘except nests of scorpions.’

‘Argh,’ Charlie grumbles, ‘I hate those things. And snakes. I came here to fight the Boere. I didn’t come all this way to be stung by fucking scorpions.’

‘Easy, Charlie,’ Gwaza says. ‘I read somewhere that a very small percentage of about fifteen hundred known species of scorpions have stings fatal to humans.’

‘What if the ones in there are part of that small percentage?’

‘You’ll be the first beneficiary of our training in first aid, Charlie.’

‘You’re in safe hands,’ Blade says.

‘Julle is almal mal. Muito louco.’

When looking at the men and their woman leader, he agrees with Charlie that everyone is mad. Can’t they feel the danger in the air, throbbing like something alive? Even though he has come to regard them as members of his own family – including the silent Ananias – he can’t compare them to anyone he knows. Well, anyone except for Pule. Pule would be at home here. And Sobhuza? Comrade

Sobs? This is also his world. He has a sense that, while he's never really known his father, the encounter and interaction with the guerrillas have increased his unknowingness.

Entering the mine, despite Tekere and Malume's assurances, is not simple. They have to climb down a series of ledges, which give the climber only a toehold. There are rusted iron rods embedded in the sides of what must have been an ancient ladder, which the guerrillas grip as they descend. There is a hollow echo as Blade, who seems to know a lot about mines, warns them about the dangers of old shafts. They mustn't touch anything they don't know. There's the fragility of rotten timber and the possibility of hidden explosive charges that can be set off with a mere touch. He points out the volatility of the atmosphere and that the dampness masks the presence of potentially poisonous gases. The dead lightbulbs above, connected to strings of cable, are covered with condensation.

Some thirty metres on, the tunnel is a lot more even and roomy, although Sis Violet has to bring out a flashlight because of faint daylight. She nods with satisfaction.

'We can set up camp here,' she says. 'But, is this defensible, comrades?'

They agree it's defensible. Joseph realises people are probably too tired to search for another sheltered spot. They tense visibly when they hear a rustling coming from a spot in the darkened passage. Two giant rats break cover and run across the ground into a hole torn in the floor. Joseph imagines them as guerrillas of the animal kingdom, taking evasive action. On her part, the leader of the human guerrilla band, Sis Violet, looks somewhat amused. She teases Gwaza and Blade, who have removed their shoes to examine their blistered feet. 'I thought you all were hardened by the six hours of *fisico* you did in Malanje.'

'Ja,' Gwaza says. 'There, you had one of those crazy *mchindas* trained by ZAPU, Shakes, Kid and Maria Maria, an unholy trinity, running behind you, letting off bursts of machine-gun fire over your head. Of course, you had to run.'

'And bark like a dog,' Blade says, going *hu-hu-hu*, chanting: '*i-Zipra mkhonto...*'

Gwaza picks up the chant: '*Hu, inyamazane...*'

'... *hu-hu...Ma-Maria, isela lomuntu...*'

Her face registering alarm, as if fearing the men are about to get carried away, Sis Violet shouts, 'Comrades. *Vol'no*, you remember the volatility of these places?' Her voice echoes in the cavern.

Joseph asks Charlie, 'How do you understand each other with all these languages you speak...?'

Charlie regards Joseph before answering. 'Most of us were trained in different places where we picked up the languages of the instructors. Or of the people who hosted us. Cuba, Angola, GDR, USSR. Some of our people are fluent even in Arabic, which is a difficult language.' He laughs. 'But then, you must always remember that we're not only sponges that absorb and then assume the character of the people in whose countries we find ourselves...'

'...Mainly to impress the women,' Gwaza says with a mischievous chuckle. '*Pionero*, don't let these people act all high and mighty with their lofty ideals. They're all a bunch of show-offs.'

Charlie laughs, dismissing his comrade. 'Truth is, these languages are our way of bringing back something from our shared past. I'm sure Comrade Sobs now and then said words you couldn't understand?'

Joseph remembers how his father carefully kept one part of his life completely separate from his family life. The two worlds never met. 'Sometimes we'd hear him swearing in Portuguese.'

'We're going to get supplies,' Sis Violet says, hitching up her knapsack. 'Malume will stay with you.'

'When will you be back?' Joseph asks. They've been huddled in a corner, cocking and uncocking their guns, checking the grenades and extra magazines. He remembers how they left him at Hubert's place in Francistown. He wonders how and where they're going to get the supplies at this time of the night. It's about 9pm.

'Bra Joe's worried the supermarket will be closed,' Charlie quips.

The others grin – Sis Violet, Blade, Gwaza, Tekere, Guduza, even Ananias. But the smiles are strained. Joseph has seen these smiles before.

'Can't it wait until morning?'

'No,' Sis Violet says, checking her wristwatch. 'Comrades? It's time.'

Malume is not like Charlie or even Gwaza. Joseph likes Gwaza, who calls him '*pionero*', in recognition of the pioneer movements of socialist countries. The name has a nice ring to it, much like Bra Joe from Kilimanjaro. The names let him know the guerrillas are at ease with him. Malume is another matter altogether. Although he jokes a lot, teasing people, there's something hard about him, a bitter edge to his humour and something not quite right about his eyes. His strange presence becomes even more evident with everyone gone. To make matters worse, he starts to remove the bandage stuck to the wound on his leg. The wound is ugly, a red centre edged by a greenish circle. Joseph averts his eyes but not quickly enough to miss seeing the wound breathing, pus oozing and running down the leg to the curve of the foot. Concentrating on a spot above Malume's head he wishes the others would come back soon. When people vacate an area, they take their goodness with them and leave their silence in the shadows. Quickly, quietly, Malume nurses himself, covering the wound with gauze and binding the leg with a fresh bandage. Now, sitting with a thin blanket over his knees and his knapsack between his back and the wall, Joseph watches Malume emptying a can of beans onto a plastic plate. He spoons some of the beans onto another plate and cuts them both slices of hardened bread with a bayonet. He hands Joseph a plate.

'This is far from the menu at the Pamodzi,' he says, 'but I guess it will do for now.' He smiles, a movement at the corners of his mouth that doesn't leap into his eyes.

'Thanks. *Zikomo*.'

Willing himself to not think about where Malume's hands have been, Joseph accepts the plate. The beans are a little lumpy and the bread tastes mouldy. But Joseph scoffs it all down. This is probably the only meal he's going to have in a while. He watches Malume, who has used the bayonet to open the can, spooning the mound of beans to his mouth with the blade, licking it to get the last of the runny sauce. There is something at once fascinating and repellent about the way the knife digs into the beans and travels to the mouth, the tongue snaking out and stroking the blade. Malume is not unaware of his effect on the young man. He asks: 'Are you okay?'

‘I’m fine.’ He wants to ask, *why?*

Malume answers the unasked question: ‘You look uncomfortable. Are the beans not to your liking?’

‘The beans...the beans are okay.’

‘You lie, young man. These beans are the pits.’ He pauses, fixing Joseph with a look. ‘Is that how you’ve managed to get through life, by telling lies?’

‘I’m not sure I understand. When did I tell a lie?’

‘In the camps we were taught by these Zimbabwean instructors, and they used to say a lie is not always something you say but something you do. They’d say “*uyambuluz*a” when you malingered. And people who *mbuluza* are invariably disloyal. Many turn out to be enemy agents.’

‘I’ve not malingered. I’m here because I’m looking for my parents.’ He can feel anger building up in him, coursing up from his toes to the top of his head. ‘I’m sure you can understand that.’

‘Don’t tell me what I can or cannot understand,’ Malume snarls. ‘We’re at war, here. I’ve seen many of my comrades die through the action of enemy agents.’

Joseph debates with himself. Run? But where to? I’m in a mine, a cave, far from the restaurant along Los Angeles Boulevard. There’s no one around here, no Lanky Boy or Leila or even Pule. If Pule suddenly made an appearance – like what happens in movies when someone is in trouble and salvation comes at the last moment – he’d jump and entwine himself around him, tell him his girlfriend is all right, she’s just gone out with a few guerrillas and will be back soon. He’d give him a blow-by-blow account of their journey here. He’d tell him about the role played by Father Columba, how – since they wanted to take a direction different from the one known to Jerome, that enemy agent Jerome – they were blindly taking the route to Ghanzi, a town to the west of the desert. Joseph had heard the men swapping stories of refugees, either skipping out of South Africa or attempting to find their way into South Africa, how they blundered off towards Ghanzi and ended up as bleached bones to be picked up by the BDF patrols. But Sis Violet’s unit was saved by Fr Columba and, to a large extent, Blade, who is also familiar with these parts.

As he plots how to deal with a man's smouldering account of betrayal, with half of his mind reliving the teeth-gnashing moments of their journey from Botswana into an unknown and violent South Africa, Joseph knows he has to survive this night. Tomorrow, I've got to get out of this place, keep moving, he thinks. Get myself far from the monotonous recital about comrades who died, sold down the river by enemy agents – that word again! – in various slaughterhouses. Malume's recital takes over part of Joseph's thoughts. Now, more toneless, as if about to sleep, Malume recounts: 'Matola, Mozambique. Fifteen dead, including my close friends, Mdu and Obadi. Lesotho was a bigger harvest for the regime, thirty-seven all told, men, women and children, sustaining wounds that are a burden to remember. Gaborone: George Phahle, Bra George, he of the shiny shaven head and rolling gait and onetime member of the Spoilers Gang of Alexander Township, shot to shreds together with his graceful, beautiful wife, Lindi Malaza. And Thami Mnyele? An artist, for fuck's sake, where, on the front page of the *Star*, paid assassin Craig Williamson exhibits the paintings and posters as part of the weapons of war, and on 16 June 1985 the *Sunday Times* crowns in its banner headline: *The Guns of Gaborone*. The liberal press joins the enemy press in celebrating the deaths – the murders – of our people. Do you know what I'm talking about?'

Joseph hears the question cutting into his own thoughts and suddenly remembers overhearing Sobhuza and ma talking about war.

'My father,' he says, 'once said that, in war, you're more likely to be killed by your own side than by the enemy. In World War II, in the Soviet Union, there were Red Army soldiers who ensured there'd be no retreat in the fight with the Germans. Anyone retreating would be shot in the back. Do you have that in your, er, army?'

Malume, his face wet from exertion or tears, is no longer really seeing Joseph and does not respond. Joseph gets the impression the man is focused on something outside of the mine. Malume dips his head.

'We shot people,' he says, 'following the mutiny, *umkatashiya*, in Angola in 1984. These are our comrades who wanted to go and fight inside the country as opposed to sustaining casualties in battles with UNITA *bandidos* on the Eastern Front. We buried many people. We ran out of coffins and resorted to

120mm boxes, cramming into them the remains of our dead. So, when the mutiny was raging, and we had to defend our camps, and when our own comrades had killed our comrades, in Pango, or in Camp 32, we had to capture them.' His words now come out in a long-drawn-out sigh. 'We formed a firing squad, tied them to trees. In one case we used the ZGU, the anti-aircraft gun fired horizontally. Now, imagine what the gun with a trajectory of miles does to a human body.'

'Where was my father in all this?'

'He was in a special unit,' Malume says, snapping back to the reality of the cave. 'They specialised in assassinations. Some of the people with him graduated.'

'Graduated?'

'Yes. Into a suicide squad.'

Joseph wants to follow up with questions. Is his father an assassin? Who has he killed? Does ma know? Seeing the blank look on Malume's face, Joseph suspects he might have used up his quota of questions. Malume suppresses a yawn.

'It's late,' he says. 'Let's catch some sleep, sonny.'

The memory of how Sis Violet and the unit members abandoned him comes back to Joseph. However unpalatable this question might be to Malume, he is going to ask it. Mainly because he feels there are gaps in his understanding. He was a good student, he tells himself, and his grasp of issues came from asking questions.

'Comrade Malume?' Joseph says, hoping this is the correct form of address, 'what's this mission you're all on about?' What are Sis Violet and the rest of the team going to do so late at night? He has many other questions, but they can wait.

Malume looks at him, a vagueness in his expression as if he doesn't understand what Joseph means by 'mission'. Then he settles down on his haunches and proceeds to stretch his problematic leg.

'If it were back in the camp,' he says, 'I'd peg you for an enemy agent, because no one asks what the mission is all about. But it takes a certain depthless level of stupidity to be an enemy agent. Our mission, simply, is to destroy certain

government – or regime – installations. Destroy them in a manner that tells the people of South Africa that Umkhonto we Sizwe – MK, the People’s Army – is alive and present in all corners of the country. It’s called armed propaganda. We aim to cripple the regime’s economic interests in publicised, spectacular attacks that will win us new recruits and adherents to the cause. To win hearts and minds.’

‘So, are they on their way to attack now? The installations?’

‘No, right now we have to get the material that’s kept in DLBs.’

‘DLBs?’

‘Dead letter boxes. Arms caches stored by other units before ours. Ammunition. Explosives and the kind of ordnance that has been smuggled or procured internally.’

‘Ananias? Comrade Ananias? Is he the one to do the crippling?’

‘All of us are experts in our fields.’

It’s all too much to take in. Sobhuza, part of a suicide squad. He’s tired. Even though anxious about his parents, especially with this new information about his father, Joseph drifts into a dreamless sleep.

The next morning, at about 5am, Joseph is jolted awake by the sound of distant gunfire and excited voices that waft into the mine. Most of the guerrillas have returned, except Ananias and Guduza. ‘Where’s Ananias?’ he asks. ‘He’s on guard duty, above,’ someone – Gwaza – answers, ‘with Guduza. Hurry!’

Joseph breaks into a sweat. Although far off, the gunfire still echoes in his stomach. ‘Come, come,’ Sis Violet orders, slapping the side of her leg, ‘come. If it’s an attack, they’ll seal off the entrance. *Bystro! Bystro!*’

Having scrambled to collect their belongings, Charlie and Gwaza cover Joseph between them while running crouched out of the mouth of the tunnel. The three hit the ground some few feet behind Sis Violet, who’s down on her haunches behind the headframe. They crawl, keeping their heads down, Joseph tasting dust and grass, keeping up with the trained guerrillas.

Sis Violet scans the terrain through binoculars. Shaking her head, she passes the glasses to the men, finally to Joseph. Each time someone manages to get a full measure of what the noise was all about, the discovery is followed by a

shake of a head and a low whistle. Joseph accepts the binoculars, and, bringing them up to his face, he feels as if he's on a rocking boat as the landscape swims and eddies crazily before he can get a clear picture. The scene unfolding outside causes the guerrillas to look at one another in utter amazement. Dotted along the field in the middle distance are white cottony blobs, which turn out to be a flock of goats bleating and milling around as they attempt to flee from a group of young herders clad in tattered shorts and khaki shirts. Looming up in this confusion is a medium-sized flatbed truck stuck in the ditch on the side of the dirt road. Leaning to the side, it has lost most of its load, although a sizeable number of livestock is still blocked from jumping off by the cage of side panels and vertical logs. Three men, two in overalls and woollen caps and a third one, bareheaded in a short-sleeved white shirt and black pants, struggle to set the truck's wheels on the road. Joseph notices that the third man must have been the one doing the shooting as he has a holstered gun around his waist.

'Tell you what we'll do,' Blade says. 'Malume and Guduza, this might be a godsend. We need transport. Go down and help the men there.' He instructs them to leave their AK-47s behind and instead carry their pistols concealed. 'Watch out for the Lone Ranger down there. We have you covered.'

'Yes, commissar,' Malume says. He seems uncomfortable about surrendering his weapon, murmuring something about a folding butt. Joseph wonders if Malume managed to get some sleep. What was all that babbling about last night? He doesn't have long to wonder, though, as he watches the action around him. Charlie and Gwaza adopt the prone firing positions, their rifles trained on the scene below.

Sis Violet shakes her head as she watches the two men begin their descent. 'Shouldn't they just go down there and take over?'

'Those are civilians, komandir,' Blade says. 'We've got to win them over. And we can't do that if we brandish our weapons.'

'But they are armed. One of them is armed. You heard the shots.'

'Could be blanks meant to scare the animals.'

'I still don't like it.' Joseph wonders if her reservation has anything to do with Blade's taking over the role of commander.

'I'm sorry, komandir. I have been in these situations bef...'

The word is hardly out of his mouth when all hell breaks loose. A second before his own ears are deafened by two loud bangs as Charlie and Gwaza fire almost simultaneously, Joseph hears the *pop-pop-pop!* of gunfire. In that wrenching moment, Joseph feels something forcing its way up to his throat, blocking off the air, a feeling accompanied by a realisation that, although the guerrillas are a unit, each one of them acts independently – and that he, too, must save himself. In a moment, he's also jumping and scrambling downhill, slipping on loose bits of rock and grass tufts and scraping his knuckles on stones, Joseph can hear nothing. Repeatedly, he falls on his back, rolls down and rights himself and lands in a shallow ditch along the rugged road. Crimson splotches spread across Lone Ranger's white shirt. He falls on his back. One of the pair in overalls, mouth open and eyes widened, dashes, jumping up and clearing a hurdle of goats huddling in confusion. His other colleague is on all fours on the ground. Next to him, spread-eagled, Malume lies, barely moving. The three herders stand fixed to the ground, their sticks in their hands. One of them points at a fleeing man.

Charlie takes aim at the running man in blue overalls and then lowers his gun without firing. Joseph's hearing returns to plunge him into confusion, a whirlpool of sound and movement as men shout and animals bleat. Gwaza and Sis Violet rush to the spot where the three men are lying. They place their fingers on the injured men's necks, starting with the man in the blood-spattered white shirt. A kneeling Sis Violet shakes her head, waving vigorously for Charlie to remove Joseph from the scene. He claps his rough hand, which smells of tobacco, over Joseph's face. 'You don't have to see these things, my *laaitie*.'

'I want to go home,' Joseph says. Then the ground rolls up to him in spirals and all the lights go out.

CHAPTER 20

He wakes up with a massive headache in the front seat of the moving truck, everything blurred by the condensation on the windscreen. Sounding as if from a corner of his brain is the sorrowful bleating of a goat, a noise that gets amplified when other goats join in. As if sensing his need for clarity, Sis Violet quickly wipes the windscreen with the sleeve of her jacket and lets in the faltering light of the dying day. Night is falling, where did the day go? What day is it? He's uncertain about everything. How did he get into the truck? The only thing he knows – what he can see – is that Blade is driving, his face set in a sullen profile. There is a tense atmosphere in the cabin, which is charged with the acrid smell Joseph has come to link with thunderstorms. Did my waking up interrupt a violent argument? Sis Violet looks at him.

'Ah,' she says with a small smile. 'The sleeper's awake.'

'Where are we?' he asks. Then, the images of the fight come back, rushing, mashing into each other and bringing up nausea. 'What happened back there. Where's Charlie?'

Blade says: 'Charlie's in the back. With the others. Minding the goats.' He glances at Sis Violet. 'Should we tell him?'

'He'll know soon enough.'

'I'll know what?' Joseph hates it when people speak about him as if he's not there. Or is soft in the head. 'Where are we?'

'We've gone past Dinokana, using back roads.' Sis Violet sounds distant, almost sorrowful. 'This is the place where Tiro was born. Then Craig Williamson sent him the bomb that blew him to pieces in Botswana.'

'Craig Williamson?' Joseph says. 'Malume mentioned that name last night. He was the one who killed an artist in the raid on Gaborone.'

'Wow,' Blade says wonderingly. 'You two must have had an interesting tête-à-tête last night.'

'It's been a long road,' Sis Violet says, something choking in her voice. 'We've lost some of our best people.'

We've lost some of our best people. He remembers the man in the blood-spattered white shirt, the other on all fours and Malume lying inert on the

ground. The goats. The gunfire. He can still smell the metallic odour of the battle, for that's what it was. Nausea prickles at the back of his throat. It's suddenly unbearably hot even though the sun has died down. He wishes he could ask them to open the windows. Or to get out. The movement of the truck on the uneven ground increases his discomfort. But, thank God, Sis Violet winds down the window and lets in air, which, albeit warm and dusty, quietens his own storm. Tentatively, he asks: 'What happened to the man back there?'

'Sometimes things happen,' Sis Violet says, 'and it's difficult to foresee how they end.'

'We had a situation,' Blade says, 'and we acted on it the best way we could.'

'Is the man dead?' Joseph asks.

'Three men died,' Sis Violet says. 'Unfortunately, Malume also got killed.'

'Malume?' He can't remember a time when someone he's known ends up getting killed. He wonders if the fact that he didn't warm to Malume, now dead, makes him a bad person. Did Malume have an inkling, the faintest suspicion, when they were having their little talk yesterday, that he was going to die so soon? It stands to reason that, if you're a soldier – and the guerrillas are soldiers – there's the likelihood that another soldier, perhaps one faster than you, or equipped with superior weapons, could get the better of you, beat you to the draw, like in Westerns. And then there's the issue of the funeral.

'When is he being buried?'

'Who?' Blade asks.

'Malume.'

'We buried all of them in a spot near the Botsalano Game Reserve.'

'Game reserve?' Joseph asks, remembering Mr Chikwedere's animals. 'Won't the animals dig them up?'

'No. We've done this before.'

'Shot people and buried them?'

'No. I mean we've buried comrades before. Also, animals don't dig up bodies if precautions have been taken.' Blade exhales. 'Can we focus on the journey, please?'

Joseph wonders about the precautions. But he feels tiredness envelop him like a blanket. Now it's too dark to make out any features of the land. It's a darkness that speaks. The truck rattles on with the lights switched off. I guess it's another precaution.

Throughout the drive, Joseph thinks about what's happened to him, from the events at Hubert's place through the long hours of terror and happiness at Mr Chikwedere's home with Boitumelo, Thabo and the animals. He remembers Thabo. He remembers Modise and his mad coworkers, but finds, to his frustration, that he can't really recall what they look like, except that they filled him with dread. And now this. He feels he has been lucky so far but that his luck might be running out. The deaths have introduced a level of gravity he didn't bargain for. He wonders what disturbs him more: the realness of people dying or the cursory – for the surviving guerrillas must have hastened to beat the clock – manner of their burial. Was it like the disposal of a dog hit by a car? Swaddled in yesterday's copy of the *Times of Zambia* and thrown into a shallow grave? How do you perform proper funeral rites when you're running from the enemy? Fleeing for your life? Fleeing so you don't end up being food for the worms yourself? How do guerrillas report the death of one of their own to the parents or relatives of the deceased since, he has heard, no one uses his or her real birth name? They might all be friends and colleagues – comrades – but the friendship does not extend beyond the oath that binds them, uttered on joining the liberation army, an oath unconnected to families or to anyone outside of the fellowship. I'm lucky that my father, Sobhuza, has a surname, Mabaso, and can be traced, but what if the world only knew that he was Sobhuza and nothing more? Who would have known where Sobhuza's umbilical cord is buried, the better to inform his kith and kin on the occasion of his passing? Who would perform the rites to ensure his spirit was coaxed to connect with the other spirits of his parents, grandparents and ancestors who form part of the lineage?

His train of thought is interrupted by the sound of Sis Violet catching her breath. He opens his eyes. Up ahead, perhaps a kilometre away, lights flicker, a sign that humans are living there. Just as his own excitement mounts, Joseph hears, as if from the depths of a cave, at first a rumbling, then the drone of a

helicopter flying overhead. Blade and Sis Violet stiffen noticeably. They cast anxious glances at the dark sky, waiting for the helicopter's return. It doesn't.

'What do you think?' Blade asks Sis Violet. He has pulled to the side of the road. One of the men at the back bangs on the roof, shouting something inaudible. Blade rolls down the window and tells them to stop the racket. 'Yes, komandir?'

'Our presence has been reported for sure,' Sis Violet says. 'I wonder, though, if they'd send a helicopter at night. They know it's too risky for them.'

'They have night vision.'

'Even then. It's bad practice to seek guerrillas with a helicopter at night.'

'So, what was that all about?'

'They know about us. There's no doubt about that. And the truck makes us an easy target. I suspect they've set up roadblocks all over the Western Transvaal.'

'And so: your final word?'

'Let's ditch the truck.' She pauses, thinking. 'Pity about the goats. I was getting used to being a stock farmer.'

'Stock thief, more like.' Blade says. 'But the police will know we're in the vicinity.'

'Let's find a way to hide the truck. It must take them time to find it. Once they do, they'll think we must have got into another form of transport. I mean, what idiot leaves a serviceable truck behind?' She pauses. 'We've got to leave them with that impression.'

'Or they'll think we'll come back for it.'

'Either way, it's time to march.'

It's Charlie and Gwaza, however, who have a grimmer vision of their prospects.

'If we don't think creatively,' Charlie says, 'we're simply going to get killed before achieving our mission. The police will by now have requested army support, even if the authority is at national level. Right now, they must have set – or are setting – up roadblocks in the whole area. They've probably mobilised regional units – and dogs, too.'

The goats bleat and break wind. Joseph wonders if it's from boredom or fear. 'You should see the *kaka* these things have left on the back of the truck,' Charlie laments. 'After this, me, I'm off goat meat.'

'Forget that and concentrate, Charlie,' Blade says.

'And those army helicopters,' Gwaza continues from where Charlie left off, 'are fitted with infrared night sights and machine guns.'

'Change of plan,' Sis Violet says. When she's sure she has everyone's attention, she outlines her plan. Because it also involves Joseph, he is brought into the conversation. Everyone thinks it's crazy, but then, what's the alternative? Joseph switches off when the guerrillas begin talking in their jargon, which completely excludes him. In the darkness, he senses rather than sees them nodding or shaking their heads. The nods, like the ayes in a debate, have it. Ananias now takes the lead, getting the men to offload the boxes from the back of the truck. There is a rattle of steel, the sharp tearing sound of Velcro strips, hushed admonitions – *careful with that...the first mistake is your last, remember?* – and the *snip-snip* of busy scissors.

'Remember,' Sis Violet says. 'After all this, we must expect nothing from the enemy but pure terror.'

She tells him, her voice even although he can sense her anxiety. The other day it was Malume. Now it's Sis Violet. She tells him about terror and the forces behind it. This region, almost all the farmers are armed. They are connected by a network that is co-ordinated in the police stations. Most of the farmers are members of the AWB, the resistance movement of Afrikaners. The black person is nothing to them. Children are brought up on a diet of hate. There are camps where the teachings of the bible are aligned to philosophies of separation, the same way the Hitler Youth brigades were brainwashed to hate and destroy anything that wasn't from the Aryan race. That is what we have to bring to an end.

Now, he doesn't look at her walking beside him, next to him, behind or in front of him. Both of them are barefoot and in clothes befitting a young deaf herder, Thabo, and his nubile sister, Boitumelo, both heading to the market in

Itsoseng to sell their uncle's goats. The goats, about sixteen of them, are unruly, straying off the dirt road, getting into the bush, nibbling at anything that sprouts leaves.

In the predawn light, Joseph can hear the metallic crackle of voices on the radio, the hum of powerful vehicles, whose lights penetrate the darkness. Flashing blue dome lights alternate with red to bathe the scene in an unreal, otherworldly glow. In this illumination, Joseph sees two sets of heavy police vehicles parked on either side of the road, one pointed towards oncoming traffic, the other at the ready to pursue vehicles on the right side of the road. Perhaps getting a whiff of the goats approaching, the dogs start barking. Joseph sees their handlers, standing next to the vehicles, trying to quiet them. 'Keep calm,' Sis Violet whispers.

A white plainclothes policeman comes out of the group of uniformed officers standing in the middle of the road and raises a gloved hand. Standing next to him, in the camouflage uniform of the Bophuthatswana Defence Force, are two men. The lanky one with sharp features looks like the leader while his colleague, shorter and stouter, seems relaxed – it's just another day at the office.

Sis Violet mutters frustrated insults at the wilful goats, trying to gather them around herself while progressing towards the men. The plainclothes policeman says something to the taller officer. The latter takes a few steps towards Sis Violet.

'Miss?' he says, 'we're in the middle of a police operation here. May I ask where you're going with the beasts?'

'Ah, officer,' visibly cowed by official attention on her, Sis Violet gushes, 'perhaps you can help me, lend me some of your men. These goats, *my ma hoor my*, they give me this stupid errand, together with this stupid boy who can't take care of animals...' She makes to hit him with the back of her hand and stops when he cowers.

'But why at this hour?'

'Why not? We want to be early.'

Just then a dog handler, pulled by the Alsatian on a leash, yells: 'Bomber, for fuck's sake.'

Joseph recalls the urgent briefing and the on-the-spot rehearsal, the police dogs and their habits, the fact that they struggle to smell when it's hot. The temperature is low; the dogs must be at their most alert. And if they are fresh, they can smell gun oil and ammunition. They need to get out of here. The plainclothes cop barks a command. The lanky officer addresses Sis Violet.

'I don't know where this market is,' he says, 'but if I were you, I'd get my goats out of here quick-fast.'

'Why, officer?' Sis Violet asks. 'Is something happening?'

'Something you wouldn't want to see, miss.' He nudges his black counterpart. 'Morwa? Could you escort them out of here?'

'Come this way,' says Morwa, the shorter officer, who's been observing the exchange with an amused expression, beckoning them over. 'Bomber? *Gerrrooff!*'

Bomber, in his exuberance, has snapped at one of the goats, causing a panic among the flock. Two of the goats peel off the flock and blunder back the way they came. Joseph rushes back and chases them to the other side of the police cordon. Morwa turns to Sis Violet. 'Where did this one learn to be absolutely useless with goats?'

'Sometimes,' Sis Violet says, 'you've just got to work with what you have.'

'I see,' Morwa says. 'Miss?'

'Yes, officer?'

'You have to be careful. Itsoseng is miles from here, and there's no village market there.' In the uneven, broken shimmer of artificial law enforcement lights and a reluctant dawn, Morwa seems old and weary. 'I have two younger brothers who skipped the country in 1976. I hope they are safe where they are.'

'I...' Sis Violet starts.

'Don't say anything. I am risking my job as it is. You'd better disappear from here.'

He gives a sign to the general darkness, to the concealed machine gunners positioned to pick out any vehicle suicidal enough to try to breach the roadblock. Before Sis Violet can recover from her surprise at Morwa's advice, the

older man does an about-turn and strides purposefully back to his post. Hurrying without seeming to, Joseph and Sis Violet make their way up the road, into the darkness, aware that the bush on either side could unleash deadly force. Then, there's the confused sound of more goats rushing to the checkpoint, sounding, even from a distance, like a hundred horses galloping on a paved road.

Intercepting the flood, the dogs let out a series of frustrated howls as their discipline conflicts with their nature, the instinct to hunt and tear flesh. Running, abandoning the goats, Sis Violet and Joseph put as much distance between themselves and the checkpoint as their legs will allow. Minutes later, watching from a vantage point a few hundred feet away, they see the truck rumbling down the road with its lights out, the headlamps like the sightless eyes of an avenging beast. It picks up speed just as the platoon of a joint police and military force tries to jump clear of the juggernaut, slamming into a Nyala armoured personnel carrier, tipping it over before bursting into a ball of fire. The blast knocks them to the ground where they inhale the smell of burning rubber. And flesh.

Although she moves fast, often catching up with him when he's surged ahead to pick something up, examine a plant or simply to be the first to see whatever unfolds ahead, he gets the sense she'd rather slow down. It's not in anything she says. He concludes it's something to do with being robbed of the things that make her a soldier. With her gun and backpack left in a hole in an unknowable field, she is now a young woman, no different from anyone he has known in the past. Walking beside her, he imagines her in Aunt Thelma's colourful chitenge.

'Would you wear a chitenge with your president's face on it?'

Sis Violet laughs. It's early in the morning, and they have been walking for hours, following a footpath that runs through a flat grassland scattered with acacia thorn and karee trees. She motions for them to stop now and then, listening to something – a truck or an aeroplane droning in the distance – and resumes the walk when they're out of danger. He is totally unaware of what poses a threat, except, of course, a snake or any of the creepy-crawlies, the mere memory of which causes him to shudder.

'What makes you think of chitenges? Are you missing home?'

'I thought you'd look good in one.'

‘Are you hitting on me, Joseph?’

What he has said came out wrong. She stops to look at him, her hands on her hips. Then she bursts out laughing. ‘Look at him. He’s blushing.’

They get serious when she educates him on invisibility, which is essential for surviving detection. Resting under a tree, listening to the bush crackling, Sis Violet explains how the guerrillas use the features of the land, the vegetation, how they dress in the cloth of the land and speak its language through mimicry, how they regulate their breathing under the savage heat of the sun, remembering the San who tame the Kgalakgadi and who run and conserve energy and find food and water where nothing exists.

‘I heard the men talking about their rangers training together with Zimbabwean freedom fighters in Mkushi,’ he says. ‘Were you part of that, too?’

‘It was extremely hard for us, as women,’ Sis Violet says, ‘for the simple reason that the Zimbabwean instructors, who called themselves *izinyamazane* – the wild animals – were really like wild animals, wiry, muscular, without an inch of fat on their bodies, that’s how tough they were. They gave it to us, working us from morning to nightfall, making us run through the bush like mad things, starving us, shooting at us while we zigzagged through the gorges, no distinctions between a man and a woman. You were a soldier, *umchinda*, a weapon on two legs.’

‘And before you knew it you were also an *inyamazane*?’

‘Correct.’ She says it with a quiet emphasis that leaves no doubt as to her feelings. She stiffens, pressing her back harder against the tree. Even before he sees the source of her caution, he becomes aware of movement at the outer edge of his field of vision. Head to head like plotters, two boys, perhaps of Emmanuel’s age, are laying a snare, using an involved arrangement of flexible branches tautened with a string that runs through a hole in the pole and comes out in a noose that rests on a platform of maize stalks. Crawling like a cat, Sis Violet advances until she leaps out of the bush. One of the boys, as alert as a meercat, jumps up with a yell while his companion, fleshier and slower, merely sits there, rooted to the ground. Sinking to her knees to put herself level with the boys, Sis Violet smiles and shows them her empty hands.

‘Don’t run,’ she says. She points at Joseph. ‘Me and my cousin were just resting there, and we got interested in your game.’

‘It’s not a game,’ Meercat says. ‘We’re hunters.’

‘Hunters, huh? That’s interesting. My name is Boitumelo, and that is my cousin, Thabo. What’s your name, soldier?’

‘Lesego. Kgolo is my cousin.’

‘Where are your parents?’

‘Papa is in Bobbejaanspoor. Ma is at home.’

‘What are you hunting?’

‘Anything, *mmutla*, Auntie Boitumelo.’

‘Have you caught any?’

Kgolo turns to Lesego, the self-appointed spokesman, for an answer. Getting no response, he turns to Sis Violet. ‘These things just run away.’

‘Bring me those branches,’ Sis Violet says, clearing a patch of stony ground. ‘And those strings. Do you have a knife? Thanks. Now look carefully.’

On sentry duty, Joseph occasionally turns to watch the progress of the trap. The two boys peer over Sis Violet’s shoulders, quivering with excitement. With the trap set up, Sis Violet invites them to test it. They exclaim with gleeful surprise when the branch snaps loose and a noose tightens around Lesego’s wrist. As bait, the boys place pieces of cabbage and sweet potato on top of the bed of reeds.

‘Now,’ Sis Violet says, ‘give it some time, an hour, two hours, could be a whole day. But anything nibbling here...’ she brings her hands together, ‘...*pah!*’

‘*Lesego? Kgolo?*’ A woman’s voice reaches the hunters and their new instructor. Joseph, happy to be useful, says: ‘Someone’s coming, a woman.’

‘It’s ma,’ Lesego says. ‘Will you come and meet her?’

‘Yes, please,’ Kgolo agrees. ‘We’ll tell her about the trap.’

‘Are you sure?’ Sis Violet asks.

‘Yes,’ Kgolo says. ‘I’m sure.’

CHAPTER 21

She tells Sis Violet – who’s introduced herself as Boitumelo Mokoena – to call her MaLesego, Lesego’s mother. She wishes her eighteen-month-old daughter hadn’t died four months ago, because Lesego, just look at him pretending that butter wouldn’t melt in his mouth, he’s a real handful and now it’s double trouble with her nephew Kgolofelo being foisted on her. Where’s she to get the means to feed two, no, three, if she counts herself, hungry stomachs? But then, she pauses, checking herself, I’m talking too much and haven’t even offered you and your son a glass of water, in any event, what I’m telling you can only stay within these walls because I don’t talk much to the neighbours. They gossip about me, saying I have no chest as if they’ve got the kind of secrets worth knowing.

They are in a two-roomed thatched hut made of stone with a central pillar that supports a chimney pipe attached to the back of an old iron stove. A small, wiry and energetic woman, MaLesego brings her guests into the house without fuss, holding Sis Violet’s hand as if they’re best friends or sisters. Earlier, walking through the bush that leads to a clearing where a group of huts formed a horseshoe and where a mopane tree gives shade to a common area, MaLesego greeted her neighbours, a cluster of old crones who chattered like excited geese as they pounded grain using pestle and mortars. She waved her hand airily but offered no explanation about her visitors.

Inside the hut, which smells of old cow dung and paraffin, Joseph’s eye goes straight to two bowls – one slightly bigger than the other – brimming with *nshima* and green *morogo* but no meat. MaLesego quickly drapes a cloth over the bowls, the effort not quite hiding the swirl of steam from the bowls. Lesego and Kgolo glance at the covered food but make no attempt to do anything, standing there instead with huge questioning eyes. A large pot simmers on the stove. The heat from outside adds to the warm air blowing out of the stove. Sweat trickles down Joseph’s brow and along his nose to *plop-plop* on the floor of smoothed cow dung. As MaLesego lifts the lid to inspect her pot, the smell of cooking sweet potatoes wafts through the air. Sweet potatoes. It’s early afternoon, and he hasn’t

eaten in... He can't think of food without being overcome with dizziness and nausea.

'I'd like some water, please,' Joseph says. His tongue is thick in his mouth, and he realises, as he gratefully accepts a plastic cup with tepid water scooped from a bucket, that he hasn't spoken since alerting Sis Violet to MaLesego's approach earlier in the afternoon.

Her eyes full of questions, MaLesego watches him as he drinks noisily and greedily. But before she can ask anything, Sis Violet turns to the two boys. 'What about your hunt? Jackals like to snatch what others have caught in a trap.'

The two boys race out, much to MaLesego's irritation. 'I wanted them to get more firewood for the stove,' she says, 'I can no longer afford coal.'

'Well,' Sis Violet says. 'They're keen hunters.'

'Bah, those two. They have never caught even a field mouse.'

Outside, is the *doof-doof* sound of the women pounding. MaLesego looks at Sis Violet and Joseph.

'I'm just waiting for the sweet potatoes to cook,' she says, 'then we'll eat. It's not much. Though the rains were heavy the last season, the harvest has been poor.'

'We don't want to be any trouble,' Sis Violet says. 'We're just passing through.'

'If you're trouble, then it's too late to apologise. The radio – I have a small radio – reported a woman and a boy. They are wanted, and we're not to try to capture them, because they're armed and dangerous. Armed and dangerous, I remember those words. I don't know how dangerous you are, but you don't seem armed to me.'

'They'll say anything,' Sis Violet says. 'Our arms are the people themselves.' She thinks for a minute. 'Did they say what happened?'

'Just that you exploded a bomb,' MaLesego says. 'It must have been a huge one, because we heard it here. The ground shook. They don't say how many people died, but, from that sound alone, it must have been quite a devastation.'

'Anything about any of our own?'

‘Nothing. Just that they killed two terrorists. There was a firefight.’
MaLesego’s face creases with worry. ‘Is that a problem?’

‘Yes. Of course. We have to wonder who died. They release information that makes them feel good about themselves. Minimise their losses.’

‘Meaning, we have to read between the lines?’

‘Definitely.’ Sis Violet thinks before asking the next question. ‘Your son, Lesego, says your husband is in Bobbejaanspoor?’

‘They arrested him on possession of a firearm four months ago. There was some trouble here, men fighting with men from the other side of the hill. What could he do? I haven’t been able to visit him because Kelebogile died the day they took him away. And I have to take care of the living.’

‘A firearm? Did he have one?’

‘If someone doesn’t like you, they report to the Brixton Murder and Robbery Squad that so-and-so owns a gun. And once you’re in the hands of those brutes, even if you *don’t* have a firearm, you’ll just have to make damn sure you produce one.’

‘Did they force one out of him, your husband?’

‘Leonard is a Mopedi. They did everything to him, but he never admitted anything. Bapedi and stubbornness are cooked in the same pot.’

Joseph laughs to himself, remembering. Although MaLesego means this in the best possible way, admiring her man’s capacity to withstand torture, the part about stubbornness is exactly the same thing that the Chibemba say of the Chitonga, the Chilozi of the Chilunda, in Zambia. Everyone has something to say that lowers the estimation of others.

Sis Violet says: ‘A time will come when people like your husband will be recognised, which is why we’re in this fight. We’ll need clothes, if you have any to spare. And,’ she points at her feet, which are dusty and blistered, ‘would you believe I used to pride myself on having the most splendid feet in the camps? Now look at this.’

The two women laugh. Having grown up with ma, Aunt Thelma, Banji, even Gogo Mulubwa, Joseph knows it always comes down to the shoes.

His feet are a little sore. Braving the walk in Kgolo's Bata shoes, he resolves to cease complaining because Sis Violet must be having her fair share of discomfort in MaLesego's pumps, which are a little too big for her feet. Without asking her anything, he knows Sis Violet must be quite moved by their experience with Mrs Keabetswe Phiri, also known as MaLesego, whose kindness has been overwhelming. When Lesego and Kgolo returned from checking their snares, triumphantly holding up, not one, but two rabbits by the ears, Lesego couldn't contain his excitement. '*Bôna, mmê,*' he said, '*retshwere mmutla.*' To which, MaLesego, addressing herself to Sis Violet, replied: 'I thank you. I haven't seen them this happy since they took Leonard away.'

And then, before letting them go, she arranges a little prayer, which she says quietly so as not to arouse the interest of the know-nothing gossipers pounding grain when, in their hearts, they're pounding their neighbours to fine dust. The prayer is not to any particular deity because many of them are all over the land, blessing or cursing the people, whatever the case may be. She prays, calling upon the things that walk on the ground and those that live beneath the Earth, which has swallowed so many of our forebears and whose hunger is never stilled. 'We ask you now,' MaLesego says, 'to guide these two, your messengers, and turn everything harmful that's aimed at them into nothingness. Let their feet walk on the road to safety.' Then she hands them their bundles and says, 'Walk, and don't look back.'

Now, back on the road, using the shortcuts recommended by MaLesego, Sis Violet hustles Joseph along to climb on the back of a lorry ferrying farmworkers from cooperative farms in the Itsoseng area. They're on their way to Ottoshoop. There's general merriment in the back of the lorry among the passengers, who sing songs about the bosses and the foremen. *Meneer Van Vuuren is vol klomp kak, sy skape en sy bokke is ook vol kak.* Some of them breaking out quarts of Castle Lager or home-brewed *khadi*, celebrating the payday at the end of November. Dressed in overalls and wearing gumboots, the farmworkers bring with them the smells of their industries, the sourness of livestock or the sharp, nostalgic odour of virgin soil upturned. Layered above all that, however, is the smell of the men's bodies, their distance from water. Some of the men, led by a

broken-toothed, broad-faced joker whom everyone calls Kgosi, flirt with Sis Violet – *Ag, ousie, jy's so baie mooi* – until she says she's on her way to Bobbejaanspoor to fight to get bail for her husband, the father of this one, who can't speak. What's he in for, your husband? They say he murdered two men who were having an affair with his wife. They say, *hulle sê*, everyone knows people don't commit offences. They are all accused of, alleged to, only. Joseph wonders if Mr Chikwedere or even the Chinese man, the big boss, ever wondered if whatever they were doing could be thought of as committing an offence. When he, Joseph, stole bread in Lobatse, was he really committing an offence? Is an offence the same thing as being wrong? A vivid image of his mother and father flashes through his mind. He immediately expels it. He listens, therefore, accepting the role of one without the power of speech, embracing the invisibility suggested by Sis Violet: to be there and, at the same time, to be unseen. At the back of the lorry, there is a general *ah-ah-ah*. Kgosi flinches, the hand encircling Sis Violet's shoulder retracting as if it's touched a live wire. People debate the subject of murder, what it is that drives someone to take the life of another. A hatchet-faced young man with an old manner about him talks about the necklacing in the townships, a tyre doused in petrol and slung over the neck of the victim and set alight, a punishment for people selling out. *Ah-ah*, is freedom that costly? The unforgivable sins are listed. At the top is cheating. Sis Violet's husband is justified. Those two rats had to go to the land of the ancestors. Hope that taught them a lesson. If I catch someone with my wife, Hatchet Face says, I'll give him such a beating, he'll enter heaven pushing a wheelchair. Someone laughs in the darkness, scoffing, 'What wife, Ngobese, you who can't attract even *nenyharha yase Transkei*?' With that, the men pass the bottle around. The women workers, all wrapped in blankets, regard Sis Violet with a mixture of sympathy and awe. In the main, they leave her and her unspeaking son alone.

They alight and stand briefly on the side of the road as the transport turns into a grove, the smell of oranges and mopane wafting in the late evening air. The men rush into the compound to change. There's a party somewhere. You can't let a payday pass without a celebration, can you? Someone, one of the women, seems to hesitate. It appears to Joseph she wants to invite them, but something

dissuades her, perhaps the impatience of her colleagues, who are already walking away. She tells them, however, pointing at the glow of lights in the distance, that Lichtenburg is three kilometres away. Sis Violet thanks her. The two continue their walk.

The month-end celebrants, knots of men and young women, emerge out of the settlements. Joseph is accustomed to the darkness and can make out villages dotted in the darkness, people moving up and down, laughter and the occasional shriek from a woman, possibly startled by somebody mischievous. He wonders what Sis Violet is thinking as she walks, keeping a safe distance from the people walking ahead. She's changed. There's not a shred of happiness shown towards him. He reasons she has to keep a certain distance from him because of what happened at the roadblock, the fact that the police must be hunting for a woman and a boy. If she were alone, he knows, she would have easily used her training – what did they call it? MCW, yes, MCW – to be invisible and make her way southwards. He is a millstone around her neck.

A minibus taxi comes racing down the unpaved track, raising dust and causing the walkers to jump out of the way, cursing. A young man wearing a tie over his golf shirt jumps out and slides the doors open, shouting: 'Mojela's party, Mojela's party, come in, don't waste my time, time is money, Mojela's party...'

'Jump in,' Sis Violet whispers, shoving Joseph inside the taxi. The two passengers already inside shift further inside to make room. In no time, the packed taxi starts moving. The tout leans over and holds onto the bar behind Joseph's seat. Already frazzled by tiredness, Joseph fights off waves of nausea he feels from the ripe, feral smell of the tout's unwashed armpits. His ma hated body odour with a passion, and she taught her children to avoid it at all costs. Here he is, lost, wandering in a strange land where everything is loud and immediate. In fact, just when Joseph thinks the smell has been displaced by the motion of the car, the young man starts gyrating to Brenda Fassie belting out, *Too Late for Mama*:

*Ten kilometres barefooted in the bush,
Started raining on the way to fetch some water.*

Even though he has slowly come to dislike most things South African, Joseph tells himself that, despite their violence, these people have got one thing right: the music. Looking at the young conductor whose scarred face is screwed into an expression of delight, Joseph wonders if Brenda knows the kind of people who worship her. As they approach Lichtenburg, a town where the amber lights give the buildings – mainly single-storey warehouses, car dealerships and hardware shops – the effect of brooding emptiness, he senses Sis Violet tensing. The taxi pulls to a stop behind four or five cars halted at a police roadblock. Breathing according to her earlier instruction, he empties his mind of any imagined calamity, until it's their turn at the head of the line. The police, swaggering in twos and threes, surround the taxi. Their commander, his face a mere shadow beneath the peaked cap, directs the beam of his torch inside the car, blinding each passenger, obviously in search of someone, a face. He rattles off a series of questions at the driver, a moon-faced man with a head like a football, who nods and shakes his head, *Ja, baas. Nee, baas. Dankie, baas*. Satisfied with the answers, the policeman waves the car along: *Ry aan, julle*, move on. The driver steps on the accelerator, and, his voice thick with resentment, mutters, *Dankie, bra Jesu Krestu. Baie dankie, jou fokken verdomde domkop van 'n boer*.

There is a hush in the taxi. Just the rasp of the tyres eating up the gravelled road. And Brenda Fassie singing her song.

They pull into Montlhakeng in Mmabatho, a livelier improvement on Lichtenburg. If Joseph heard Setswana spoken in Francistown, the South African – or Bophuthatswana – form is faster, interspersed with Afrikaans, which he has come to associate with the swearing driver. The conductor, whom Joseph calls Mr Armpits, may be scar-faced, but he's a kindly man, a nicer, older version of Lanky Boy. '*Nihambe kakhe*,' he tells Sis Violet. His slit-like eyes give her an appreciative look as he watches her turning, leaving the partygoers at the doorstep of a huge house. Its size sets it apart from the rest of the houses.

'How does he know you speak Zulu?' Joseph asks. They are now walking towards the station.

'I speak almost all the languages of my country,' Sis Violet says. 'It's useful.'

‘Even Afrikaans, the language of the oppressors?’

‘There are more non-oppressors, if there’s a word like that, who have Afrikaans as their mother tongue, than there are oppressors.’

‘Black people?’

‘Yes. Black people form the majority of Afrikaans speakers. And, while we’re at it, there are black people who side with the oppressor just as there are some – emphasis on *some* – whites who support the liberation struggle.’

‘I find it strange that some black people might side with the oppressor.’

‘How many white people do you remember manning the roadblock?’ Sis Violet asks. ‘Back there where things exploded.’

‘There were one or two.’

‘The majority of the police and soldiers were black, right?’

‘Right.’

‘Malcolm X said black visibility does not necessarily mean black power.’ Sis Violet pauses. ‘We’re here in this Bantustan called Bophuthatswana, which is run by a tinpot dictator, Mangope.’

‘Doesn’t he want freedom for his people?’

‘The most desperate creature,’ Sis Violet says, sounding as if she were quoting something from a book, ‘is a black person who imagines he has entered the promised land, just because he’s been given the symbols of power. Anything given can be taken away.’

‘Do you think you, South Africans, will ever get to the promised land?’

‘Well, we’ll fight damn hard to ensure that day arrives.’

‘Time will tell, hey?’

‘Yep. Now shut up and step it up.’

There’s something lonely about a bus and taxi rank in the morning before the hustle and bustle, in the moments where the engines are silent, and the exhausts aren’t farting out diesel fumes. It looks unnatural. The emptiness is accentuated by the homeless hordes getting up and collecting their bedding, which consists of cardboard boxes and grey blankets and strips of what was once cloth but has now become a home for bedbugs and assorted vermin. Here, the vagrants are in rags no different from scrawny dogs and cats that suddenly get up to chase a rat

or anything that survives on what has been deemed inedible by those who survive on leavings. A worker in blue overalls and gumboots sweeps the floor, his grass broom making little dent on the accumulated dirt and debris, discarded cans and squashed carton containers of *Chibuku* sorghum beer also known as 'shake-shake.' Splashes of fuel, grease and water have created streaky patterns on the concrete which, cooking in the morning sun, release a pungent smell common to all the stations Joseph has seen.

Huddled in a corner, melting into the background where they can be taken for the scores of travellers that spent the night to catch the early morning transports, Joseph and Sis Violet watch the bus and taxi rank stirring awake, keeping their eyes peeled for askaris. These are former Umkhonto we Sizwe members who've cast their lot in with the South African security forces. The wait is an unrelaxed one, as Joseph has to keep on beating off the rats that have lost fear of humans. They take an undue interest in his broken shoes. Sis Violet says the askaris belong to the rat family. Rodents of the revolution. They are found in all major transit centres – bus ranks, train stations – they form part of the roadblocks and are trusted to point out their one-time comrades. They have already foiled a number of operations by MK and are known to be very brutal during interrogations – they have a lot to prove to their new and infinitely more cruel masters. It's in this lonely space, when the first buses are rolling in and the touts have started to warm up their voice boxes and the beggars and undesirables are being hustled off by the police and zealous queue marshals, that Joseph spots Jerome.

He doesn't know it's Jerome, having never laid his eyes on him. But something alerts him in the way the lean man in a beige safari suit and black shoes – a leather clutch bag pressed against his side – stands with his head tilted, the morning sun catching his reflector glasses. It's the stillness – no different from the stillness he's seen in Sobhuza, how he cocks his head to the side to hear what someone, ma, is saying, shoulder against the wall with one leg bearing most of his weight – that turns him into a familiar stranger. 'There's one of your comrades,' he tells Sis Violet.

'Who?'

'Over there. Under the Coca-Cola sign.'

Just then a lorry carrying workmen trundles to a stop, blocking their view of the man that Joseph has just pointed out. Sis Violet dashes to the back of the lorry and covers her face against the exhaust fumes while scrutinising the figure standing under the sign. She shakes her head, seemingly unsure. She beckons Joseph to come over. They both stand, observing, now and then getting out of the way of the high-spirited workers busy emptying the lorry of a variety of bundles and large drums.

Neither one of them makes any gestures. There is minimal movement as if they have already adopted the immobility of the subject being watched. He's fifty metres from where they are standing. It's only when the man takes off his glasses to peer into the growing crowds that Sis Violet nods. She mouths the words, *That's him*. Not far from where the man is standing are some of the touts shouting, directing the customers to the minibus taxis while washing the vehicles, drawing water from a tap on the side of a toilet building. Once Sis Violet has satisfied herself of the identity of the target, she tells Joseph what must be done. Joseph is unsure. 'What if he's not alone?'

'That's a chance we have to take.'

'Are you sure?'

'Joseph? Of course, I'm sure.' Then she wails, slapping the sides of her hips in frustration. 'Of course, I could never be too sure, but how the hell did he second guess us like this?'

'MCW?'

'Fucking MCW, you're right.' She pats Joseph on the back. 'It's your move now. Go.'

There are some vendors standing around Jerome. One, an equally thin man with a leg ruined by polio, is selling a bunch of leather belts that look like snakes, waving them in front of an uninterested Jerome. Another, a biggish man, also young but sporting a wide mouth full of old people's teeth, sips beer from a quart bottle, offering Jerome a sip and asking him for a contribution in the same breath. Joseph comes up behind them and faces Jerome, sees his lips curled in a disdainful smile. Picking up a plastic bucket full of soapy water, Joseph holds the handle with two hands and swivels like a player about to throw a rugby ball, emptying the water onto Jerome's trouser front. He registers the momentary

surprise on Jerome's face, a look that immediately clouds into an expression of fury. He runs, feeling fearful and satisfied at the same time, remembering Malume and the others, the people he spoke about, his comrades who were dead because of the askaris. He runs around a minibus taxi, knocking a man almost to the ground, not stopping to apologise, and then straight into the women's toilet. He notices there are no urinals here, just cubicles. A woman washing her hands screams, *Hey, get out*, just as Jerome catches up with him and takes hold of a bunch of his shirt front. He draws a hand back, the fingers balled into a fist, his eyes wild with rage. He strikes once and, although Joseph feels no pain at the impact, he sees stars and the room spins, everything begins swimming. As he falls, hitting his head against a door and hearing timber splintering, he sees Sis Violet standing calmly to the side, a rolled newspaper in her hand. She strikes Jerome, once, twice, on the temple and watches as he sags to his knees. '*Bom dia, camarada,*' she says.

She gets Joseph to stand by the entrance while she searches the unconscious man, removing a pistol and magazines, an evil-looking bayonet with a serrated blade, a few hundred rand and pula notes. She pockets the cash and the weapon and ammunition. Using the blade, she tears off strips of Jerome's safari suit top and removes his shoes. 'Florsheims. Charlie would have approved.' Joseph helps her lift Jerome and half drag half walk him outside to a spot behind the toilet. They tie his hands behind his back before propping him up against a wall that reeks of stale urine. To inquisitive eyes, Sis Violet murmurs, *Brother-in-law, month end, too much to drink.*

When Jerome comes to, his eyes have not lost the initial menacing glint. Glaring at Sis Violet, he spits. 'You're dead,' he says. 'You hear me? You've signed your death warrant.'

'Jerome,' Sis Violet says, kindly, 'you're in no position to make threats. I have your gun and ammo and your cash and, guess what, your appointment card. Didn't know askaris carried IDs.'

'You're in trouble.'

'Let's cut to the chase. Who sent you?'

'Fuck you. *Ouch!*'

The move is so quick that Joseph only hears *whap!* before he registers that Sis Violet has slapped Jerome with the gun barrel across his eyebrow ridge. Blood trickles down the corner of Jerome's eye.

'Your handlers will kill you, Jerome,' she says, 'because we'll let it be known that you're still working with us, and there's nothing the Security Branch hates more than a triple agent. Your best bet is to cooperate with me, tell me what I need to know and hand yourself to the ANC. They'll understand you've been compromised. They'll probably send you to Quatro or the Green House, but you'll live. Do you get me?'

Certain she's got his attention, Sis Violet continues. 'What happened to Blade and the others?'

'I don't know who...'

He doesn't finish the sentence. Sis Violet strikes him across the jaw and Jerome spits blood and two teeth. Mouth frothing, red bubbles mixed with saliva, he splutters. 'Look what you've done...'

'Answer the question. Where's the rest of the unit?'

'They're still to get positive IDs of the bodies,' Jerome lisps, spitting on the ground, 'but Blade died in the truck. Gwaza in the shootout. Charlie and Ananias, I don't know. They've not been accounted for.'

'And me? What do they know?'

'I don't know. They don't tell me much.'

'Except that we're safe? I'm safe?'

'Yes. And that you're to be shot on sight.' He pauses. 'They want you, Violet. You caused them many casualties.'

'Ja?' Sis Violet sounds mildly curious. 'How many?'

'Official count eleven, but there could be more.'

'That's a drop in the ocean compared to all of our dead. Not counting the indirect deaths of millions.' She thinks for a minute. 'I'm going to untie you. You won't try anything stupid, Jerome?'

Just as she starts to cut the thongs using the bayonet, Jerome lunges at her, grabbing her by the throat. Joseph hears a sharp tearing sound, *ghwap*, the knife entering the flesh. Sis Violet allows Jerome to rest his chin on her shoulder before she removes the knife and pushes the lifeless body to lie face down on the

piss-drenched ground. Wiping the knife across Jerome's safari trousers, Sis Violet turns to Joseph. 'Let's go.'

CHAPTER 22

The sunray falling aslant through the windscreen lands on his face, waking him from a restless sleep. He starts, focusing, feeling the vibrations of the stolen Mazda pickup van through the broken leather seats. He suspects his jerking awake must have jolted Sis Violet out of her own doze. From the corner of his eye, he catches a movement, Sis Violet wiping something at the corner of her mouth with the back of her hand. She gives him a sidelong glance.

‘You’re getting to be quite a sleepy head these days,’ she says. ‘Are you sure you aren’t pregnant?’

He squirms, blocking her hand as she tries to prod his stomach. Normally, he would have found this playfulness welcome, a sign that she’s getting less edgy and more human. But he can’t quite get over what has happened in the past week, the violence. The shootings were one thing – they were remote, *pah-pah*, man down. And that fiery ball that swelled to a great height followed by the explosion that knocked them off their feet, that was loud and deadly, but it was also from a great distance. But Jerome...Jerome. There was something personal, close, intimate about his death. Joseph could sense the shift from life to death and hear the gurgle of life trying to hold onto the body, the soul – do guerrillas and their enemies, the askaris, have souls? – taking a long returnless journey into the void.

‘Do you think Jerome has parents?’

‘That’s a funny question,’ Sis Violet says, giving him a puzzled look. ‘Where’s that coming from? Of course, he *must* have parents. All of us have parents. Or had.’

‘Do you have parents? Brothers and sisters?’

‘Every South African engaged in the struggle is a relative of mine.’

‘Is that from the book of struggle?’

‘There’s no book of struggle, per se,’ Sis Violet says. ‘We have the Freedom Charter, which says *South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black or white*, and we have some founding documents like *Struggle and Tactics*.’

‘These books, the documents, do they teach you anything about killing people?’

Sis Violet blows out her cheeks, the sound loud in the car. ‘Didn’t Sobhuza teach you anything? People die in the struggle. We die. They die. If someone from security sees me, I’m dead. I didn’t choose this, so ease up on the judgment, friend.’

He has touched a raw nerve. ‘It scared me.’

‘Well, I have news for you.’ Her tone, though quiet, is hard. ‘No one – unless we’re talking about full-scale certifiable psychos – no one enjoys killing, taking a life. Jerome is someone I knew. We left the country together, trained together, but he had weaknesses, and the enemy exploited them and used him against us. It’s either him or us.’

He looks out the window as they wind along a red road flanked by trees, no wider than a footpath. Where there’s a break in the trees, there are farmhouses set well behind fences, some of them electrified, others of timber and building cast-offs, like Chikwedere’s. Almost all of them sport plaques stating the efficiency of armed security companies and bearing names of the owners of the properties: *TJ Taljaard & Seuns* and *Cornelius Momberg* or *Slaap Lekker B+B*. Their fences encircle rolling hills and valleys, stretches of greenery, fruit trees heavy with dangling mangoes, fields dotted with pineapples and vast acres of sunflowers that arc to face the sun.

After driving southwards for several hours, past a sign announcing the town of Tarlton, just as the sun begins to set – which is lucky, because they would have missed the turn had they been later – Sis Violet takes a slip road and noses the bakkie into a corrugated driveway that’s almost totally covered by a line of trees forming a canopy. Darkening the interior of the cabin so that Joseph feels as if night has fallen, the canopy stretches for more than fifty metres before opening into a paved enclosure. Under a carport, a tractor stands parked next to a muddy Datsun Nissan Safari sporting bull bars and giant wheels, the headlights staring at the Mazda as if daring it to come closer.

‘Where are we?’

'The party's over, Joseph,' Sis Violet says. 'Here, we're at the mercy of others. It's best to keep quiet and let me do the talking. Unless you're asked questions, please answer truthfully.' She gives him a level look. '*Uyangizwa?*'

'*Ngiyakuzwa.*' Joseph laughs, nervously. 'Is that how you say it?'

'*Yebo.*'

As they get out of the car, Joseph's smile is immediately wiped off his face as two Rhodesian Ridgebacks come bounding from the corner of the house, heading straight for him. Perhaps a few years older than Joseph, a young man in a smart blue shirt with a bow tie, pressed slacks and polished shoes comes running out, shouting, 'Vorster! Verwoerd!' The dogs slow down, ears reared, but continue sniffing at the newcomers. Joseph reasons that the dogs are just seeing a vagrant in him, a smelly one, too. Scared stiff but staying stock still, he marvels at how Sis Violet strokes the animals' great heads and lets them lick her fingers.

'What beautiful animals,' she says to the young man, 'but why give them such...unfortunate names?'

The man shrugs and leads Joseph and Sis Violet into the house through the kitchen. In the kitchen he announces the visitors, '*Mme, ousie leMmêmogolo?* These are Papa's visitors.'

The middle-aged woman, most likely the young man's mother, wipes her hands on her apron and shakes Joseph's and Sis Violet's hands. Her hands are cold from the water. 'Pleased to meet you. Jabu will take you upstairs.'

The house bustles with activity, there are children in Sunday clothes flitting in and out of the kitchen where three women are busy preparing the evening meal. One of them, a gnarled gogo with strands of white hair showing above her brow where the *doek* has been pushed back, directs or meddles in the operation, her ladle a conductor's baton. The two youngish women, Jabu's mother included, smile, indulging her. 'Of course, Mmêmogolo,' she says, 'we hear you.'

'You'd better not only hear me; you must also *do* as I say,' Mmêmogolo barks as she retreats into a room along the passage. Hearing them laugh, she shouts: 'I can hear you.'

Joseph feels a pang of nostalgia at the domestic scene of the busy kitchen, the food cooking and sizzling, the happy banter. It is almost overpowering. More,

the smells of home. Cars pull up outside and the dogs bark excitedly as more people come in. There are voices. By the time Sis Violet nudges him into the lounge, Joseph can feel tears springing to his eyes. He is, at the same time, nervous, and increasingly so.

Sis Violet walks unconcernedly behind Jabu, but Joseph has questions. Who owns this place? Will I find my parents here? His heart thumping, Joseph follows Sis Violet up a short flight of stairs leading to a corridor formed by wide windows that look out onto the roof on one side and an expanse of the back of the house on the other. Beyond that is a bush, green and dark with the advancing night. Just then floodlights illuminate the back of the house, exposing a swimming pool ringed by a clump of trees. It's a beautiful, peaceful place that somehow doesn't quite shed a feeling of impermanence, like a newly built holiday resort. There are no pictures on the walls. Jabu stops in front of a door and knocks. 'Come in,' someone says from the inside. Jabu opens the door and steps aside. 'They're here, Papa.'

In the room, six men and two women sit at a table. Although huge, the room is hot and filled with smoke. The people, including the big man, Papa, look like they are in the middle of a conversation, in their shirtsleeves with their ties loosened. For a minute, Joseph thinks one of the women is his mother, she has the same features and headdress, but his mother wouldn't be caught dead puffing away at a cigarette. Except for the women and Papa, the rest stand up as Joseph and Sis Violet enter. One of the women, in t-shirt and brown slacks, shifts in her seat and pats an empty chair beside her.

'Young man,' she tells Joseph, 'I've heard so much about you. Come sit next to auntie.'

'Comrade Auntie,' Sis Violet says, trying to lighten the atmosphere. No one laughs. There's an air of expectancy, broken slightly when Papa introduces the people around the table. Joseph hears names, some of which ring a distant bell, but they're soon jumbled up. The only names he retains are of the two women, Auntie Bessie, seated to his side, and Auntie Malebo. Still standing, with her back to the door, Sis Violet asks: 'And where must I sit?'

'Sit anywhere, Comrade Vi,' Papa says, a cold note in his tone. 'You're at home.'

‘Am I?’ Sis Violet asks with a wry smile. ‘Sure doesn’t feel like it.’

‘Don’t pull theatrics here, comrade. There are serious charges.’

‘Charges?’ Sis Violet sounds genuinely surprised, pulling a chair and sitting down facing Papa. ‘You know, comrades,’ she starts, and shrugs, looking at each person around the table, ‘I didn’t know I was being charged with anything. I came here with this young man, after travelling a few thousand kilometres from Lusaka, via Botswana, to Tarlton, crossing rivers, surviving roadblocks and ambushes and here we are, being told we’re being charged, and no one has even offered us a glass of water.’

Papa, a big man with a shaven head, who, despite his girth, is light on his feet, gets up from the table and opens the door. ‘Jabu! Emily! We’re dying of thirst here.’ He turns to Sis Violet. ‘Excuse my lack of hospitality.’

‘No problem.’ Straight-faced, Sis Violet is still not happy. In a short while, Jabu comes wheeling a trolley covered with a lace cloth. There is general vocal appreciation of the drinks, fruit, biscuits and nibbles pierced with toothpicks. ‘Please,’ Papa says, ‘don’t eat too much as supper is being prepared.’

Auntie Malebo says: ‘You still know how to entertain, Comrade Papa.’

‘It’s the least I can do,’ Papa says. ‘You all right there, little man?’

‘I’m very good, thank you, sir,’ Joseph says, dismantling a succulent piece of chicken. Even as he relishes the food, he feels as if he’s doing something illegal, as if he’s not worthy of this enjoyment. The fizz of the cold drink hits his nostrils, and the meat suddenly tastes like cardboard and smells strangely like the gunk he fed to the pangolin. He suddenly shoots up from his seat, startling the two women on either side of him and, his cheeks filling up with bile, he rushes to the door with Sis Violet close behind him. He runs down the corridor until he ducks into an open bathroom. He has hardly grabbed hold of the sides of the toilet bowl when his stomach lurches loose.

He can feel Sis Violet’s hand on his back, soothing him. He has broken out into a sweat, running hot and cold. Just when he thinks he’s done, he’s overcome by another wave of nausea, on and on until he retches nothing but air. As he gets up, shaking, he can’t quite trust that his legs will carry him, but he takes a step nevertheless and stands firm. Sis Violet strips a few squares of tissue off the toilet roll and hands them to Joseph to wipe his mouth. Then he puts his head

under a tap and starts to feel renewed, the shakiness subsiding. He turns to Sis Violet.

‘Can we go back now?’ he asks

‘Yes, Joseph. Let’s get back.’

‘Are you going to be all right with them?’

‘Of course. We’re all fighting for the same cause.’

The room where the meeting was being held is empty except for Auntie Malebo, who’s using a saucer to cool her hot tea by pouring the liquid into the saucer, blowing on it and returning it to the cup. Joseph watches, fascinated. ‘I thought only Zambian aunties did that,’ he thinks. Auntie Malebo looks up as the two enter, her glasses shining. ‘Come in, dears, and have some tea. How are you, boy?’

‘Where are the others?’ Sis Violet asks. There’s something in her voice.

‘They just left. Said they are coming. Oh,’ Aunt Malebo says, face brightening, ‘here they are.’

Papa leads the group as it files into the room. Something about their steps tells Joseph a big decision has been made. As they arrange themselves around the table, only one man stays standing, Comrade Dictionary Nzuza – *I got the name ‘dictionary’ in prison, because I was good at Scrabble* – who, at sixty-nine is still sprightly and full of humour.

‘We debated this matter, Comrade Violet,’ he says, ‘and we even thought it best that the young man, Joseph, be taken to the other room so that the grownups can talk uninterrupted.’ He stops, tilting his head. ‘Is that all right with you, Joseph?’

Without even thinking about it, Joseph shakes his head. ‘No,’ he says. ‘It’s not all right. I would like to stay.’

‘We’re discussing serious issues here.’

‘I prefer to stay.’ Joseph grips the sides of his chair.

Comrade Dictionary shakes his head. ‘Be that as it may, and, while I take exception to the young man’s tone...’

‘Joseph,’ Sis Violet says. ‘His name is Joseph Mabaso. His father is Comrade Sobhuza Mabaso.’

‘Thank you, Comrade Violet. I was saying, even though he’s not central to this matter, Joseph is also a significant part of it. And we *are* a democratic movement.’ He clears his throat. ‘We have here a serious breach of the rules, where operating procedures were simply cast aside. This has led to unnecessary loss of valuable lives of time-tested comrades and combatants. We know you still have to file a report and so these are the preliminary findings, which will be mitigated or aggravated by your report. The casualties we’ve sustained are Albert Khama, aka Malume; Siphso “Blade” Ndimande; Thabo Potsane aka Gwaza; and, Cleopas Jwara, who was known as Guduza in MK ranks. Charlie, Tekere and Ananias are still to be accounted for, but the presumption is that they are also dead.

‘All these lives, in pursuit of a frolic.’

‘Frolic?’ Sis Violet makes to stand up and stops.

‘You’ll get a chance to defend yourself, Comrade Violet,’ Papa says from his seat. ‘Suffice it to say, the biggest loss you’ve caused us is in your little adventure with Jerome Ntaka.’

‘Jerome? Jerome’s an askari. Was.’

‘Jerome was working for us,’ Papa continues patiently, ‘the big test being the word out with elements of the Security Branch that a highly-placed MK operator has escaped from the Movement after he had been outed as a spy for Pretoria. He was to be intercepted in Mafeking by the Security Branch and debriefed. That’s when *you* fucked it all up.’

The swearword sounds all the more jarring out of the lips of such a dignified man. But Sis Violet will have none of it.

‘Why didn’t he give us a sign that he was...kosher?’

‘How would he have known that you were not askaris yourselves?’

‘Askaris? After what we went through?’ Sis Violet shrieks. ‘Are you out of your mind?’

‘Can I say something?’ With his hand raised, Joseph doesn’t wait to be granted permission to start speaking. ‘I’m responsible for the trouble Sis Violet is in,’ he says, not really knowing what to say or how to stop the flood of words that flow out of his head to his tongue, ‘because I had the problem of my parents disappearing, and my Gogo Mulubwa said I mustn’t return without ma and pa,

and we travelled all over the land and crossed the Zambezi, went into Francistown where I worked for Mr Chikwedere, and there was Thabo and Boitumelo, and we travelled by truck, Malume died, and we led the goats, and the bomb went off, the truck was on fire...'

Joseph. 'Sis Violet calling as if from a deep cave. 'Stop.' She turns her eyes to the table. 'Perhaps Joseph shouldn't be here, after all.'

Joseph gets to his feet. 'Please put yourselves in my shoes,' he says, and gives a small, grim smile when he sees the eight pairs of eyes lowering to gaze at his torn shoes. 'If you have travelled all this way to find your parents, wouldn't you want to walk the last mile with the person who's taken you along on this journey? I hear you saying she did this and that, things I cannot understand, but I saw how she worked with those guerrillas...comrades...freedom fighters, and how they looked up to her. I don't know what the struggle is all about, but I would always follow a leader like her.' He pauses, swallowing something bitter. 'I saw how she was cut up when Malume first and then the others, I think Blade, Gwaza and perhaps Tekere, who had prepared those explosives, drew lots as to who would accompany Blade on the truck. She didn't see that I witnessed that. I knew they were doing it for the struggle, but I also know it was something they felt was an honour to their commander.' By now tears are streaming down Joseph's face and he sniffs snot back up into his nostrils. Sis Violet hands him a wad of tissues, which he accepts and absently shoves into his pocket. 'My father once told me about the women who had taken part in the struggle, Lilian Ngoyi, Dora Tamana, Helen Joseph, Sophie de Bruyn – I remember them because those names sounded like the lyrics of a song – how they protested against the passbooks and marched on Pretoria. I know if Sis Violet had been alive at that time, she would have been part of those women.'

'Wow,' Auntie Malebo says, 'Comrade Violet? Are you sure you haven't paid the young man to sing your praises?'

'No,' Sis Violet says, 'I'm as surprised as you are. I have travelled all the way with him, and, in certain parts, he had to pretend to be deaf, and I never imagined he had it in him.'

‘Bravo,’ Comrade Dictionary says, his tone laced with irony. ‘Good speech. But we have a grave matter to sort out.’ He mulls over something for a minute. ‘We were about to ask Joseph to excuse us for a moment. Am I right?’

Just then there is the *tsk-tsk* sound of wheel casters, which gets louder near the door. Jabu opens the door after knocking and enters, pushing a wheelchair. The seven people, led by Papa, scramble to stand. Dictionary Nzuza shuffles backwards, managing to make himself seem smaller while giving an uncertain, gap-toothed smile.

‘*Hawu*, General Mgeni,’ he says. ‘We didn’t know you were coming.’

‘I didn’t know I was coming,’ General Mgeni says. His voice matches his appearance, a deep bass that comes out of his chest, which supports a neck topped by a face along which runs a scar, from the point of his widow’s peak to his upper lip, making his face look as if it consists of two parts. A thatch of white hair makes Joseph think back to Hubert. They could be brothers, except that Mgeni is black. He swivels his chair and looks at Sis Violet as if seeing her for the first time.

‘*Ntombazane?*’ he says, ‘just because I’m now in a wheelchair you pretend that we’re strangers.’ He spreads his arms for an embrace. As Sis Violet buries her head in his shoulder, Joseph notices that her own shoulders are shaking.

‘My daughter is distressed,’ Mgeni says, holding Sis Violet by the shoulders and studying her face streaked with tears. ‘What’s going on here, comrades? Dictionary? Papa?’

‘No one’s done anything, General,’ Sis Violet says. ‘It’s probably that time of the month.’

‘Guerrillas are never affected by those things.’ He turns his eyes to Joseph. ‘Are you the young man who caused all the trouble?’

Joseph, still feeling the rawness of his throat after all that retching, doesn’t trust himself to speak. Moreover, he thinks he has already spoken out of turn and might have caused more problems for Sis Violet. He’s somewhat relieved that the big man who frightens everyone seems to have a friendly relationship with Sis Violet. But, he has now come to know, there’s no trusting anything with comrades and guerrillas and freedom fighters. He’s also amused that such old people are part of the liberation struggle. Even if they win this war, when will

they ever have the time to enjoy the spoils? He goes to shake the big man's hand. 'I'm Joseph,' he says, 'and I really didn't mean to cause trouble.'

'Well,' General Mgeni says, 'we need troublemakers in the struggle. From what I've learnt, the trouble you have caused has already contributed to the regime accepting the need for negotiations. Today is...' shooting his cuff and looking at his wristwatch, '...Sunday, 24 December. Least that's what my calendar says.'

'It's correct, General,' Papa, having found his voice, says. 'The year is ending.'

'And I hear HQ is already getting teams ready for talks. The old men from the island are already out. We're now waiting for the word on Nelson.'

'Is there any word,' Joseph asks – to hell with Sis Violet – the urgency of the moment hitting him, making him desperate, 'about my father?'

'Your father's Sobhuza, right?'

'Yes.'

'We know where he is. We would like to get him to come to us voluntarily.'

'Is he in trouble, my father?'

'All of us are in trouble, son. But we have to succeed.'

1989 comes to an end with Joseph staying with a family headed by a one-time Anglican priest, who's still called Father – Father Wilson Mbeje – one of Sis Violet's and General Mgeni's connections, on Honey Street, in the restless suburb of Berea. The house looks onto a park, which is off limits to him, too dangerous. Moreover, since there are few black families here, Fr Mbeje has advised that they should all keep a low profile. Although pleased to be in a neighbourhood where there are trees and an abundance of light, he has to be vigilant. 'Everyone here,' advises Fr Mbeje or his son, Almon, who's eighteen years old and imagines himself streetwise, 'knows what's going on and what's going on is nobody's business. Keep your head down and your nose clean. These streets eat up boys your age. There's something new being peddled on the corner by one of the shrewd ones, fresh from Leeuwkop Prison or on their way there, so watch it.'

Don't go accepting things from anyone, not even when you see it's an orange. This is not Lusaka. This is Jozi.'

Jozi. The night has its own rhythm, throbbing like an upright bass, infecting the gait of the walkers. It's New Year's Eve and Almon, geared up in a black shirt and matching black jeans with white Nike sneakers, the ones that give a luminous glow at every step, is with two of his equally fashionable friends and two young women in neon outfits so tight Joseph thinks they must have been poured into them. When they pile into the house, bringing in with them the mixture of perfumes, colognes and that unquantifiable funk youth brings to any situation, Joseph dashes away, headed for the bedroom where he's started reading a book. Fr Mbeje catches him and brings him back to the lounge. 'Hawu, Almon,' he says in his priest's baritone, 'how can you leave our visitor to *gunquza* alone on New Year's Eve?'

'It's okay,' Joseph says, actually looking forward to some peace and quiet. He's really enjoying the story of the old woman in *We Killed Mangy-Dog*, relating the poverty of Luis Bernardo Honwana's characters to those of his people in Zambia, finding similarities. So, he's got no problem with being left to *gunquza* alone in the house. At some later stage, just before midnight, he'll tune into SABC 1 where he's heard they'll show the countdown to 1990 with a fireworks display. 'I really mean it.'

'No, no, no, I insist,' Fr Mbeje says. He turns to his son. 'Almon?'

'Okay, okay,' Almon says, with bad grace. Then there's the hold up while Almon finds suitable clothes for Joseph – *You're* not going out with *us* looking like *that!* – picking from his own wardrobe. *Here, try this.* The rest of the gang looks on, some pitying Almon for this foreign *moegoe* he's forced to babysit, others making suggestions, one of the young women going so far as to apply lip gloss onto Joseph's dry lips and pursing her own lips to demonstrate how to distributed it evenly. 'You've got a cute little brother,' one of them remarks, to which Almon, retorts, 'He's *not* my little brother.'

Despite himself, Joseph enjoys the party. He looks at the happy faces, young and old dancing to Hugh Masekela's horn, singing along to *Bring Him Back Home*,

Bring back Nelson Mandela

Bring him back home to Soweto.

This prompts some wit to quip: '*Ou Bra Hugh, maar...wie't hom gesê Mandela sal in Soweto wil kom bly?*' To which someone answered, 'Of course, Mandela will choose to live in Soweto...'

I wanna see him walk hand in hand

With Winnie Mandela

And the dancefloor explodes with the chorus: *No more Pollsmoor*. This becomes the theme song to usher in 1990, sung in various sharps and flats during the countdown, until it's zero hour and people shout, *Happee!* Outside on the patio, revellers watch the firecrackers opening up, lighting up the sky, turning night into day. They cry in one another's arms, hug and kiss. Dora, the earlier supplier of lip gloss, pulls Joseph so close he can feel her pelvic bone pressing against him. She gives him a full, lingering kiss in which she explores his mouth with her tongue. When he enters the room, he has to pull the front of his oversize jacket down to hide an erection. Dora whispers, 'Happy 1990.'

Tired, happy and confused, he rests at the back of the car, pretending to be asleep during the drive back to the house. Outside, the air still smelling of sulphur and the street strewn with overturned garbage bins and strips of cardboard, there are a few cars parked. Joseph reasons that Fr Mbeje also has visitors to celebrate the New Year. Inside the house, the atmosphere is sombre. There are about a dozen people, some of them Joseph remembers from the house in Tarlton.

'Joseph?' Fr Mbeje says. 'Sit down. I have some bad news for you.'

Joseph's mind races. Ma. Sobhuza. South Africa is a violent country. 'What's happening?' he asks, and something in Fr Mbeje's eyes communicates the answer.

'Comrade Violet is dead. An ambush in the Orange Free State.'

CHAPTER 23

A death is not just a death, a mere, workaday departure from the land of the living to the land of the ancestors, if you believe in that, which Joseph does sometimes and doesn't most of the time. He holds the simple view that the afterlife would be too cramped to accommodate the countless millions who have died since the advent of humans. Moreover, who's going to sort out the confusion of those who die as enemies and later meet in the afterlife? Would they reconcile? There are just too many questions. It would take another eternity to resolve. Also, he can't quite see how people – souls – would spend endless hours singing songs of praise. The boredom alone would give rise to a veritable mutiny. Rather let the dead stay dead.

He wishes Sis Violet – her real name is Nomasonto Sibiya – were not dead. It's taken Fr Mbeje over an hour to negotiate his small Datsun Nissan through the narrow streets of Zone 3, Meadowlands, Soweto. This is their second visit. The first was harrowing. They had to break the news to Mrs Sibiya in the early hours of New Year's Day to make sure she didn't get it from other sources. People are using pagers, Fr Mbeje explained to Joseph, which helps them transmit information, and there was no telling if someone, possibly well-meaning, will broadcast the news. The old lady was shaken. On this Friday of the funeral, however, she's more controlled.

The service starts at the house, which, like most of the houses on the street, is a four-roomed red-bricked structure with a small yard enclosed by a breeze-block fence. It looks like the houses of Helen Kaunda or George Compound in Lusaka, all without a space adequate for mourning. One of the mourners, pointing to a clutch of women using long ladles to stir large *drievoet* pots, one of *mogodu*, tripe and entrails, and the other one of pap, says: 'Where will the ancestors stretch their legs in this cramped space?'

But the people have found a solution. The organisers have set up a small marquee slap-bang in the middle of Mpolokeng Street. All traffic has to be diverted to connect with parallel streets down the block. Already the serving stations are bustling with women with rolled-up sleeves, chopping and kneading,

preparing the traditional after-funeral meal. In a corner of the backroom, more women are sieving sorghum beer, pouring it from big drums into calabashes. As in Zambia, a good number of the mourners are hungry people who have heard there is going to be food – two goats have been slaughtered – and beer. Joseph wonders if Sis Violet – he can't quite think of her as Nomasonto – would have found it mildly funny that there are only two goats for her funeral, when they once controlled scores of them. He knows he will never look at a goat the same way again.

There are already hundreds of people, even though it's still morning. Neighbours' children stand with their noses pressed against the fences, their eyes unreadable. Most of the mourners, except for the youth in their yellow t-shirts and jeans, are sombre in black. A few have taken their defiance of the regime a notch higher, appearing in the black, green and gold colours of the ANC and – just so everyone gets the message – waving homemade flags sporting the same colours.

He has felt the pressure of Fr Mbeje's hand on his shoulder, from the moment he greeted the family members – Sis Violet's siblings, uncle and mother, whose faces are hard to define and at the same time wholly unforgettable – to the routine shaking of anonymous hands from inside the house into the tent. He feels the hand as he steps on the rough mat that stretches from the entrance to the front of the tent, where the coffin, wrapped in ANC colours, rests on the bier, weighted down, it seems, by a forest of wreaths and colourful flowers. Men and women in combat uniform stand at the four corners of the coffin, heads bowed, keeping watch. Standing on an easel is a framed photograph of a younger, more relaxed Sis Violet, a faint smile on her face, her eyes following Joseph to his place in the second row behind the family.

The master of ceremonies, one of the uncles, speaks as Joseph and Fr Mbeje come in. He now stands aside to allow a childhood friend, a tall man with a boyish face in outsize clothes, to walk up the aisle to the makeshift stage. His glasses shine as he moves his bullet head to make a point about what it was like to grow up with Sonto. 'She bullied us,' he says with a stammering smile, 'mainly because she grew up among boys, her brothers and cousins, and had to fight for herself. She came from a poor family but was not ashamed to share her lunch

with us, usually pap and *mala mogodu*, and...' here he emits a sound, a mix of a laugh and a cry at the memory, '...you know how *mala mogodu* thickens into a blob of fat when it gets cold, but Sonto wasn't fazed by that.' He nods at the congregation's amusement, holding himself still.

'When she left the country,' he continues, 'she left behind a gap, a memory of the smile you see in the picture behind me, and we listened to the news, to Radio Freedom, for her voice and when there was a skirmish here, a confrontation there, we knew she was somehow a part of it. In a sense that made us part of it, too. And we prayed to our Lord and to our ancestors that she be safe. And that she returns home.' He pauses and runs a finger along the side of the coffin, the nail rasping against timber. 'Here she is now, back home, in a plain pine casket that represents her complex simplicity. We can never see her face for we can't open the box, so grievous are her wounds, but we remain with the smile that will sustain us until we're truly free.'

When he is finished, he walks over to the coffin and rearranges the leaves of a flower, making things right. As he bows towards the foursome standing vigil, others from the pews stand to relieve the first team.

Without knowing what has come over him, Joseph walks up the aisle and stands on the left-hand side, the head end of the coffin, with his own head bowed. The sniffing from the front row develops into soft weeping. Sis Violet's mother, frail in her black dress and wrapped in a shawl, sways and has to be supported by relatives.

Father Mbeje's sermon is mercifully brief. The heat, which was a mere suggestion earlier, intensifies. One young woman faints and is carried out. As if fearing more people will collapse, the pallbearers come forward and, preceded by Fr Mbeje and the family, they follow the coffin to the hearse. Joseph and Fr Mbeje follow two or three family cars directly behind the hearse. Almon, who's been elsewhere in the crowd with friends, sees his father's car, flags it down and jumps in the back. The interior of the car is flooded with the fumes of stale cigarette smoke and yesterday's alcohol.

'Dad?' Almon asks after a mumbled greeting. 'Did you know Joseph tried to steal my girl?'

'Your girl,' Fr Mbeje asks, adjusting the rear-view mirror. 'Which one? I've lost count.'

'Dora.'

'Maybe she likes them young,' Fr Mbeje says. 'You know the expression, *ugotshwa usemanzi*.' He turns to Joseph. 'It's easier to influence somebody when they're young.'

'Well,' Almon says, sullen, 'I don't like it.'

'Do you know how ridiculous you sound right now? You're eighteen years old and you whine about a fifteen-year-old stealing your girl. It means you must wake up.'

'I'm awake.' Almon is suddenly very angry. 'Stop the car. I'm getting out.'

'Don't be stupid.'

But by then Almon has opened the car door, letting in a whoosh of hot mid-morning air. Fr Mbeje slams the brakes. Almon gets out. His father calls out. 'And don't...'

The door slams shut, causing the car to shake.

'... bang the door.' Fr Mbeje shakes his head. He watches his son in the mirror, his brow knitted into a frown. He curses under his breath. 'I knew it.'

'What's happening, Father?' Joseph asks, thinking that Almon could already be embarrassing himself with the funeral traffic coming up behind.

'The police. A Casspir has cut in front of some of the cars of the mourners.' He slams his hand on the steering wheel, the flat sound loud. 'Don't they have any decency, these people?'

Joseph turns and sees the armoured personnel carrier coming up along Forbes Drive. It veers left and right trying to overtake the funeral procession, the torsos of the four or five armed police in camouflage uniform looking like permanent fixtures of the vehicle. The police officers wave their arms menacingly, but the cars aren't giving way. It makes a spirited lurch on Van Onselen Road, managing only to rake up dust on the unpaved part of the road, scattering vendors, sending chicken flying. It still doesn't get ahead. It turns down a side road at the entrance of Jabulani. Just as the cortege rolls along Mphahlwa Road, some one hundred metres to the Doornkop Cemetery, the Casspir comes charging up from Bendile Street but has to stop for a disordered

marching band accompanying a ragtag team of drum majorettes from the cemetery precinct, obviously having seen someone eminent off to their last resting place. By the time the last performer twirls her baton and swings her hips, the cars have successfully entered the grounds.

The hearse slows down on entering the gate and turns left. A fresh set of pallbearers, who must have been waiting near the entrance, all clad in khaki uniforms and black berets sporting little ANC flags in the front, quickly remove the coffin. Joined by a crowd of men, women and children, they carry the box on their shoulders, chanting slogans and dancing the toyi-toyi at a brisk pace. Their leader in front, a thin, wiry young man in a yellow tracksuit with black and green piping, sets the pace at the head of the throng, charging forwards, standing, stork-like with one leg raised. He brings it down and raises the other, on and on, all the time singing:

U-Violet ho, i-commando

U-Violet ho, isotsha,

U-Violet ho, inyamazane

I-Zipra Mkhonto, ho – inyamazane!

uComrade Violet – inyamazane...

Joseph has been to cemeteries before and is unsurprised by the layout of this one, the vast plantation of grass, mounds of brown-red earth, some freshly brought to the freshness of the day, some old, sprouting tufts that remind him of the grass the craftwork teachers insisted was good for making woven handicrafts. There are granite headstones bearing messages of passing, of remembrance and a hope to meet in the future. Sis Violet has no headstone, just a marker. Fr Mbeje tells him there was no time, but they'll make sure something lasting is put there to remember Nomasonto. The vocal singers and chanters, dancers and mourners, tell Joseph it is true: Nomasonto will not be forgotten. He searches the faces, looking for someone familiar, hoping that, perhaps by some miracle, he might see Charlie or Ananias or Tekere, whose whereabouts are still unknown. All he sees are faces transformed by grief. The coffin is lowered with a song and a prayer, *ashes to ashes*, and he follows others in the mechanical act of throwing a handful of sand into the deep scar on the Earth. He is present,

although far away. A plane drones in the sky. It's time to leave. The others remain behind, singing their songs and dancing, the scar now concealed and replaced by a mound covered with the same flowers that were in the tent.

'Watch out,' someone shouts and an object whizzes in the air and makes a lazy landing on the tomb of one Zachariah Vera, dead at twenty-three, one of the early casualties, Fr Mbeje said, of HIV-AIDS. The flying object goes *fffft!* as it becomes a small cloud of smoke that wafts in the air, enveloping Joseph and driving others to great fits of coughing. 'Tear gas,' Fr Mbeje says, and hands Joseph a handkerchief while he covers his own face with the lapel of his jacket. *Run!* But Fr Mbeje can't run so well. Something is wrong with his one foot. He depends on Joseph's shoulder, the Bible banging on Joseph's breast.

'At least we buried her,' Joseph thinks as he runs, jumping over someone lying face down in the grass. 'Is he dead?' he wonders, but then sees the man stirring like a drunk getting out of a ditch. 'Do you want to rest, Father?' 'No, let's keep on...'

Now the *pop-pop-pop!* of firecrackers, although he knows it's live ammunition; he's heard it often enough. He directs the old man to run zigzag up the field of stones and stubborn tufts of grass, past a woman sitting with her back to a tombstone, her legs stretched out before her as if sifting grain in her basket. 'Should we?' Joseph asks, wanting them to stop and help her escape, but Fr Mbeje, out of breath, says she's safe, protected by her innocence. 'We have to get out of here.'

They do, finally, ending up transporting two other people. He thinks of them as graveyard refugees, a young man and a woman, who, seeing the cleric's collar, simply dived into the back seat. Fr Mbeje, less shaken but still teary eyed, says to the pair, 'I hope you're not hijackers! You don't look like hijackers, but I've been hijacked twice and pistol-whipped as many times, so I don't really need that, not today.' 'Don't worry, Father, we're friends. We sang with the choir at the service. We buried Nomasonto, no matter what they tried to do.'

It's a different matter at the house. Fr Mbeje has an allergic reaction to the teargas. His face has blown up to almost twice its size, the eyes buried deep in spongy folds of flesh. Almon returns grumpy and groggy in the evening and is

jolted into sobriety at seeing his father's condition. He turns to Joseph, his eyes wild.

'It's you,' he says, pointing a tobacco-stained finger. 'It's all your doing, you miserable Zambian fucker. Since you came here, you've done nothing but sponge off us, taking advantage of my father's kindness.'

Fr Mbeje comes out of the bedroom, walking stiffly, the limp that Joseph noticed earlier having become more pronounced. 'Almon,' he admonishes, his words muffled as if the swelling has extended to his tongue, 'stop this nonsense and take me to the doctor.' *Thtop thith nonthenth*. Illness turns us all into babies.

It's early evening on Friday, the twelfth day of 1990. Joseph hears the gate closing and, after sitting quietly in the bedroom watching the shadows deepen, he listens to the Friday sounds, the occasional car or truck rolling down the road, the return of revellers from the park, the sound of happy men and women on their way to the shebeens. He gets up and starts packing his few belongings into an old battered suitcase he finds at the top of the wardrobe. He gives the house a last, lingering look as he goes down the stone steps to the gate. The word 'sponge' plays itself over and over in his head. The look of revulsion, which must come from something very disgusted inside Almon's belly, the son feeling he's being separated from his father by a stranger, a fucking Zambian stranger at that. The rage rises to his tongue, tasting of bile. He wishes to tell Almon, to tell all South Africans that he's here because they've taken everything from him. They took his father and his mother. Now they've taken one of the few people he really loved, loves, for she cannot die, not while he can keep her memory alive in his head, Sis Violet.

Now he walks the road, aware of how wide it has become. The absence of others with whom to look at the world, he thinks, changes the nature of what you see. All along it's never been a road worth noticing, just a conveyor for Fr Mbeje's car as the two of them travelled from place to place. Now it is long and wide and full of menace, the people walking are suddenly bigger than they normally are when he's in company or when seeing them from the protected cocoon of the Datsun Nissan. Their faces are in the shadows, and it's unclear when there's a glint of an eye or when teeth flash whether the look is

accommodating or disparaging and if the teeth are bared in a smile or a snarl. And the park, with its swings, slides and seesaws, suddenly becomes the place he was warned against. Keep out of the park at night; there's violence in South Africa.

It's Friday, and the year is still new, and so here and there people walk in twos and threes, men and women, some holding hands, others swinging their arms in an expression of freedom. Up the long and dangerous avenue, Louis Botha Avenue, which is the route for buses and minibus taxis from Alexandra Township, the walkers are fewer, but the sound from the houses on the right of the road is one of night-time happiness. Up Bedford Road, there's happiness coming from the congregation in a church service in a warehouse opposite the bottle store that flashes its products in equally loud lights. Along the lower levels of the row of two-storey buildings lining the street, shopkeepers are pulling down the shutters in front of their shops; on the pavements, young vendors of cigarettes and 'soft goods' – soap, perfume, condoms in lurid boxes – pass Joseph and give him a look. Throughout his walk, Joseph is conscious of footsteps, *tap-tap-tap*, like those of a cat, following with the dogged patience of Jehovah's Witnesses. He turns into Muller. This is Yeoville.

Suddenly conscious of his suitcase and that it might attract attention, he cradles it under his arm and strides towards a shopping centre that's bustling with Friday people. Outside the brightly lit shop, a guard sits on an upended beer crate. As he addresses him, Joseph is aware he is initiating a conversation with a South African without the support of others. All along it was Sis Violet, then it was Fr Mbeje. The guard, feeling the scrutiny of the young man, looks up.

'Ja?' he asks, '*unataka nini ... ufunani?*' He is a middle-aged man with a paunch that bells over to his knees. Joseph wonders what kind of a fight he would put up if *kabalalas* came to attack the shop.

'I'm looking for a place to sleep,' Joseph says.

'No one sleeps here, *mfana*.' He points with a knobkerrie. 'You see there, where all those bundles are? People sleep there. Sometimes nine people go to sleep but only seven wake up.'

'The other two?'

‘They go, *klu*.’ He makes a strangling sound, twisting his neck to the side and showing a mobile tongue of a lurid pink. ‘Sometimes those who wake up have lost something, a hand, a foot, or even a pippie.’ He laughs a racking cough, hawks up phlegm and directs a jet right between Joseph’s feet. ‘They come crying past here in the morning, *mboro wangu imeibiwa*. You can join them.’

As he walks away, Joseph can hear the guard chuckling. He can imagine him shaking his head. There goes another country turkey. He wonders what it would be like to have his penis stolen while he sleeps. He shudders and keeps on walking. He’s now on Rockey Street where someone has set up a fruit and vegetable stall. He hears the throb and rumble of hidden speakers churning out a medley of sounds, high-life, pop, rap, rhythm and blues, jazz, blues, gospel – lots of that, louder than the rest, exhorting believers to hold on to Christ – kwassa-kwassa, kizomba and zouk, and mixtures of mixtures, a rich spiced soup of many African and Latin American delights. The night here is without time. He stops next to a shop selling fabric, where two women, seated on low stools are braiding the hair of two women seated on chitenges on the pavement, while, standing above them, two women tend to the hair needs of their seated colleagues.

Still fascinated by the women, four pairs of hands where greased fingers flit, roll, loosen and weave handfuls of hair into patterns, Joseph is slow to react when someone jostles him and snatches the suitcase out of his hand. He whirls round. Two barefooted boys cackle as they run across the street to stand on the other side of the road. They taunt him, holding the suitcase aloft like a trophy.

Something goes *qhwaha!* in his head and he jumps off the pavement to cross the street. In some distant corner of his mind, he hears the squeak of brakes, car doors opening, hooters blaring and people shouting – *you fucking cunt, jou verdomde moerskont, you uncircumcised baboon, you* – and sprints behind the two young men, who are both wearing oversized jackets and who weave their way through the crowds on the pavements. Unconcerned with strategy, Joseph barrels through the throng, hearing the distant curses that outline the process by which he came into this world.

The boys are making good progress when the one holding the suitcase trips and falls and the suitcase snaps open and Joseph’s meagre belongings –

underwear and t-shirts – scatter on the pavement. The other boy hesitates, wondering whether to stop and help his friend but decides against it. Joseph throws himself on the fallen boy and starts pummelling him with his fists. The boy, wiry and agile like a cat, springs to his feet and reaches into his back pocket. Joseph hears the sharp click of something in the boy's hand and sees he's holding a knife.

Dancing, delighted with having turned the tables on his opponent, the boy, smiling with bloodstained teeth, holds the knife with the point up. *Kom, jou fokken hond, stupid fool, moegoe, mampara...* At which point Joseph picks up the suitcase and throws it at the young man. He follows up with a kick, delivered with desperation, to the groin. There's a sharp crack as the knife clatters to the ground, the young man holding his crotch with two hands as he goes, *Wooo*, and falls to his knees as if in prayer. Joseph kicks him in the head. The boy falls to the side, upsetting a vegetable stall. Joseph is about to deliver another kick when he is pulled from the back.

In a minute, Joseph and the injured boy are being frogmarched to the Yeoville Police Station. During the walk, Joseph is thinking, 'Well, that's it. I've been avoiding police stations for such a long time, now it's come to this.' He is tired and drained. He hears the voices of the crowd, which were egging them on during the fight, until a woman – a black woman – says, 'Don't you have no shame, big grown people like you, encouraging kids to kill each other?' Now the crowd, which follows the police and their two prisoners, is a lot more subdued. Joseph wonders if any one of them will speak the truth. The young man did pull a knife on him.

They do not.

The station is already teeming with people, many of them brought in for being drunk and disorderly; complainants line up at the desk, car theft, accidents. The reception area smells like a shebeen. Joseph and the young man, whose name turns out to be Stephen Mohajane, also fourteen years old, are instructed to sit on a long bench and wait to be processed while Sergeant Mokwena at the desk deals with more serious cases. Stephen glares at Joseph and runs a threatening finger across his throat, mouthing, 'You're a dead man.' Just when Joseph means to report the threat, there's the noise of a hurricane at the

entrance, and Joseph hears a woman shouting at the top of her voice. 'I want my son. Where's my son?' And for a moment, he thinks it could be ma – Chanda – coming to fetch him, but the voice isn't Chanda's. It's too self-assured, entitled and used to bullying. It's then that Joseph feels real fear and a sense of being alone. The police officers all stand aside as the woman strides in, large and imposing, dressed in a white two-piece suit, her massive legs tapering to a pair of red crocodile leather pumps. She has a matching handbag slung over her shoulder, swinging with her every movement, the hank of ginger hair flowing down to her shoulders swishing the other way. 'Where's my boy?' Then she sees Stephen, who's starting to get to his feet before his ascent is curbed by the handcuff on his and Joseph's wrists. Sheepishly, as if embarrassed by his mother, he settles down again. 'What have you done to my boy?' she asks no one in particular, 'look at his face.'

'Madam,' Sgt Mokwena says, 'please don't disturb the process in the station. Your boy was fighting.'

'Fighting? From what I heard, *lelizizimbane* assaulted him.'

'Madam? I will ask you to keep yourself in check.'

'Listen to him,' the woman, Mrs Mohajane, says, turning to her audience inside and outside the police station, '*he* wants *me* to keep in check while this *vuilpop* assaults our children. Is this fair?'

Sgt Mokwena turns to Joseph and Stephen. He signals to a constable to remove their handcuffs. 'Where do you come from,' he asks, 'people calling you a foreigner?'

'Zambia.' Joseph knows that trying to tell a lie won't help him now. 'But my father is from here.'

'Where's your father now?'

'I don't know.' It suddenly seems important that the policeman must not know about Sobhuza, his father in exile. A guerrilla who's also an assassin. 'He left years ago.'

'And how did you get here?'

'By train from Botswana.'

Sgt Mokwena laughs and shakes his head. Then he beckons the constable over. 'Hey, Constable Mali,' he says, 'please bring this one's things, I'm taking him to the prefab office outside.'

'Where are we going?' Joseph asks the question although he has an idea what's likely to happen.

'Your new place,' Sgt Mokwena says as they leave the police station to the car park at the back. Fishing his keys out of his jacket pocket, Sgt Mokwena says: 'As an officer of the law, all of us in the force, we have strict instructions about alien immigrants.'

'My father is a South African.' Joseph is aware of the eyes of the people in the charge office. Mrs Mohajane has a smirk on her face.

'Ja,' Sgt Mokwena says, 'but we've all heard that rumour before, haven't we?'

Joseph doesn't respond.

CHAPTER 24

It's raining. The canvass at the back of the truck keeps flapping open, letting in needles of cold water, which, even though he's three people from the tailgate, still splashes Joseph's feet, increasing his anxiety. It's late afternoon and the truck has been making stops so often that Joseph has lost count of the number of times the back of the truck has been opened to let in a fresh batch. Each stop leads to an increase in discomfort, which becomes more pronounced as the truck moves. The hangdog expressions of the people express an acceptance of their fate, where no-one says anything about where they are going. The armed police officers are tight-lipped, only issuing orders, *get inside, hurry*, their hands hovering over their holstered side-arms. Women and men sit beside each other, mostly quiet, the only sound of life comes from the restless – and scared – children perched on the laps of the adults.

It seems strange, this docility, where the police are out there in the cab of the truck, their charges uncomplainingly crammed in the back without any supervision. No one jumps out even as the truck pulls to a stop at a stop street or waits for the light to change at the crossroads. In Zambia, he knows, the truck would certainly get to its destination with a significantly reduced load. Where are they going? Remembering how he escaped from Hubert's car, Joseph starts calculating how long it would take him to jump to the tailgate and vault onto the ground. There's something forbidding about the two men between him and the possibility of freedom; they are grim-faced, the type that might just stop him and raise the alarm, just to gain brownie points with the police.

As if sensing what Joseph is thinking, the nearest man turns to him. 'Where are you from, sonny?' Joseph assumes he's from Zaire as he speaks with the accent he remembers from Zambia, the *kabalala* who'd ask you, *d'ou êtes-vous?* before robbing you. All the people in the truck are from somewhere in Africa, complexions ranging from the shiny black to mottled pumpkin yellow. Although well dressed and wearing expensive pointy leather shoes, Mr Zaire has got bad teeth and a runny nose. Now and then, he makes a throaty sound as he clears his sinuses and then swallows whatever he hawks up.

'Yeoville,' Joseph says.

‘No one comes from Yeoville, sonny,’ Mr Congo says. ‘Not even the Jewish people who were the original dwellers there.’

This is fascinating. Mr Congo has gained a lot of knowledge about South Africa, a sign that he’s been here for a long time. He also shows the brash, opinionated attitude of many South Africans. ‘Where do Jewish people come from?’

‘*La terre promise*,’ he answers pompously, as if he’s seen the inside of The Promised Land, ‘where else?’ As if sensing that he’s being steered away from his enquiry, Mr Zaire presses on. ‘Where’s your home?’

‘Why?’

‘Because *c’est naturel* to want to know, that’s why.’ He sounds a bit outraged anyone would be unaware of something so patently clear.

Seated four or five people closer to the front and dandling a crabby toddler on his lap, a man whose Chichewa intonation marks him for a Zambian or a Malawian, says: ‘*Hawu?* Can’t don’t you leave the boy alone? *Aliyense pano*, all of us are here because of some trouble. We don’t need a third degree.’

There’s a general murmur of agreement. Someone, a woman, says, *mind your business*, under her breath. Joseph experiences a strange emotion at hearing someone speaking his language from home. He wishes to respond, perhaps say *zikomo kwamberi*, but remembers Sobhuza advising Uncle Agrippa. You mustn’t let people know everything about you, S’bali. We have an expression in isiZulu: don’t empty all your calabashes as if you’re relocating.

‘It’s not a third degree,’ Mr Zaire says with bad grace. Glumly, he slumps into his black raincoat and seems to contemplate the grey sky outside. Grimacing in distaste, he looks at the rain coming down in buckets. Then, turning to the man with an angular face and bloodshot eyes of a *mowa* user, who’s seated directly opposite to him, he asks: ‘What d’you think,’ he asks, ‘about making a run for it?’

Angular Face says: ‘In this rain? Are you fucking out of your mind?’

‘You don’t have to swear, *mon amie*.’

‘I’m not your friend. Leave me out of your schemes.’

Joseph hopes it won’t end in a fight. In Johannesburg, fights culminate in a stabbing. He feels a tinge of sympathy for Mr Zaire with his bad teeth. Perhaps

he's short of friends, that's why he's reaching out to others. But the others are more focussed on their present situations than in taking chances that might backfire.

Joseph has an idea this trip will end in a deportation; at the same time, he knows that he always jumps to conclusions and ends up scaring himself half to death. He is comforted by the presence of women and children, surely nothing bad can happen where there are children, even in a war, women and children are supposed to be spared. Even as the thought flashes across his mind, he knows he's lying to himself. If that were even remotely true, Sis Violet wouldn't be dead.

Then he wrestles with the meaning of death. I can't die here. I can't die in South Africa. If I have to die, it's got to be at home. Home-home. But then, he asks himself, isn't South Africa home? His father was born here, which means that the seed sown by the ancestors, which germinated into his grandfather and down to Sobhuza was nurtured in this country; despite what Leila said, he *is* a South African. But then, realising the trouble he's in, his being a South African might mean *sommer fokol*, as Charlie would say, if he doesn't have the papers to prove it. He might as well have been born in the Kamchatka Peninsula.

He can't quite get the image of Malume's wound out of his head. It stands in its vivid rottenness, crowding out the broken sights and smells of blood he has experienced from the moment he set out to search for his parents. He wishes to distract himself from the dull journey in the truck, which is only varied by the suspension hitting peaks and troughs, by evoking the memory of his parents, of his siblings, but everything feels so remote and unattainable. Is it possible for a piece of memory to overpower other memories? To stamp its foot like a child having a tantrum and say, *only I will be remembered*? Then and there, instead of trying to evoke the unrememberable, Joseph harnesses the memory of the wound and his failure to retain a perfect image of his family members into a resolve to fight his way out of his predicament. It's enough. I've got to get out of this place.

Why are the people, the captives, so obedient, like sheep; isn't the first duty of anyone in captivity to escape, or is that only in prisoner-of-war films like *The Great Escape* or *Von Ryan's Express*? In real life, what do people do? There are stories of how, in the past, an *unarmed* policeman could arrest scores of pass

offenders, get them to stand in a line and wait for a police truck and voluntarily get inside even when the arrester had only one set of handcuffs. There was even a joke doing the rounds, where people netted in a swoop are kneeling, waiting for the transport and a man asks them why they are on their knees, and, when told that these are pass offenders, the newcomer also takes his place behind the last person in the queue. He says: I might just as well join in, as I also forgot my pass back home. But that was in the past. It's a different situation today.

He sees everything a minute after the truck has sped past, which gives him a sensation of being in flight in a world marked by impermanence. After almost an hour of trundling along DF Malan Drive with its hotels, garden centres, a herd of horses in dreamlike paddocks, enclosed wedding venues with flowers, fountains and well-tended lawns, the truck turns left into a corrugated road, past warehouses, shacks and informal stalls before it threads through narrow a stretch with trees on either side. A police van with a flashing light, which has been following all along, also turns. So, Hatchet Face had it right. Jumping out would have been foolish.

The truck slows down and noses past a clump of bushes that seem man-made before it turns into a cobbled driveway where it shudders to a stop, its exhaust sending out smoke. The police van also pulls up behind. Although the rain has stopped, the windscreen is streaked with water, distorting the faces of the driver and his passenger. All around the area, filling the air, there is the sound of voices raised as if the truck is entering a packed stadium. The truck gets into motion again. It goes past a guardhouse, and proceeds through a boom gate. The armed guards are in black uniforms and peaked caps, looking grim. There's an order for everyone to disembark.

There are eighteen people, among them four toddlers and a teenaged girl; there are five older women, one or two who might be of Chanda's age and the rest are men. All around are high walls topped with barbed wire. The buildings look like barracks, units fronted by steel doors painted in different colours, the windows fortified with sturdy burglar guards. A sign tacked to the wall reads: WELCOME TO CAMP LESEDI, to which someone has scrawled, *Your halfway station to jail*. Observation towers on all four corners of the camp remind Joseph of his long conversations with the guerrillas. What would Charlie have

made of this set-up? Or Ananias, whose mission it was to cripple installations: would this have been one such installation earmarked for crippling? What are his comrades from the police truck thinking? The strange thing is that none of them has said a word throughout the journey, none, except for the quizmaster, Mr Zaire, his Chichewa-speaking detractor and Angular Face. But now, with their feet on the ground, everyone's voice box has opened up. They complain about hunger, their muscles are sore from being cramped in the truck, where are the toilets? This babble is cut short by one of the guards, who signals with a finger pressed to his lips. The police driver and his passenger are joined by the twosome from the van. 'Make two lines,' the guard orders.

As Joseph walks on, trying to keep up with one of the older men in striding purposefully ahead, he gets to understand the source of the thunderous roar heard earlier. In the courtyard, hundreds of people strain against barriers, shouting with arms raised, their hands waving sheets of paper, trying to catch the attention of the marshals dressed in reflector vests over khaki uniforms. A line of guards uses the barriers to force the crowds back. When Joseph slows down to take a good look, another guard shoves him none too gently. 'Eyes front,' he says. This is prison.

Joseph swallows his saliva to suppress hunger gnawing at him as he stands at the edge of a desk, looking into the eyes of a police clerk laboriously entering his details into a register. In a sing-song voice dripping with contempt, the clerk recites what is required.

'You're all inmates of our wonderful facility, Hotel Happiness. I'll need you to give me your name, parents' names, country of birth, place of birth, year of birth, if you have a police record: don't worry, we'll check that...in the meantime, let's get you fingerprinted, and your picture taken. Once the information is verified by Pretoria and, with some of you big mambas, by Interpol, you'll be deported at our expense, courtesy of Home Affairs.'

Young with a round face and closely shaven, the clerk is in civilian clothes, the only sign of officialdom is the badge on a string around his neck.

'You're still a *laaitie*,' he tells Joseph, 'and you're already a PI?'

Joseph doesn't know whether this is a question or a statement; whatever it is, it seems to require a response. 'PI?'

‘Prohibited Immigrant,’ the clerk explains. He points at the crunch of people behind and around Joseph. ‘All of you, *zonke zothayi*, are prohibited immigrants. What puzzles me, though, is that all you’s folks come from independent countries...’

Shaking his head, he lets the statement trail off and concentrates on the task at hand. Now and then raising his eyes to look at the person he’s serving, his face can hardly conceal what he must be thinking. His nose is wrinkled like someone forced to scrape off something foul he’s just stepped on. Joseph remembers Mr Pemba at the Lusaka Civic Centre when he read the clerk the Riot Act for their rudeness to Sis Violet. ‘Now,’ the clerk says, addressing himself to the guard standing at the entrance, ‘please escort these...’ checking his watch, ‘... to the canteen. Maybe they’re still serving supper.’

He’s aware of the noise. A clash of aluminium plates and steel trays that drowns the excited – or angry – voices of men, has become so prevalent as to be acceptable as background noise. The women and children have been taken to a separate wing, behind a bamboo screen. There are posters with directional arrows pointing to centres for child and youth care, programmes for those who’ve been sentenced and residential diversion. Joseph knows he’ll need someone to interpret what happens in this place. Where is a Leila when you need one? Now and then the air is rent by the sound of wailing babies. If they are also eating this food, Joseph thinks, then they have a real reason to cry.

Except for the women and children, the people who were in the truck have clubbed together, queuing, eating – and advising one another about the food. Steer clear of the soup; it’s got some vile stuff in it and, to cap it off, they’ve added some tablets – which you can actually see swimming on top – designed to suppress the libido. Joseph doesn’t quite know what the libido is until one of the men makes a fist with the thumb wedged between the index and middle fingers. So, he eats dry bread and washes it down with tepid water, steering clear of the soup as advised; this avoidance has nothing to do with the libido, whatever that is. The smell of the soup tells you it’s not fit for human consumption.

All the horror stories about being imprisoned in South Africa come rushing into Joseph's head as the steel door clangs shut a minute after entering the dormitory together with seven other inmates. He is struck by the smell, which he traces to the two toilets plonked side-by-side like clumsy tombstones, both doors, the height of a crouched man, are open. A man unselfconsciously wipes himself with a wad of newsprint, flushes and comes out, wiggling his hips as he hitches up his trousers. Something seems faulty with the plumbing as pools of water have formed on the floor. Tobacco smoke wafting over a group of almost twenty-five men, brings about some relief from the smell. Having conducted a mental head count, Joseph estimates that it's going to be a challenge to get a place to sleep because the beds, navy-blue metal frame bunks with mattresses, are all occupied. A man of indeterminate age, who seems to be the leader here, stands up from a boisterous game of draughts on the floor where buttons and bottlecaps are used as counters. Huge with a shaven head showing scars, his name is Madala.

'Welcome, *madoda*,' he says in a surprisingly mellow voice of a singer. 'As you can see, we're all in this mess, and we have to make the best of a bad situation.' He points to the lockers. 'For those of you who come laden, you can place your things there, there's no guarantee you'll find them tomorrow, but that's none of my business.' *My biznis*. His eyes land on Joseph. 'They brought a child in here. How old are you, *mfana*?'

'Seventeen,' Joseph says, deepening his voice to support the lie.

'That's not true,' says the Chichewa-speaking man. 'I saw his record at the intake. He's Zambian and he's fourteen years old.'

Joseph turns to look at the man who had earlier preached the gospel of leaving things alone. Why is he now meddling?

'Fuck's sake,' Madala says. 'Why not put him with the other young people?' Turning, he addresses the room. 'Listen, I know some of you are already sharpening your pippies. Let me tell you, anyone trying to touch this boy will have me to reckon with.'

'What is it, Madala,' a draughts player on his knees on the floor asks, 'you want him all for yourself?'

The room explodes with laughter. The joker, emboldened by the reaction, gets to his feet and does a suggestive dance, raising his arms to encircle

an imaginary partner, swaying to unheard music. Displaying amazing agility for a man his size, Madala has crossed the floor and has gripped the dancing joker by his shirt front. 'Listen, Ngwenya,' he says, 'you and I are from Bulawayo, where things are shitty, and we're being sent back there. So, it's time to be serious. We cannot go back there, back to the poverty.'

'Madala,' Ngwenya says, trying to prise his compatriot's fingers, which are like sausages, from choking him. 'You and I are from the trenches, *mchinda*. I was merely joking.'

'Joking in times of struggle is no different from *ukumbuluza*.'

Joseph remembers the last night with Malume in the cave, where the latter railed against the disloyalty of malingerers, people who *mbuluza*, potential enemy agents. He wonders if Malume's military training had brought him in touch with the likes of Ngwenya and Madala. Strange things have happened. But he cannot say anything. He's also very tired.

Joseph spends a restless night on the bunk above Madala's, listening to the men tossing and turning and mumbling. Someone screams out. Maybe Ngwenya reliving the moment Madala almost strangled him. What is the struggle that the inmates have to wage? They spoke of resisting being sent back to Bulawayo; how are they going to do that?

The first morning in the repatriation camp consists of waiting. Long queues have formed for breakfast which, when it comes, is a disappointment. Thin porridge, which Joseph passes on to one of the inmates in the dormitory and eats his hardened dry bread and rooibos tea that tastes like nothing he's ever drunk before. A week passes, then two; January ends with news from outside of trouble in the land. Joseph learns of the fighting taking place all over the country, especially in Natal, and wonders where Sobhuza is. The prophesy made by Comrade Mbizo, that important developments were going to take place has come true, in a sense. The release in October 1989 of long-term political prisoners – including, or especially, Walter Sisulu and Govan Mbeki – are a portent for a breakthrough in the political front. At least that's what Madala says in the nightly discussions before lights-out. As for answers about the status of the people due for repatriation, the PIs, it's still early days. The mantra from the office is: there

are still no answers from Pretoria, or the other embassies. Some of the more enterprising among the inmates find casual work and are ferried to farms in the Krugersdorp area, where they do the lowly tasks that South African labourers won't touch. Mr Zaire, whose whole swanky wardrobe has been stolen – including the crocodile leather shoes – has returned dejected from a stint in the farm, where, he says, everything is *merde*.

It's unclear to Joseph whether the theft is what started it all, or if trouble was always brewing, the discontent building up like a rash under the skin. For, in the evening of the last Friday of January 1990, a fight breaks out in the dormitory. Mr Zaire, whose real name is Alphonse, now reduced to wearing a set of torn overalls and canvass shoes with holes, which he must have got from a jumble sale, has accused Baloyi, a Mozambican, of stealing his things.

'You're a t'ief man, a bad black *voleur*,' Alphonse says, pointing with a long, thin finger, 'Mozambican riff-raff escaping from Portuguese *xibalwa*.'

Joseph wants to laugh, because Alphonse is actually much darker than Baloyi. But Baloyi's fury discourages any humour. A bantam about to attack, he springs from the lower bunk where he's been quietly playing a game of Solitaire.

'Stupid, foolish Mobutu lackey,' he says, '*filho da puta...*'

Madala takes control, getting the rest of the inmates to clear the floor space and stack the chairs, inviting the warring parties to the centre. 'No weapons,' he says, 'bare fists only, no kicking. A man falls, that's it, game down.'

From the bunk above, Joseph has a clear view of the fight. Madala, shuffles around the two men, saying words of encouragement and advising that there should be fair play. Both of you come from countries with a fighting tradition, you remember Tshibalabala Kadima, or Ali and Foreman in the Rumble in the Jungle, Ali boma ye and all that. And the *sibhakela* fighters, the amaShangane, who never back out from a fight, so, treat each other with brotherhood.

Before Madala can finish, Alphonse has struck first, a short, sharp blow to Baloyi's forehead, which staggers the latter, causing him to shake his head as if in denial, snorting like a bull. Taking a step back, crouched, Baloyi signals Alphonse to come closer, lunges and catches Alphonse flush on the mouth. Alphonse grins, his teeth bloodied. By now the inmates are on their feet, howling,

egging the fighters on. Just then, there's the sound of the steel door being opened, a hard, metallic sound. The lights go out just when Alphonse throws a punch and Baloyi steps out of range and canons onto Ngwenya. Police officers and guards, their torchlight stabbing the corners and staying on faces, rush into the dormitory, their boots clomping on the smooth floor. Joseph scrambles back to the wall, covering his legs with a blanket. He hears rather than sees the truncheons landing on people's heads, screams when a blow lands hard against his leg. Suddenly, although it's quite dark, the only illumination provided by the torches and the overhead yellow light splashing across the courtyard, he can see with clarity everything that's taking place. It's all frozen, a sequence of destruction in slow motion where Madala knocks a police officer to the ground, whereupon five or six colleagues punch and pin Madala against the toilet door while one of them claps handcuffs on him. He falls, the momentum taking two of them to the floor; one presses the truncheon under Madalas's chin and raises him up while the ones on the floor strive to hold him down. Even though there is noise of struggle, the one sound that Joseph hears above all is Madala trying to breathe, the truncheon cutting into his windpipe, the sigh. Then he was limp.

'Die Here weet,' someone says, *'die man is dood.'*

Suddenly, without knowing how and when it happened, Joseph is out in the courtyard where inmates are engaged in a running battle with the security guards and police officers. It's a noisy fight characterised by screams and curses and whistles and chants that Joseph is hearing for the first time. At the same time, the chants contain words that connect him to a time he cannot quite remember. The act of remembering becomes burden to the mind. One dormitory is burning, people are running helter-skelter with mattresses, which they throw into the fire, the flames leap out of windows in search of more things to burn. Something hard crashes against the nape of Joseph's head, filling his head with flashes brighter than Christmas lights.

CHAPTER 25

Friday, the twelfth day of 1990, has still not exhausted itself. For Joseph, the day is like a character in a book or film, stubborn, a boxer ducking and diving to dodge blows that could knock it out and usher in the dawn of the following day. Stubborn as it is, the day is now on its last legs. The clock on the dashboard of the unmarked police car reads 11.40pm.

It shocks and scares Joseph that the police are so wary of the citizens they monitor. The wariness can be deduced from the nature of weapons they carry. Apart from the sidearms, 9mm pistols like the ones Sis Violet and her guerrillas bore, there are huge automatic rifles, pump-action shotguns, tear-gas masks and canisters in the boot. Having seen what happens when someone gets shot, Joseph hopes there is no confrontation where they are going. At the same time, knocking somewhere at the back of his mind is a thought, a sense of pride that he has come to know more about people who put the fear of God into the police than they would ever imagine. But has that helped him in any way? Does he know himself? He catches a glimpse of his reflection, a blurred image distorted by the curvature of the window of the car, his eyes and mouth elongated but still – and this gives him a jolt – conveying how thin his face has become, his hair knotty and burred like an aspirant Rasta, *Jah, ma-an*. Above his upper lip is the merest suggestion of a moustache, although he knows that this might be his imagination. Every boy wants to become a man. He never really became a man. He lost the chance to go to the mountain. But, what about the mountain he climbed with the guerrillas and their leader, Sis Violet? Whatever it is, he doesn't miss what he has become; he thinks back to what he once was and smiles. He could easily have died, which is why he looks forward to seeing his mother. It's bad manners for children to die before their parents, it's in bad taste. This is the last chance. About Sobhuza, though, no matter how doggedly or cunningly he probes, he has failed to get an answer. He's got more questions.

They are driving along Clarendon Street, facing the buildings of Hillbrow. The balconied dwellings with wide windows, arched doorways, stained glass entrances, have adopted names of past glories - Burlington Heights, Piccadilly Mansions, Sloane Square –that have no connection with African

geography. The owners might be physically here but mentally they are elsewhere, across the sea. It's like that tune by the O'Jays, *Your Body's Here with Me (But Your Mind is on the Other Side of Town)*. Already he's heard people, including Almon and his friends, complaining about the violence in Natal, wondering if it will come to the streets of Johannesburg. But Jo'burgers know how to deal with *moegoes*. Or these darkies from the North. North of where, no-one can clarify that one. They just know that whatever is not homegrown must go back home. Simple. Joseph wonders how he feels about *home-home*.

'This murder,' he asks, 'how come you're in Yeoville Police Station, Chief Inspector Chona? Why not some other part of the country or even city?'

Sgt Mokwena takes his eyes off the road to look at Joseph. 'You've got a lot of questions, Zambia, are you practising to be a lawyer?'

Gladwin Chona chuckles. 'It's a good question,' he says. 'I could have done the search for your mother from Pretoria, for instance, but we were directed to Yeoville. Call it a stroke of luck.'

'And ma? How did you find her?' Then, a thought hits him. 'If you're investigating a murder, how does it affect her?'

'We had a request from the Botswana government.' Chona pauses, probably weighing up how much he can reveal. 'Your mother, when she left, used a Botswana passport. It seems legit, we don't know how. Then, when the murder took place, we had to check all exit points of the country and her name came up. It then meant checking with Botswana, the destination logged at the airport and Botswana informed us she had flown into South Africa. Technically, we have no diplomatic or consular relations with South Africa, but Botswana had given us a lead.'

'That she's in South Africa?'

'Yes. We also cross-checked with the SG of the ANC in Lusaka if perhaps Chanda Mabaso, married to a freedom fighter, was on ANC business, underground work and so forth. I was told your father had left, whereabouts unknown.'

'Unknown or undisclosed?' Sgt Mokwena asks. He laughs self-consciously. 'You know, these MK guys, police in uniform like me are a target.'

'Unknown.' CI Chona sounds irritated.

Joseph asks: 'So, my mother knew where my father was?'

'That,' CI Gladwin Chona says, 'we're yet to find out.'

The parking lot is nearly empty at this hour. There's a strong scent of the vegetation that grows abundantly all over the hospital grounds. Joseph remembers hearing it boasted that Johannesburg has one of the biggest urban forests in the world. Perhaps it provides a good dwelling for violent *kabalalas*. An ambulance drives in with lights flashing but no siren and pulls up at the casualty emergency entrance. Paramedics both from inside the building and the ones in the vehicle scramble to ferry a person inside on stretcher. It's not clear to Joseph whether the crimson splashes on the patient are blood or an impression created by the flashing dome lights. Whatever it is, it doesn't look good.

He follows the two policemen as they walk through a set of revolving doors into a well-lit foyer where the receptionist in a light-blue uniform greets them formally and directs them to the ICU surgical ward, warning them to watch the slippery floor, which is being swabbed clean. Patients, some on wheelchairs, mill around the reception area, some stand before the glass doors of the hospital cafeteria, which is closed at this hour. Nurses ending their night shift traipse along the corridor, their faces managing to be welcoming and closed at the same time, as if telling all and sundry that they have already contributed to the wellbeing of the ill and the dying and are now on their way home for well-earned rest.

Joseph feels his knees protesting at the prospect of the walk along the long, tiled corridor, almost giving in as the trio passes a bank of lifts, perpendicular to another corridor. They go up the lift, sharing it with two people – Joseph can't say whether they are doctors, nurses or even patients – in green smocks and disposable masks, shoes and heads covered. They could commit a crime, and no one would know how to identify them.

As Joseph and the lawmen go past the nurses' station into the ICU section, Joseph feels his heart kicking against his chest. Short of breath, he follows the others as they put their hands out under the nozzle of the disinfectant dispenser. There's a bit of confusion when it turns out that the patient, ma, is in another section; someone misspelled her name, entering it as

Thando Mavasa. A man in a white coat, who seems to know everything about the hospital wards, escorts them and leaves them in the hands of another nursing sister who listens attentively before nodding. 'Come with me.' Excited and full of dread in equal measure, Joseph follows the three adults through a passage where he has to weave his way past light plastic sheets separating even smaller sections. He gets a glimpse of patients lit by a blue light that gives them an eerie pallor, lying on their beds, some with the bedsheets flung to the side from the heat, here and there, a thin arm connected to translucent tubing, an old woman covering her shrivelled breasts with a gown. At last, the nursing sister locates the right ward and, relieved, points to the bed where Mrs Chanda Mabaso is lying. 'There's the lady,' she says.

Attached to tubes and cables linked to humming machines and monitors blinking with urgent colours, she's lying on her side facing away from the entrance, her head pillowed on her forearm and the left arm stretched forward as if she were reaching for something on the bed when sleep overtook her. She breathes with great difficulty, wheezing. Joseph wonders if the presence of two big men and a boy, himself, in the room is not contributing to the lack of breathable air. As if conscious of the stealthy footfalls of the people entering the ward, ma draws in a deep breath and then, without turning to face them, Chanda speaks.

'Is that you, Joseph?' she asks. 'You brought Banji and your brothers?'

'No, ma. Yes, it's me. The others are still in Lusaka.' Even though she's here, within touching distance, his ma might as well be another person, a stranger. He tries thinking of her, straining to remember her as clearly as possible, his ma, Chanda. Overwhelmed by it all, the strangeness, the newness of the experience, hearing her speak, albeit with a changed voice, Joseph wants the policemen gone, so he can have a moment alone with her. His memory of her is like a memory of circles, she whirls inside them, full of energy, wearing her colourful African prints and a matching headdress, not this pinkish drab robe that fails to hide some of her undergarments. Fortunately, Chona is an understanding man. 'Let's step outside a bit,' he tells his colleague, even before the boy can ask. 'In any event, she's not going anywhere.'

He sits and waits while she lies motionless, the only sign of life the rise and fall of her flank together with her irregular breathing and, once or twice, mumbling. He can't catch what she's saying and is worried about what others would think if they found him hovering over her. The room is warm, despite the air-conditioning, which hums on and on and has become an element of his thoughts. Is my mother dying?

He must have fallen asleep with this despairing thought. When he next becomes aware, the light in the room has grown considerably dimmer. But ma is sitting propped up on a bunch of pillows, busy adjusting the angle of the backrest of the bed by pressing a button on the frame on the side. The bed goes *vrrr-vrrr*, edging up or down until ma has set it at a level that gives her maximum comfort. Then she adjusts her gown and presses the switch for the side lamp but quickly switches it off again. Even in the half-light, he can still see her. And she him. She makes a brave attempt at a smile.

'Joseph,' she says, the name coming out with difficulty, like her throat cannot quite form words, '*uli bwanji, mwana wanga?*'

'Sindine bwino, ma.'

'You're not well?' she asks, now with a familiar dismissive cackle. 'Here I am with pipes coming out of my every pore, and you're the one who's not well. I'd say come and give me a hug, but I don't know if this thing I have is catching.'

Joseph wants to hug his mother; at the same time – it could be the surroundings, the smell and heat and whirr of machinery, a patient demanding painkillers, *injection, nurse, please*, in a ward down the corridor – he feels Chanda is a stranger. There's something changed in her. It's the headdress, the hair, most likely a wig, unkempt, peeping through the fabric like some furry animal, the eyes deeper in their sockets, the face thinner and bearing a calculating expression. 'Is this my mother, really?' Joseph thinks. For the first time he has a sense of his mother being in a trap.

'Where's my father?'

'Where are my children?'

'I left them with gogo,' he tells her. 'I'm sure you know that.'

'I don't know anything.' She mulls over something for a minute. 'Come closer.'

'Your father is no more,' she says.

'What?'

'Yes. He's dead. Buried in Lusaka. Leopards Hill.'

'Dead?'

'Dead. *Wamwarila*.' She leans back and tells him what happened.

It all started a long time ago. Joseph must remember how ma fought Sobhuza over his disappearances. The vanishing man. She, not unreasonably, believed he was shacking up with some *hule* somewhere, you know how many homes have been broken that way. In October, the day after Joseph's birthday, she confronted him. This was the last straw.

'When he disappeared – and following the counsel of some of the churchwomen, you don't know how resourceful they can be when they're not gossiping – I went to speak to the chief representative, Ntate Mashigo, in Kabwata, the big-headed soft-spoken man. Do you know he fought in the World War II? Anyway, he referred me to the HQ in Cairo Road, well, not Cairo Road exactly, but Chachacha Road, where I could maybe see Tambo or Nzo, and ask them what was going on, but that was like trying to get an audience with KK at the State House. Security! Ha! Those boys in suits said we don't allow anyone without an appointment here, madam. Madam! I tell them I'm the wife of a freedom fighter; they say they are used to hysterical Zambian women making those claims. Me, hysterical? I'm a woman, of course, a Zambian one at that, but my being a Zambian and his being a South African have never been an issue, so why now? I went back to Helen Kaunda, but I was like a ghost, coming in late and leaving at the crack of dawn. When I wasn't there, on an errand for survival, I would check with Thelma if she knows if he has returned. It was always no, until it became too embarrassing – too painful – to involve my sister, who thought I'd married beneath myself, anyway.

'We lose ourselves in this thing called marriage,' ma says. 'We carry this cross that comes weighted by the eyes of people that have nothing to do with the married couple. Sometimes, these marriages – or liaisons, if you will – are dead the minute people sign that marriage certificate at the Civic Centre. All that remains, in innumerable cases, is a habit. A habit of togetherness. And fear, fear

what would happen when one goes away and leaves the other alone, with the children.' She pauses and then breaks into laughter, the sound jarring and startling.

'Are you okay, ma?'

'I'm fine. I'm laughing remembering the day I started knowing that Sobhuza and I had become a habit for each other. A bad habit. I wanted to go into the bathroom one morning and it was locked. That was strange, especially when all of you had gone to school, one of those days when I didn't have to be early in Kabulonga, and the two of us were left alone, we never locked the bathroom door. This time it was locked. I banged on the door until he was forced to open. When I quizzed him about it, I could see he was uncomfortable. He had a towel draped around his shoulders. I managed to snatch it off him and saw that he was acting like that because he had all these scratch marks on his back, some *hule* had worked on him with her nails. Instead of getting angry, listening to him coming up with stupid excuses, I suddenly had this clarity of mind. Why was I bothered about his back? It was *his* back, not mine. I had no right to his body unless you say you have a right to a habit, something that exists out there and is driven by its own internal logic. Many men – and women – stick with their partners, spouses, until death does them part; by that time, the survivor has a right to heave a monumental sigh of relief, for being freed from a bad habit. Those who say they love each other to the very end are lying to themselves and to the world. The weight of the stuff that takes place between couples on an extended period buries, suffocates anything connected to that quaint notion called love. In a sense, I thanked Sobhuza for the betrayal, which opened my eyes to a truth I should have known years, decades, earlier. I decided there and then that I would regard him as part of the resources needed for the maintenance of a homestead, which include the nurturing and schooling of children. As for love? Ha! No more.'

He's taken aback by ma's bleak view of life. 'But you still looked for him?'

'I had a duty to find him,' ma says. 'Someone said I should try the drinking place in Chilenje, where freedom fighters meet. I got a minibus taxi and,

true enough, there was your father, with his comrades; there were some women, but it didn't seem like he was with a particular one.'

All along, Joseph has been straining not to lose the thread of the story because of his mother's strange way of relating it. She's at once the actor – *ine* – and the subject – *iye* – of the story. She looks up when Chief Inspector Chona and Sergeant Mokwena come in on tiptoes, like two overgrown ghosts. For a moment, it seems as if she's going to raise an objection, then she slumps her shoulders and retracts into herself. Joseph marvels at how small she looks. She wasn't a big person to begin with, but now, even though almost completely covered in hospital clothes and linen, there has been a marked chiselling out of her flesh, leaving her all angles and planes. Now, as if parodying a flight stewardess directing passengers, she uses her two hands to motion the policemen to find seating. 'Where was I?'

'In Chilenje. In a minibus...'

'Oh yes.' She takes a sip of water from a glass on the little side table. 'I worked out an arrangement with the driver, because I knew it could take long, paid him hundreds of kwachas upfront. So, we sat watching the house until around 11.30pm, and Sobhuza and another comrade came out. I could see there was something wrong with him, the way he walked. Even from that distance, where I could have yelled and told him to come home, something was missing. That wasn't my husband. Anyway. They got into a Land Cruiser, and we lost them somewhere in Woodlands. Something told me to go wait in Chilenje, which I did, until morning.'

'Morning?' Why, oh why, Joseph laments, didn't someone tell me where my father was? There is a knot at the base of his throat. 'And then?'

'We had parked in front of the same house in Chilenje,' ma starts, 'when the Land Cruiser pulls up and someone, the same man Sobhuza was with, was driving. Instead of turning into the driveway, they came to where we were parked. The driver, short and light-complexioned, in a leather jacket, was wearing a plaster cast –'

'Comrade Mbizo!'

She looks at him, puzzled. 'How did you know? Anyway, your father called him Bizo.'

‘It’s Mbizo. Please go on, ma.’

‘Bizo. Mbizo. He pulls out a gun and threatens the driver. “Why are you following us? Who are you?” And so on, very rough.’ Ma shakes her head at the memory. ‘I screamed and your father came out and saw me. I must say, though, the look on his face was well worth the trouble.’

‘He came alive. “Mbizo, that’s my wife, Chanda, put the gun away,” and, with all the trouble we’d had, I didn’t know my husband still knew my name.’ She looks to the side, smiling bitterly. ‘Mbizo said, “You people need to sort this thing out.” Sort this thing out. Like it’s that simple.’

‘What happened?’ Joseph still can’t believe his father is dead. The more details come out, the more he hopes for the possibility of some reversal. His ma’s words might yet prove to be as insubstantial as water. Mentally, he strives to bring his father back to life.

‘It was decided that we shouldn’t go back home,’ ma says. ‘We were booked in at the Pamodzi Hotel, where we stayed for three days. On the fourth day, he was dead.’

‘How?’ He wants to know. He doesn’t want to know.

‘I told you he was haggard, out of sorts, in a word, ill,’ ma says. ‘I asked him what he had eaten. Where. He kept on saying, *I did a terrible thing, I did a terrible thing*, over and over. I pressed him until he relented.’ Here, she looks her son straight in the eye. ‘Your father was a trusted assassin.’ She shakes her head at her own choice of words. A trusted assassin. ‘He’d been responsible for killing quite a notable number of prominent enemies of the revolution – you remember, that’s how he spoke, always “the revolution”. His disappearances inside the country were to conduct those assignments. And then, the last one involved someone that Sobhuza knew, a businesswoman, Martha Kweyama, who ran a string of shops in Clermont Township, a pillar of society. She had been detained and released and suddenly there was a rumour she was selling out. A number of students she had harboured on one of her properties were picked up by the Special Branch. Martha Kweyama was labelled a sell-out. She had to be killed. Sobhuza asked Mbizo, who gave him the brief, why they couldn’t find someone to do the job inside the country. The answer was the informer was supposedly well

protected. Only Sobhuza, with his experience, could penetrate that ring of security.

‘Sobhuza tracked Martha – he called her Martha – to her home in Pinetown. There was no ring of security around her. There was no one. It was as if she was expecting him, for she opened the door and welcomed him in, and asked him the question: “Have you come to protect the rot in the ANC, Sobhuza?” He pulled out his gun, shot her once in the neck and twice in the chest, to make sure. And left. Two weeks later, Mbizo tells him they killed the wrong woman. They’d acted on unreliable information from Ezrom Mshana Nkabinde, who later turned out to be the enemy agent. Based in Swaziland, Nkabinde had already led to the deaths of a number of comrades, there and in Mozambique and Botswana. All the places where there have been massacres in ANC places, he has had a hand in it. Sobhuza felt used. He was sick to his stomach.

‘Sobhuza told Mbizo he wanted to make amends, to make a clean breast of it with the family of the dead woman. The ANC wouldn’t hear of it. It would compromise all of the other operations. The toing and froing between Woodlands and the house in Chilenje, where Mbizo challenged us, were to discuss how this tragedy could be handled. Inside the country, the political structures were in disarray, because it was quite clear that Martha Kweyama had been killed by her own people.’

On the third day of their stay in the Pamodzi, Sobhuza’s condition worsened. He had been complaining of stomach cramps, but today, he was vomiting, writhing with pain, sweat pouring out of him like a river. ‘I took him to hospital, and they immediately started pumping his stomach, fearing he might have ingested poison. On the fourth day, he was dead. Two days later, we buried him with a handful of people, at Leopards Hill.’

‘Any autopsy reports?’ Chief Inspector Gladwin Chona speaks for the first time. ‘There must have been a death certificate with a cause of death.’

‘Nothing. Mbizo said we had to expedite this as it would cause problems with the Zambian authorities.’

‘What kind of problems?’ Chona asks. ‘South African nationals die occasionally in Zambia, and there haven’t been problems. Unless someone has been murdered, which becomes a police case.’

‘Well,’ ma says, with sleepy carelessness, ‘maybe this was a police case that someone didn’t want investigated.’ She picks up her chin, remembering. ‘I should have asked more questions. But Mbizo was anxious about Sobhuza’s last words to me. *What did he say? Did he say anything?*’ She laughs, this time it’s the real Chanda laughter, bubbling from inside her, completely taking her over. When the spasm subsides, she wipes her eyes and starts sniffing as if about to cry. ‘Yes, Sobhuza not only *said* something,’ she says, ‘he also *wrote* something. He left me with a letter to take to the family of Martha Kweyama. That is the reason I left quietly for South Africa the day after the burial. To deliver the letter.’

‘Can we have sight of the letter?’ This from Sgt Mokwena. ‘Just so we can attest to the truthfulness of your account?’

‘Sergeant Mokwena?’ ma asks. ‘It’s Sergeant Mokwena, right?’

‘Correct, madam.’

‘Do you think I was born yesterday?’

‘No, madam, it’s just that...’

‘There’s no just that.’ Ma’s mouth is a severe line of determination. ‘This letter first lands in the hands of the Kweyama family. I give it to you and, *zip*, it’s gone forever and reappears in Mbizo’s hands. And they will quash it. No.’

‘I suggest we let the lady rest,’ CI Chona says. ‘I see the nursing sister hovering around.’ He glances at Joseph. ‘And you, young man?’

‘I’m staying with ma, for now. *Zikomo kwambiri.*’

Chanda and Joseph stare into nothingness, waiting to hear the whine of the elevator to confirm the departure of the two policemen. Later, Chanda reaches into her handbag, on the other side of the bed, and produces an envelope bearing the crest of Pamodzi Hotel, Lusaka, Zambia. There is a crackle of paper as she extracts the letter, which is written on lined paper. ‘Here it is,’ she says.

Joseph reads about his father’s life. Written in a shaky hand, the handwriting is unmistakably Sobhuza’s. As he reads, Joseph feels the silences and doubts that had characterised his life with his father turning into something he cannot quite define. He breaks out into a sweat and shakes as if coming down with a fever. The letter explains, using matter-of-fact language, the terror and pride Sobhuza felt about being chosen to be in an elite corps of the People’s Army, of MK. To be an assassin, to eliminate the enemies of the revolution meant

that he could no longer belong to himself. The act of killing, no matter how justifiable, simply throws the killer outside of the royal fellowship of normal human beings and turns him or her into an instrument, as unfeeling as the trigger mechanism of an AK-47. That was why Sobhuza had ensconced himself inside the family – which provided him with a cover, a legend – while operating outside anything that smacked of communion. Because he knew he was cracking from the inside, when he saw the lives he had helped create – Joseph, Emmanuel, Banji and Mulilo – and the unwavering love of Chanda, he knew he was as truthful to the ideals of his mission as he was fraudulent in his dealings with circles that called upon him to evince his humanity. The tension was unbearable. He drank. He whored. He prayed to the Gods of his mother-in-law and the shamans of Kitwe to give him strength. And doing his work was mainly possible if he kept the knowledge at the front of his mind that the enemies deserved what they got. The only time he knew he was undone was with the assassination of Martha Kweyama. He was an assassin, not a revolutionary monster. Something had to give. He had to make a clean breast of it.

Chanda had travelled all these distances on account of the letter. Then she fell sick and could not honour the promise she had made to Sobhuza. Her habit. Joseph has a sense that she's keeping something from him. There've been so many secrets. He doesn't know if he can bear more revelations that would shake his world. He reads the letter again, from beginning to end.

He looks up from the reading, only to see and hear from her breathing that Chanda has gone back to sleep. If Mbizo and his colleagues were so anxious about Sobhuza's last words – and the letter is about Sobhuza's final contribution to what must have been a lifelong debate in the ANC – then he, Joseph, would have to keep the letter safe. And ensure it lands in the right hands.

And so, he goes to the nurses' station and requests writing paper, a pen and an envelope. Minutes later he is writing furiously. He remembers his father telling him that, when he joined the liberation movement, he had to write and write and write about his political involvement, starting from the time he first became aware of oppression as a young man in South Africa. 'By the time I was through,' Sobhuza said, 'with the repeated referrals back by the security officers

to ensure clarity on details and to iron out inconsistencies, I am sure my file must have grown bulkier than *War and Peace*.'

Joseph doesn't intend writing a book, but the details of his own experiences – from the instant he left home to this very moment in his mother's presence – have almost used up all the pages of the notepad. He writes until, at the break of dawn when he is overcome by tiredness, he falls asleep in the chair, his mother's breathing providing a lullaby.

The letter suddenly becomes very important.

Three days later, on Monday at around noon, Sgt Mokwena arrives to pick them up from the hospital in his own car, which is clearly his pride and joy, a 1986 BMW 318i 5-speed. It matches his dress today: he's casual in a sports jacket, a button-down shirt and khaki pants. For shoes, he's wearing Hush Puppies, looking stylish in an understated way. Perhaps the only extravagance is the aftershave, which fills the car. Knowing ma's low threshold for strong smells, Joseph checks her and sees that she's relaxed. She chats about the beauty of the surroundings, the well-tended plants at the first roundabout on the way out of the hospital grounds. She thanks Mokwena profusely.

'Where are we going?' ma asks as the car turns into Barry Hertzog Avenue. 'I thought we'd be expected at the Botswana Embassy.'

The car turns left on Empire Road, past the University of the Witwatersrand on the right. Joseph looks at the traffic of young people going in or out the gates, almost all dressed in jeans, t-shirts, trainers and carrying backpacks, walking with the sure-footed steps of the future owners of the world. Looking at them, at the cloud of carefreeness enveloping them, he gets another glimpse into the world people like Sobhuza aspired to create. The students could have been Sis Violet or any of the guerrillas. Even Pule would fit in with this crowd. It's a crowd that's overwhelmingly white, two or three black faces in the throng, a condition, he knows, Sis Violet and the rest, sought to change.

Joseph recognises the landmarks as the car takes the direction of Berea, up Clarendon Street onto the scary Louis Botha Avenue. He wishes Sgt Mokwena

would hurry up and answer ma's question. Ma hates to be kept waiting. Just then, Mokwena adjusts the rear-view mirror to get a good look at Chanda.

'Let me break this down for you,' he says, something in his whole manner changing, 'both you and your son are in this country illegally. That whole Botswana nationality manoeuvre, well, forget it, because you're in our territory here – and I represent the law.'

'What do you want, sergeant?' Chanda's voice is shaky.

'The letter. Your husband's letter.'

'Why is it so important, Sgt Mokwena?' Chanda asks.

'When Mrs Kweyama was shot dead, we got a tip-off – at least the Special Branch did – that your husband was implicated. We had a profile of the people who'd help him in the so-called safe houses. This was high-grade info coming from within the ranks of the ANC itself in Swaziland.' He pauses, waiting for the light to change. 'But Mabaso – we even had his name – seems to have avoided associating with anyone. That's the creed of a good assassin,' Mokwena says, not hiding his admiration. 'That way he escaped our dragnet.'

'And so, now, the letter: what purpose will it serve?'

'It's physical evidence. A confession in the killer's own words.'

'But, at the hospital, you heard everything that happened.' Ma sounds tired. 'There's Chona to back you up. You don't need a letter.'

'Chona's been sent back to Zambia. He'd have become a pariah in his own country if it came out that he'd collaborated with racist South African police authorities to get a freedom fighter convicted.'

Joseph shifts in his seat. 'What will happen if you get the letter?'

'*Joseph!*' Chanda is scandalised. 'What's come over you?'

'Now,' Sgt Mokwena says, 'that's a sensible young man. We'd arrange for a quiet, no-fuss repatriation to Zambia.'

'And in the meantime? Where would we stay?' Ma needs to recuperate.

'We keep a room for such cases at *The Carousel* in Braamfontein.' Then the radio squawks into life on the dashboard. 'Sgt Mokwena, uh, huh, mmm. Roger.' He turns to Chanda. 'Business. Let me drop the two of you at the hotel. We'll talk later.' To Joseph: 'Can I have the letter?'

'Shouldn't we check in first?' Joseph asks. 'The letter is in my things in the bag. I'll have to look for it.'

'Fair enough. I just hope you're not jerking me around, sonny.'

'Of course not.'

Under ma's disapproving look, once they have checked in at the hotel reception, Joseph hands Sgt Mokwena the bulky envelope. The policeman quickly stuffs it into his inside jacket pocket. 'See you later. Food, drinks, everything is taken care of. *Ta ra.*'

'Idiot-*i, iwe!* Why did you do that? Give him your father's letter?'

Joseph laughs. Chanda glares at him. 'It's not funny.'

'It's even *more* not funny when you hear what I've done.'

'What?'

'I gave him my letter. All the stuff I've gone through.'

'They'll kill you.' She pauses. 'Tell you what, we can't stay here. I have an old schoolfriend in Yeoville, Susan Juma. She owes me some favours. Let's catch a taxi. There are loads of these Maxi Taxis outside.'

'And after that?' Joseph has a sense of an ending of something huge and inexplicable. He can see ma using her Lusaka eyes to look at him.

'The accommodation is for you. *Me?* I've got to get back to my children. *You've* got to deliver the letter to the dead woman's estate. Then we'll make arrangements for you to come back. We must give your father a real burial.'

'*Ngiyakuzwa,*' he says, boasting his new vocabulary. 'I hear you, ma.' In his mind, however, he has other plans. The letter is about his father, sure. It's also about Sis Violet and the hundreds of men and women who have taken the oath to fight the struggle. It's for the citizens of this country and their neighbours elsewhere to know that freedom is never free.

END