The Convert

Dorothy Dyer DYRDOR001

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COMPULSORY DECLARATION

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

Signature: Date:

ABSTRACT

The Convert is a novel that touches on issues of race, history and women's identities in Southern Africa, both past and present. It has two narrative strands. Jennifer is a divorced woman whose identity up till now has been mother and wife. She finds old letters belonging to one of her ancestors, and finds refuge in researching and investigating the story of her great-great grandmother, and her great great grandfather, who were some of the earliest missionaries in Namibia. In her research she meets Ndiriro, a young Namibian woman who challenges her assumptions about her ancestors' legacy.

Jennifer's story is interwoven with that of the historical story of a Herero girl, Uatavi, who was the first convert at the Heining's mission, and who developed a close relationship with the Heinings. She faced many lonely internal struggles and decisions as she became part of a new world.

Uatavi is an invisible woman of history, and Jennifer slowly uncovers parts of her story, and tries to work out why Uatavi has been written out of her ancestors' lives. However there are some secrets that are difficult to unearth.

PART ONE

JENNIFER

The hall was only half-full. It was partly a relief, after feeling so nervous, and partly an affront. I stepped up to the podium and looked at the faces turned towards me, sunflowers facing the light. Or possibly not, as some were drooping down, surreptitiously checking their cellphones, no doubt, in the pretence of tweeting my words to those who hadn't even bothered to come.

I cleared my throat. "It was family mythology that my great-great-grandmother was the origin for the traditional Herero dress," I said. "As you can see," I gestured towards my slide, slightly crooked on the wall behind me, "the actual form is based on a Victorian dress, and the local women adapted it and added the decoration and colour that is now so famous."

Some members of the audience nodded recognition. They probably all had dollies at home in the gaudy outfits. They were Namibian, after all. These dollies had probably been sent to their relatives scattered around South Africa and Germany, colourful little mementos of a far-away world. And now that I was here, visiting Namibia for the first time, no doubt I would make additions to my little collection.

"However, what is perhaps their most significant contribution to Namibian history and culture," I continued, "was their tireless work in the translation of the Bible into the Herero language." I clicked my slide to show the title page of the first Herero Bible. "For his work my great great grandfather received an Honorary Doctorate from Leipzig University."

Some people looked towards the screen, some remained looking at me impassively. Most people were middle-aged and white, like me. But Namibian fashion was obviously quite a few years behind Cape Town. I wondered if they were impressed by my low-key

quality style - a Country Road dress, my Nine West shoes. But of course they were not like the people I usually socialised with, these frumpy historians who probably wouldn't be able to identify a Jimmy Choo if it hit them in the face. I noticed a young black woman sitting near the back. She had a stern, sculpted face, and was strikingly elegant compared to the others. It didn't look like she was enjoying my talk: her arms were folded, her head rigid.

"There have been chapters about Willem Heining in historical works on Namibian history," I continued, feeling my throat drying, "and there is of course Heining's own autobiography, posthumously published, which focused on his work more than the daily life of the mission. But what has been overlooked by all of these writers is the vital contribution by his devoted wife, Elizabeth Heining, whose support was instrumental in Reverend Heining's life and work."

"She came out to Cape Town," my voice was getting stronger now. I loved Elizabeth's story, and surely these historians would appreciate it too. "She came out, a spinster in her early twenties, coming to spread the word of God. She was waiting to be assigned to the interior by her English missionary society. She heard Willem Heining, a German Rhenish missionary, preach just once, at a church she did not usually attend. They were introduced briefly after the service, but she hardly even knew exactly who he was. The next week she received this letter from a mutual friend:

My dear Miss Hone

I trust you will excuse the liberty which I take to address you on a very delicate subject, and one which is entirely new and strange to me - but one which my Lord tells me at the same time, I must interest myself in.

It is shortly this, that our friend Mr Heining has fixed his heart on you as one who would be a great comfort and assistance to him in forwarding the work of our Lord in the interior of Africa - and he has pressed me (as you suppose) urgently to write to you on

the point - and he begs to be favoured with your reply previous to his departure, which will take place this evening or tomorrow morning.

He thus in Christian love and sincerity offers you his heart and hand in this life.

Believe me,
Yours sincerely
W.H. Wathen

I was pleased to see the audience rustle at this point, in interest. Religion *and* romance! Get married and come with me, he was saying - come with me tomorrow. I cleared my throat - the best part was still to come! "She said no, it was too soon to leave her teaching work. He told her that he had to go back to the interior and would only be back in a year or so. Off he went. And then -" I look up to see most of the audience's eyes now on me expectantly. But the woman at the back still had her arms folded. "Then she changed her mind. A few days after he left. So she organised a wagon, and chased him. It took a week of travelling before a message got through to him, and he rode back. They finally met at Clanwilliam, where they were married. And that was the beginning of their successful partnership."

I loved that story. It had also been family mythology: the chase, the marriage. My mother had told us the story countless times, dined out on it at parties. I wondered what it must have been like, for a Victorian spinster, to marry a man and then go off with him into the desert to a life she surely could not imagine. As I became older I wondered about what she never told us, about how strange it must have been to have sex with a man for the first time in a culture where there was no way to find anything out about how it all was supposed to happen. But I didn't put that in my speech for the Namibian Historical Society, of course.

So different from my courtship, if you could call it that. David and I had sex in the first month of meeting, after a drunken afternoon at the Pig and Whistle. Then we shared a

house, with other students, and slowly the other students left until it was just us. Even the proposal was kind of incidental, when I fell pregnant with Rachel. I never wanted violins, or roses, but the idea of wagons and deserts and a leaping into the future with no looking back has always seemed attractive to me.

And their planned marriage certainly lasted better than my so-called love match. I could see, as I sipped my glass of water, that the skin was still white where my wedding ring had been. A dead giveaway. I averted my eyes. Now was not the time for self-pity.

I got to the ending. "Over the years, Elizabeth grew to love the land and its people. By the end the Damaras were no longer frightening aliens, but they were, as she put it, 'our Herero', and Hereroland became 'home'." I closed my file, and there was a smattering of applause.

It was time for questions. "Are you making a political point in your book?" asked a man with grey hair and glasses. I had noticed him listening intently to my speech.

"Are you implying that Elizabeth Heining was far more important than her husband's biographer acknowledged?" asked the woman next to him, before I could answer. I had noticed her too, shuffling and surreptitiously looking at her phone a couple of times.

"Yes, in some ways," I answered. "But it is also the letters I mentioned, my new source. You must understand that the letters I found have not been seen before. They were sent to my great great aunt, Elizabeth's sister, and were owned by my grandmother. The letters that are in the archives used by Heining's biographer were to her mother, and to her daughter. That is what the historians have used in the past. But these letters give far more details about her daily life, and also about her involvement in Willem's work."

I was surprised to see the black woman put her hand up. "Are there any other sources still to be discovered?"

It sounded almost like a challenge.

“Elizabeth does make reference to other letters, to her younger sister, the one she was closest to. These letters were passed down to an American descendant, whom I managed to track, and he is sending them to the Namibian archives as we speak. They will, I am hoping, put the final pieces in place. The descendant said that many had been lost, and there were only a few left, kept as mementos, so I doubt there is much more information. But I cannot publish my book until I have read them.” The woman was no longer looking at me so I couldn’t see what her response to my words were.

I was relieved when the session was over and I stumbled down from the podium to the tea table at the back of the hall. Someone pushed a cup of lukewarm tea into my hand, and a few people came up to tell me they had enjoyed my presentation. “I am honoured to meet a descendant of the Heinings,” one man said. “I am a priest at the Methodist church here, and their story never fails to inspire me.”

Another woman came up. “I work at the school established by the mission - did you know it was named after your ancestors, till the name changed recently? It used to be called Heining Community School.”

It was lovely to meet people for whom the Heinings meant something, even if these Namibians did have big teeth and bad hair. Because for once my work felt validated, rather than what my friends saw it as - a rather unusual occupation for Jennifer in order to get her mind of her failed marriage. “At least you haven’t turned to drink,” my one friend said, and was surprised when I didn’t at least try to laugh.

But despite these people who shared my interest, I was soon ready to leave, and I was relieved when I saw the chairperson of the Historical Society come towards me, her frizzing grey hair a halo around her face, one of those faded pretty women who had let herself go a bit at the onset of middle age. I hoped she would give me a lift back to the hotel. I had met her the evening before, when she had fetched me from the airport.

But now she was not alone. Behind her was the black woman from the audience, neat braids coiled around her head like sleeping snakes. I hadn't realised she was so tall. And she wasn't hiding her height either, in her bright red high heels.

"This is Ndiriro," said the chairperson. "She works at the archives and will be dealing with your ancestor's letters. I forwarded all your emails to her. She is also very interested in this period of Namibian history."

Despite her question during the presentation, Ndiriro did not look very interested. She hardly greeted me, and then turned back to the chairperson, almost like she wanted to move along with her. But the chairperson was already floating off to some other old gentleman on his own, leaving us stranded.

I gave her a wide smile. I did not want her to think I was a racist. "I am looking forward to coming in to see what else I can find in the archives," I said. "There might even be some information overlooked by other historians in the accounts of the contemporary missionaries." I was still smarting from her comment, her implication that there was more to find.

"Pity there are no records from '*Elizabeth's Herero*,'" she replied, her tone sarcastic. "A bit of a one-sided history, perhaps. It would be interesting to get their perceptions of the time."

I sighed inwardly. When I had gone to get some academic advice as I started on my research, I had been given almost incomprehensible readings to take home, but I could understand enough to perceive that missionaries were no longer fashionable objects of study - no, apparently they were the forbearers of colonisation. But that did not diminish their strength and courage, and it irritated me that these professors overlooked their enormous contributions. I had given up on getting academics' support for my project.

“Well, I’m not a professional historian,” I answered awkwardly. “I’m really just telling the story of my ancestors, and trying to make it interesting for modern readers.”

The woman looked like she might want to say more. She took a little breath, but then exhaled, as if she had changed her mind. She gave a little nod. “Well thank you for your story, Ma Wilkinson,” she said. “I am sure I will see you at the archives. We have some material you may be interested in, if you care to read it.”

It was only then, as she swished away in her tight black skirt and shiny high heels that I realised how young she was, not much older than Rachel. Calling me “Ma”! Who did she think she was?

I was glad she was gone. My hand felt shaky, holding the thick white china cup from those sets so loved by institutions. I wanted to go, call someone from home. I wished that Rachel and I had parted on speaking terms. Why was my daughter so good at holding a grudge? This was the first time that I was away from that new empty box flat, with no one waiting for my call, and I felt a panicky emptiness inside.

Later that night, back at the hotel, I lay in bed under those dreadful polyester cotton sheets with the air conditioner buzzing loudly, and comforted myself again with thoughts of Elizabeth and Willem, their strength and resilience. Surely I could find the traces of those qualities somewhere in my genes. But they had found each other, and I had only found David, whose only religion was his charm and ambition. Perhaps I lived in the wrong time.

I remembered Elizabeth’s early letter to her mother, telling her about their marriage. How exciting the world must have seemed.

Travelling by an African wagon is a very comfortable thing, apart from the jolting over stones. All luggage which is not wanted is packed into the bottom of the wagon as evenly as possible. Upon this in our case, but not in all, a frame is laid like a bedstead without

legs or posts, and then a mattress upon which the bed is made. Female travellers sit or recline upon this bed, which occupies about two thirds of the length of the wagon, all goods most likely to be wanted during the course of the journey being packed behind. The wagon has a tent over which is thrown sometimes matting or oiled canvas - twelve or fourteen oxen are usually yoked in, each of which has his own name. The whip used by the driver is almost long enough to reach the fore oxen.

After a journey of many mercies, preserved through dangers seen, and we know not how many unseen by us, we arrived here on the 19th of January. One of the greatest difficulties was the ascension of a high mountain, which caused me to think as we climbed it that I would never again leave Damaraland. Mr Klein, Willem's fellow missionary here, an older single man, received us with much pleasure. Mr Klein had also heard of Willem's marriage, but would not believe it, so we took him quite by surprise. Then such a greeting, such a shaking of hands!

I am much delighted at the situation of this station, it is a valley full of acacia trees. We have a house, built of stone and clay, nicely situated under the shade. It contains three rooms, a middle one by which we enter and which is our common sitting room, to the right Mr Klein's room and to the left ours. The floors are of earth and our furniture is very plain, but it is very comfortable and I never in my life felt more settled, or at home. Mr Klein will soon be leaving us to start a new station nearby.

For once I slept through the night. But then there was that moment in the morning, before waking up, when I still think that David is next to me, and that I must get up and get the kids off to school. And then I remember David is gone and the children too, and I get that hollow feeling inside of me that was becoming a familiar visitor since David had left.

I forced myself up, went to open the window. The sill was grimy - unsurprising evidence of shoddy cleaning in this hotel. The heat of the air outside was almost a solid force, making it hard to breathe. I slammed the window down. I loved fresh air at home. But here there were no mountain breezes behind my linen curtains, no glowing mountain in

the morning light. Just cheap nylon lace drooping in front of the window, hiding the dirt of a Windhoek street.

I roused myself, splashed myself with tepid water, put on a touch of lipstick, a subtle light pink. No point in putting on too much make-up. Today it was just me and the past. There was no one in the present I needed to impress. But I still enjoyed the feeling of cool linen against my skin as I swished over the garish red carpet in the foyer of the hotel. I have always tried to take care of my appearance. It was something I thought that David appreciated about me, not like Bridget, who, we always said to each other after she visited, had let herself go. David. I shook my head. My thoughts were going in the wrong direction.

I had a map to find to the archives nearby. Windhoek was like South Africa in the seventies. It was clean, thank goodness, not much litter and decay like the middle of Cape Town. But no modern glass and chrome, no designer wear in the shop windows, just last year's fashions hung on enthusiastically grinning mannequins. And heat. Lots of heat radiating from the tar. And lots of black people too, like Joburg, but not so many of them that I start feeling panicked.

There were also big green trees, and I was glad to find some beautiful colonial buildings, their high arches and generous spaces that so stilled the mind. The colonists certainly did some things right. But the archives was not in one of those. It sat in a square block that housed various other institutions. At least there was air-conditioning - I was already sweating by the time I arrived, and my thighs were rubbing together uncomfortably.

I found my way to the desk where I could get help, and was relieved to see that the woman from last night had a name tag. I had not managed to remember her unfamiliar name.

She did not look excited to see me. But I didn't care. I felt a little thrill that I was now going to read the texts of the diaries of Willem's colleagues that the other historians had

used. Perhaps they had overlooked Elizabeth. All that woman had to do was bring the volumes to me. I did not need her approval.

She brought them over, her stride too heavy for her delicate green sandals. She stood for a moment, her shadow over my desk. I nodded my thanks and she swirled round as if insulted, hurrying back to her desk again.

I sat for most of the day, losing myself in the dense prose. I found a few brief mentions of Elizabeth that I hadn't read before, but nothing that changed my narrative. I wasn't disappointed. My story was not missing anything vital. This visit was just sanding off the edges, reading the original accounts, and visiting the village where they had started the mission, just to get a physical feel for the place I had read about so intensely.

The day moved on before I realised it. Hunger and tired eyes were driving me out into the heat of the afternoon sun. I even debated whether to do any more searching in the archives the next day. It seemed clear there was no new information to be had.

But I had come so far. I needed to do this properly. So just before I left I looked through the little card index available: H for Heining. So quaint to see the painstaking handwritten cards packed into the old metal draws. No digital database here in the old section. Most of the cards referred to the texts I had already browsed through, and had seen anyway in printed form. But there was one new title. I found reference to an article written by a Masters student in a university journal, an article about Elizabeth Heining and Uatavi Gertze. I wondered who Uatavi Gertze was, perhaps another missionary's wife. I would return to read it.

I took the title to Ndiriro. "This is what I want tomorrow," I said. She looked at it, looked at me.

"I'll see what I can do," she said, then went back to her computer, ignoring me.

Who did she think she was, I fumed, as I walked home. She was there to serve me when I needed her, not when she felt like it.

But a part of me felt nervous at what I would find.

UATAVI

Uatavi is little when she first sees the whites, only just starting to help her aunt in the morning milking. She has heard about these strange beings: her aunt has threatened to send her to them if she did not bring the wood back quickly enough, or the water. Because Uatavi always gets distracted when she's out on her chores. When she is with her friends in the shade they can forget about the hunger in their small bellies, and the fear that Afrikaner's men will come and kill them. They gather around her and she re-tells the stories that her grandmother told them. "You remember everything," Vezemba says admiringly. And she does.

Once her grandmother told a different story, a story about the white people. They were like monsters, with their sticks that killed from far away, and their ability to clap their hands to make fire. When she told that story to her friends she added more details, about how they could fly and dive on their prey like a hawk. Her aunt scolded her the next day - her little cousin had had nightmares about flying whites pulling open the hut from the top and snatching him up.

One afternoon, just after the rains had started, there was a rumble and a small dust storm coming towards the village. People come from under the trees, from the kraal, from the water hole, to see. And what a sight! A pack of healthy oxen, fat as ticks, pulling a curved-roofed cart like they have never seen before, and a driver in front cracking a long whip.

But nothing prepares them for the sight of the man who is riding horseback next to the wagon. For as he gets close, and then even brings his horse to a halt near them, they see

his face is white and hairy. The children are frightened, and hide behind the adults who are admiring the oxen.

But the man does not fly, or make fire. His body has strange coverings, so you hardly see his skin, but the shape is the same, and his shoulders droop like Uatavi's father when he comes back from a hunt with no kill made.

With the white is a short brown man who swings off his horse too, a man who tries to speak their language. The Headpriest and other men go towards them, and Uatavi and her friends huddle behind them, peering out to watch. The men are laughing at the funny words the brown man is saying. But the children are all still looking at the white man.

"He is the colour of sour milk," Uatavi says to Vezemba.

"No, pinker than that," says Vezemba. He is the colour of a cow's tit."

Their bodies flop with laugher, and she loses all fear.

The adults are also amused. "Imagine, a whole land of albinos," her uncle says, and the others all laugh as they go with him to the flat space nearby, the place where the reeds grow thick near the summer marsh, where the cool shade protects Uatavi and her friends from the sun, and from calling mothers. But they won't be able to hide there anymore because the men are helping the white man to build his shelter in the flat spot in the middle. Uatavi was amazed at men doing women's work. But somehow building for the white man is not like building for the villagers.

Later though, the women laugh. The men did not put dung on the thatch and the cattle are eating his roof.

Uatavi wonders how the two men stay there alone, no women with them, no children. They have healthy oxen though, and the villagers respect and envy them for that. Young

boys help to herd them, and Uatavi's aunt and some other women help to milk them in the morning, after they have done the villagers' cattle.

The two men work hard, helped by some of the villagers, starting to build a completely different sort of house, a house of stone and wood. Uatavi and Vezemba spy on them sometimes, watching as they sweat and heave the rocks onto a cart hitched to two oxen. The white man is obviously the headman. He tires first, points to what needs to be done next as he leans back on a rock and wipes his brow. The brown man spots them watching, and he smiles, waves, greets them in clumsy Herero. Vezemba and Uatavi run away, laughing.

"What are you, a boy, always going around with Vezemba?" her aunt asks. "You need to help me more and stop that playing around."

"What are you, a girl, always going around with Uatavi?" Vezemba's mother's sister asks. But they ignore the teasing. For Vezemba loves Uatavi's stories, and Uatavi loves how Vezemba can make her laugh and laugh. For there is not much laughter in her homestead. Her aunt is a strict woman who hardly smiles, and her father is quiet, hardly saying a word to anyone.

"One day I will marry you," says Vezemba, and they both laugh, because the thought is so ridiculous that one day they will be big and grownup and do things like marry. Besides, you cannot choose who you marry - it is your parents who do that.
"I will have lots of other wives," says Vezemba grandly, "but you will be my headwife."

"And where do you think all your cattle is going to come from?" snorts Uatavi. "Your father only has one wife, and only those few cows."

Vezemba is indignant. "Your father was a servant and had nothing! Who are you to talk!"

"Well he's not a servant now, is he! And it was his bravery in fighting that lion that got

him his freedom. So I was also christened at the sacred fire and we are not servants anymore!"

The two of them glare at each other. Uatavi is the one who smiles first. "But so that means I could be your headwife one day."

Vezemba smiles back, mollified. The next day he brings Uatavi some of the rice that the white man gave his brother. She tastes it. "It's hard!"

"Cook it in boiling water," he tells her. "It gets soft."

That night she tastes the soft seeds that melt in her mouth, and keep her stomach fuller than it's been in a long time.

"These whites bring good food," her aunt says.

And they bring safety. While he is here, it seems like they are under his magic protection, and Jonker Afrikaner will not attack them, take their cattle, and chop the rich people's feet off to get their bangles. Thinking about that makes Uatavi shiver and almost glad that they are not rich, glad that they wander the veld, unseen and unnoticed by those big men who range the land, looking for cattle and people to own.

One winter afternoon, when the wind's cold bites at the bones, Vezemba comes running to find Uatavi. "I have news!" He knows this will send Uatavi into a frenzy, and it does.

"What news? Tell me."

"News about the white man."

"What about him?"

“Guess.”

“He has grown wings.”

“No.”

“He has … he has .. grown hair covering his whole body. In stripes, like a zebra. Black and white.” What a good idea, thinks Uatavi. She will make a story like this.

Vezemba shakes his head.

“Tell me, Vezemba, otherwise I’ll go away.” Uatavi turns her back. They both knew she is only pretending but Vezemba can wait no longer.

“An old one has come. One with a beard like a goat.”

The two of them run towards the white house. Outside it is a bigger wagon they have ever seen, with oxen standing patiently, as young men, including Vezemba’s brother, unpack huge packs and take them inside. There is no sign of the old one Vezemba described. Vezemba’s brother sees them, gestures for them to go, and they retreat to hid behind an acacia.

“What do you think are in those packs?” Vezemba asks, as they see sacks being taken inside the house. Uatavi finds it hard to even imagine.

“Dead bodies they dug up to do witchcraft,” she suggests, to try to frighten Vezemba. But he just laughs.

“Don’t be silly. They are only human.” He moves closer to Uatavi. “My uncle says that when they were building, one got a scratch on his arm. And it was red, like our blood.”

“That’s not true,” says Uatavi. “If their blood is red then surely their faces would be red too? It would shine through their skin?”

“It is true,” says Vezemba, offended. “Do you think my uncle tells stories, like you?” But then he tickles her so she laughs, and they forget about the whites for the afternoon, as they sit like lizards in the midday sun, leaning against the boulders that warm their backs.

The next day they watch again, hidden behind the acacia. They see nothing for a while. Then the old one comes out. And his beard is like a goat’s, tufty and white! He is carrying a round container of water, the shape of the bottom half of a calabash. He puts it down and sits in front of it.

The two of them watch him intently. Is it a lone drinking ritual? He puts his hands in the water.

“Why doesn’t he pick it up if he wants to drink,” says Vezemba.

“But he is not drinking,” says Uatavi. “Look!”

And the two of them watch him splash the water all over his face and neck. They both smother their giggles. “What is he doing?” says Vezemba.

“Maybe these whites drink through their noses too,” says Uatavi.

At that they both collapse, laughing loudly, and Goat-beard sees them. But he just waves his hand at them, as if they are pesky flies, and carries on splashing himself like an animal at the riverbank.

The two of them eventually tire of the scene, and slowly make their way back to the village. It is time for the milking, and Uatavi’s aunt will be looking for her. As Uatavi walks off she waves back at Vezemba. He mimes the white man splashing his face and

they both laugh all over again.

That night she thinks about the whites. They don't seem so frightening any more. Perhaps tomorrow she will take them wood, or a calabash, so they give her some food to take home. And then she will be able to see that funny beard close-up, and come to tell Vezemba a new story.

But the next evening something happens that changes her mind completely, as Goat-beard becomes the bogeyman her aunt told her about.

The moon is out, bright and full, and Uatavi and the other children have come to watch the omubiva dancing a little distance away from the sacred fire for the ancestors. Uatavi's cousin teases her because when Uatavi was little she was frightened of this dance, when the dancer become strange as he chants, stamps and waves his stick, no longer an uncle and brother. Uatavi always gets cross when her cousin tells her this, because she doesn't believe her. Surely there was never a time when she did not love the omubiva, and clap behind the other women.

"Yes, you were," her cousin teases, and Uatavi gives her a shove. But suddenly they feel a different pushing from behind, as the white man, the old one nicknamed Goat-beard, forces his way through the circle of clapping women. He is shouting, and for a moment Uatavi thinks he is trying to join the dancing, and she cannot believe he can break the circle in such a profane way; he will anger the ancestors. But then she feels her cousin's hand pulling her away as this angry old white man brings a sjambok down onto the young men nearest him. There is confusion, the men are scattering. One of his lashes snaps on Uatavi's older boy cousin's back and he winces in pain as a stripe of red appears on his back.

No grown-up grabs the whip from him and breaks it, no one lifts their own stick to hit him. Uatavi looks to Kavirongo, he is the strongest and loudest of all the young men. Surely he will fight back. But Kavirongo is running too. They just run away and leave

him bellowing like an injured cow in that strange language he speaks through his nose.

And soon Uatavi and her cousin are running too, everyone leaving the white man alone under the moonlight with his sjambok.

There are shouts, arguments in the village. Uatavi tells her cousin that she will come home soon, but first she wants to hear what the men are saying. They are standing around their cooking fire, talking. She sees Vezemba at the fire, and he sees her too, and puts a finger to his lips so they don't see this little girl near them.

She hears The Grumpy One's angry voice. "Who is this man who beats my son?" he shouts. "Why do we let this white man do what he likes?" The Grumpy One is the brother of the Headman. He is always complaining. He once hit Vezemba and Uatavi for waking him up one hot afternoon, when they were playing in the shade of the acacias and didn't even know he was sleeping nearby, and so they have given him this name. But they can't let the adults hear them call him this - they would be in big trouble. Uatavi also secretly thinks he looks like a lizard with his long body and bulging eyes. She often entertains herself with imagining people as animals.

"Why was he so angry?" Vezemba asks, pushing the coals with his stick to get the fire going again. Uatavi admires his bravery. He is lucky the men don't chase him away, this young boy talking like an equal! But everything is upside down tonight, because the omubiva, the order has been disturbed.

"It is the dancing, I think," Uatavi's uncle says, sitting down on a stone. He has worked with the white man, building his new house out of stone and clay, and knows something of his ways. "The white doesn't like dancing. Or smoking."

"How strange," says the grandfather of Tjienja. "Do whites not dance? Or smoke?" The fire flames up, lighting up his wizened face.

“And that young one, the one they call Heining, he has never done that before,” says the father of Rutjindo. “It is this old one, he likes to shout.” Uatavi shivers in memory.

“But that Heining also doesn’t dance or smoke,” says the father of Kejaua. “But he doesn’t shout so much about it. He is a good man. He listens as much as he talks. Not like that old one.” Uatavi likes the father of Kejaua. He is strong, and solid, like his oxen he so adores.

“Both of the whites must leave!” says The Grumpy One. “We don’t want them here.” He waves his hand, gesturing the distance over the hill where the white men must go. “He is going to make the ancestors angry. Look how no-one stayed to tend the sacred fire because of him!”

“We must be careful,” says Uatavi’s uncle. “The white men have powerful magic. They can make fire in an instant with their fingers. I have seen it with my own eyes.” Uatavi looks to see if Vezemba glances in her direction, and sees the whites of his eyes. But he probably can’t see her ‘I told you so’ face.

“Even Jonker Afrikaner is frightened of the whites,” says the father of Rutjindo. “Whites and all their guns. More than Afrikaner has got.”

“No, you are talking like a child,” says the father of Kejaua. “Jonker Afrikaner is frightened of nothing.”

“Where do you think Afrikaner got the guns from in the first place,” says Grumpy One. “The trouble started with the whites, I am telling you the truth.” He waves a bony finger at them all.

“But I have heard that whites never die,” says the father of Tjienja. “They say that they live forever.”

Some of the men all shake their heads in amazement, and fear.

"I don't believe it," snorts Grumpy One. "I have seen their bones pressing through their flesh like any of us, I've seen them sweat and pant like any animal." But the others are not convinced.

Uatavi sneaks off back home before the men can see her. It gives her chills in her bones to think of these everlasting whites. They have brought peace with them, it is true. Since the white has arrived Uatavi's sister has not often cried out in her sleep. She used to dream of Afrikaner's men coming to kill them all again like he nearly did before and cry nearly every night. Their aunt would shake her awake to stop the noise.

But because of that memory of the white's wildness that night, like an animal jumpy under the full moon, Uatavi is glad to hear that they have both gone back to the Cape, to where there are many like them. But sometimes she misses Mr Heining's food, and soon after he goes they move with Headman and the group to the Place of the Rhino to get away from the nearby village who are now working for Afrikaner. And her sister gets nightmares again.

JENNIFER

Dear Rosie

I have so much to say it is hard to know where to begin. I think you have heard before of my desire to dedicate my life to serving the Lord in a way that up till now has been mysterious to me, and that I have felt increasingly frustrated being a governess, as I could be doing so much more to fulfill our Maker's plan for me, if only I knew what it was. Then last Saturday week, calling upon a friend - the wife of a deacon - I received a copy of Mary Ann Hutchins book, a female missionary late of Jamaica. My dear friend also asked me if I was aware of the existence of the Society for Female Education in the Colonies, who prepare their own Agents and send them forth entirely at their own expense. This has made my path clear to me. As I read the beginning chapters of the

book, and thought about an application to the Society, I could scarcely contain my joy, and poured out my heart to my heavenly Father who I believed was opening a door for the accomplishment of His purposes concerning me. For I suddenly knew that here my talents and abilities would be put to good use to the glory of He who made us.

This was one of the first letters of Elizabeth I read, part of a set written in England, describing her long journey to just get to the ship that took her to South Africa. Her clarity of vision, her drive, were so far from where my own life was.

It was at one of the loneliest, emptiest moments of my life. Sitting in the attic, packing up my life. I had been someone, a wife, a mother, the proof was around me. A box with the wedding album and the list we made of our gifts so we could send those scented thank you letters. Rachel and Simon's school reports and certificates still in files, waiting to be fetched. Simon would frame his, Rachel would throw them out. The old floozeball table David had bought for Simon, and had hardly been used because it was the time that the first fights started, and Simon stopped bringing his friends home.

I sat in the dust. I couldn't even weep I felt so hollowed out inside. An everyday tragedy, women and men getting gutted, the knives twisted by their unfaithful partners who didn't notice the blood they spilled. David's first affair. A fucking textbook case. Cellphone messages I checked when I got suspicious. And at the second time even he could see that the price was too high. The organised groomed wife everyone envied him for had disappeared into the wreck I became. Why was it that I still loved him when I could see his weaknesses screaming out from his charming smile, his thinning blonde hair? Was it just that he wasn't mine anymore?

But perhaps it was the old me I missed most, that and my lost life in our beautiful Victorian cottage that I had poured love and energy into, restoring the wooden doors and their frames, the pressed ceilings, and the special curtains I had made from imported linen at my favourite little shop in Muizenberg. And I was there for my children, on their school boards and running the class fete every year getting unprecedented profit. David

teased me about my financial drive - “Now I know we’ll be fine if I ever lose my job,” he’d joke, as I showed him the figures (he was the only one who knew how proud I was, really). And now - now I was alone and pitied, a fucking stereotype.

And what’s more, David had turned Rachel against me, now I was the ‘control-freak’ who couldn’t let go. The unfairness of it choked me up, looking at all of Rachel’s ballet outfits that I had sewed over the years, the old piano books from the lessons that I had driven her to, and the books I had bought her. What had David done except take her side when we fought?

For a moment I had wanted to throw myself out of the window. But it wasn’t high enough, really, and a broken leg on the front lawn wouldn’t have been enough of a statement. And there would be no one to look after me. I remembered caring for my senile mother, for David with his broken arm, Rachel with her pneumonia. I had always been a good nurse. At that point I did start laughing, and crying, at the same time. I rocked myself like a baby, wailing at the top of my emptying house. Is a woman really crying if there is no one to hear her?

I soon pulled myself together. Imagine if the neighbours heard my calls, thought I was being burgled or attacked, how positively embarrassing it would be for them just to see my blotchy face and realise the truth - that I was just a woman losing control. I threw myself into sorting with even more vigour than before, filling up the black bags. I found some dinner plates with gaudy roses and gold gilt we had never liked, and threw one against the wall. So deeply satisfying for a moment. But then of course I would be the one to sweep it up. I resisted the urge to break all of them.

Then I got to the pile of stuff in the corner, untouched for years. My mother’s belongings. She had died in our house, before all of this, when I was the supermom and dutiful daughter. And David had sorted out her things for me, and what he didn’t know what to do with he put up here. I had never looked at them, never sorted them. And when I saw that old polished wooden box that I half-remembered from my childhood, sitting on the

top of the bookcase next to a few other pieces of granny's treasures, and then opened it to find the yellowing letters, I knew that this was a special find. Elizabeth's letters, all packed up in chronological order.

I took the box downstairs, looked for my reading glasses. There was the one smaller couch left that I was taking to the new flat. And there I sat for the next two hours, getting used to Elizabeth's elegant sharp handwriting, deciphering the letters that were crossed to save paper. And I knew then that this was going to be my next project: the woman behind the man.

I knew the basic story that had been told to me, about her courtship, their lives together. But this gave it depth and life. I read and read, gaining comfort from Elizabeth's distant life, and her clear vision of where she was going. I seldom went to church - just used to take the children at Easter, and Christmas, though I went a little more often when Simon wanted to get confirmed. But the familiar Biblical references comforted me, felt like the nourishment I craved. Elizabeth's life was pure and true, so far from the messy modern cliché I was living as the abandoned woman.

Even her early letters after arriving in southern Africa, so sure, so confident she was doing the right thing. How I envied her that lack of doubt.

'*At first I doubt not, many will be the difficulties and trials to be encountered in our intercourse with this nation, as is the case in all heathen countries during the first years of a missionary's residence with them. They have long been willing captives to Satan, and he will not easily bear the spoiling of his kingdom, but we know that the Lord will make of the heathen a people for his name, and we know that He who is for us, is greater than those who are against us, therefore we will not fear. Pray much for us, dearest Rose, pray for my dear Willem, that he may be made a great blessing among a people who are now sitting in darkness, and that he may preach the Gospel in season and out of season, that many may be turned from darkness into light and from the power of Satan unto God. Pray especially that we may be enabled to learn the language, so that we may be more*

useful among them.

March 24 On the 11th, the very day on which I recommenced this letter, much to our joy my beloved husband returned with Mr Klein. They have had much satisfaction in their journey, and I trust have left a blessing behind them through the mercy of God. At several of the villages through which they passed, immense heaps of wild hemp which the people smoke, and which has the same effect upon them that opium has upon those who use it, had been laid up by them to exchange. This our missionaries burnt or threw into the water wherever they came, the people willingly submitting to their loss when told by them how sinful a practice the use of it was.

I am writing on the Sabbath evening, after having a day of blessing in the house of God - we have enjoyed the privilege of again sitting down at the table of our Lord. Oh my dearest Rose, we know not how to value the privileges of our native land till we lose them for a time, and in losing them we are apt to become dead and cold."

I had felt so dead and cold. Elizabeth's letters of her hardships and hopes began to revive me, and the project of uncovering her story gave me a reason to get out of my lonely bed every morning.

UATAVI

"The young one has brought a wife!" Uatavi and her family have moved back to near the missionary's house near the summer marshland after they heard he was returning.
The land has been dry, even the wetland is cracked and parched. Many cattle have weakened and died. And then the locusts have eaten what was left of the grazing. The two scrawny cattle that Uatavi's father had owned are long since gone, and they are cattle-less, worthless, no better than slaves or servants now.

But the humiliation of this is not as consuming as the hunger in their bellies. Uatavi and her aunt have even been out in the morning cool digging for roots to eat. Even Vezemba

and Uatavi have struggled to forget their empty bellies in the long hot afternoons, when they sit in the shade, too tired to do anything. Uatavi doesn't even try to make Vezemba laugh with her stories of what animals she has imagined for the villagers today.

Uatavi's grandmother has even stopped telling her stories, and her aunt is always cross and worried.

So it is good news that the whites have returned. For they all know he will bring food that he gives out to those who help, and to those who are starving.

And now there is this exciting news that he is not alone.

After a few days the call goes out: the children must come to learn from the whites. The children are excited, Uatavi and Vezemba most of all. "Maybe we will get sugar!" says Vezemba, as they sit on their favourite boulder that has a steep side they can slide off on days where their bellies are not eating them from the inside. "Last time Reverend Heining gave my mother sugar. It is the best thing I have ever tasted in my life."

"What does it taste like?" Uatavi asks, gently pushing a little red spider next to her with a stick, to get it to move away.

"Like nothing I have ever tasted before," Vezemba replies. He leans over and flicks the spider with his finger; it shoots into the bush. "Maybe honey. Remember that honey that I found, where Kauveni was stung and we had to run and my father was angry. It tastes even better than that."

Uatavi's mouth watered. She is starving for any food - she has been hoping to find some succulent worms to eat - and this sounds too good to even imagine. Uatavi also can't imagine a woman. "What will she look like?" Uatavi wants to know. "And will she wear the same strange clothes as the men?"

About ten of them arrive expectantly at the white's place. They are crowded into a shelter that the men have just built, a little way from the main house where the whites live. It has a thatched roof but no walls. There is no food in sight, and the sun is low on the horizon, catching them in its already powerful glare. Daniel, the poor brown one who speaks for the whites, is there next to Reverend Heining and he is telling them what Reverend Heining is saying, talking about gods and spirits and magic. But Uatavi isn't listening, has even forgotten the hole in her belly, because she has just seen the woman walking towards them.

The first thing she notices is that the woman is wrapped in cloth, from head to foot, even more than the men, as if she has been wrapped to pack and move to another grazing place. And the second thing Uatavi notices is her hair. It is not black and short, like Reverend Heining. It is brown, and long and straight, and woven on her head. The other girls have noticed too. They look at each other. And then they run to her, putting their hands to her hair.

The old reverend is there too, the one Daniel calls Klein, and they call Goat-beard. He comes forward and slaps their arms down. Uatavi nearly runs away, but he does not go wild, and his sjambok is not nearby. And the young Reverend Heining speaks softly and points to the floor and they all sit down again.

"It was softer than a calf's tail," Uatavi whispers to Vezemba, her eyes wide.

"Listen now children to the word of God," Daniel intones. His voice is low and even after Reverend Heining's loud shouting with his strange sounds. Uatavi tries to listen - what is this god story he is telling? but she cannot stop looking at the white woman. And the woman was looking at them too, watching them like she wants to eat them up, like she is trying to put them in her eyes forever. Their eyes meet, and Uatavi looks down quickly - she knows she must not look adults in the eye. But she is sure the woman smiled. She peeks up, and it's true, the woman is smiling straight at Uatavi, as if she can see inside her. Uatavi forgets her hunger, her impatient waiting for the bread. She is fascinated by

this woman staring at her. She smiles, a tiny smile, and then quickly looks down again.

Once Daniel has stopped speaking about strange things, like the white god who has eyes everywhere - Uatavi starts imagining trees with eyes at the end of their branches - and how the children must come every day to learn new things, the children get up to go. "Mrs Heining will give you something at the house," he says. They all know what that means, and they start scrambling up to run to be first to get something to eat.

Goat-beard thunders a word and the children sink to the floor again, their eyes wide. None of them have forgotten that night under the full moon. "Wait, children," Daniel translates, but his tone is gentle. The three whites walk out to the house, their shadows long, giant locusts in the evening sun. Only once they have disappeared inside does Daniel nod, and the children all run through the dust and scrub to get there first.

The woman opens the door of the white house, and Reverend Heining is behind her. There is a large container in his hands. The children jump to look inside to see what they are getting. But then Goat-beard comes out, shouts again, and pulls them physically into a line, like a row of ants. Uatavi shivers at his strong hand on her arm, but she is too hungry to run away. And she wants to see the woman up close. One by one the children come to the front to be given a piece of bread.

When it is her turn the woman looks into the container, finds a piece that is bigger than the others. They smile at each other.

"Give me some of that," Vezemba says, running after her on the way home. "She should have given me more than you, I'm a boy." She laughs, and gives some to him. But inside she feels full as if she has eaten it all.

"Wasn't she beautiful?" she says to Vezemba.

"Who?" he replies.

“The white woman.”

Vezemba looks at her. “Are you mad? She is even whiter than her husband. And you even said she had a calf’s tail on her head.”

Uatavi is sad that Vezemba does not share her admiration for Mrs Heining. Up till now she and Vezemba have shared most things.

The rains come, and Headman and some others with big flocks move away to the flat lands with their cattle, to find the greener pastures. But Uatavi and her family stay near to the whites. They have no cattle, and the whites give her uncle meat when he helps them build, or look after their animals, or chop wood. Her uncle has started walking with his back straighter, and is not as silent as he was.

Uatavi starts going to what is called school, held in that basic hut near the whites’ house. But Mrs Heining doesn’t always come. Daniel or the reverend teaches them, and Uatavi discovers that she likes the feel of new words in her mouth, giving her as exotic tastes as the new food whites have, like sugar, rice, salt. She never thought of language before, of how something that you thought was so solid has a pattern just under the surface, a pattern that you can break into colours and shapes, and then put together again. She looks at the river, and calls it two names - its own name, and now the new name she has learned from the whites. “What are you doing, my child,” her aunt rebukes her as they are milking their neighbours’ cattle in the evening, and Uatavi’s hands have almost stopped squeezing because she is trying to sort out the new names and words mixing in her mind - brown, skin, spot, male, human, animal - and work out how to use them.

“Sorry, Mama,” she says, and comes back to feel the teats under her hands, the warm flank of her favourite ox pressing on her head. But her mind keeps buzzing like a beehive. She is surprised no one else can hear it.

“Stop using those words!” Vezemba shouts one day as she comes to visit him near the cattle one afternoon. He is sitting atop a rock, chewing a piece of grass. Now that his father has some more cattle that he is herding, he has changed, avoiding her when they could have spent time together. The rich families have left, so he is one of the few to boast a healthy little herd. She knows the other boys tease him, having a girl for a friend, and now she is going mad with her strange words she likes to throw at him. She is sad when he says that, because he was the only person she trusted to hear her practise, and now she cannot even share these new names with him.

She sits with him a while on the rock for a while, because she doesn’t want him to be cross with her, and they talk about the different cattle. She whispers the English words for their colours under her breath.

Some of the other girls go to school with her, but they only go to get the food in their stomachs, and do not share her interest in the new words they learn.

One day Uatavi is passing the missionaries’ house. She can see Mrs Heining through the open door. Her belly is swelling, Uatavi has noticed it before. White, but still a woman. Uatavi slows down, tries to see what Mrs Heining is doing. It looks like a strange dance around a stick. But she doesn’t look like she’s enjoying it. She looks tired and cross. Uatavi wonders what strange ritual this is - the whites are full of inexplicable behaviours and beliefs, constantly trying to please this God who spends all his time watching them from the sky. Uatavi has scanned the blue for him, and sometimes thinks she has seen him, but perhaps it is just the clouds.

Mrs Heining looks up, sees Uatavi and beckons her. Uatavi comes in, steps into the house. It is a new house, recently built, made of stone, bigger than anything she has been in. It feels so dark, so big compared to her own hut where she sleeps with her aunt and her cousin. Different walls rush to crash into each other at the sides, not like the gentle curves she is used to. There is a strange overpowering smell that almost makes her sneeze. But she stays. She wants Mrs Heining to like her, and she wants to learn. She

looks at Mrs Heining and takes the stick from her. Surely she can do whatever Mrs Heining does with the stick to help her.

Uatavi starts pushing it as Mrs Heining was doing. Mrs Heining makes a noise, points to where she wants Uatavi to push it. And Uatavi suddenly sees that her stick is collecting the dust, herding it outside. She pushes vigorously, herding all the sand she can see, and Mrs Heining nods, pleased.

"Thank you for helping me sweep," she says. Uatavi repeats the words - "Thank you for helping me sweep." Mrs Heining laughs, and repeats the words slowly, and Uatavi imitates her again. Mrs Heining goes to a wooden box and takes out a piece of bread that she gives to Uatavi. And she also finds a flat round piece of metal that she puts into Uatavi's hand, and then strokes her cheek. She speaks. Uatavi doesn't understand everything, but she thinks she knows what the words mean. Mrs Heining wants her to come herding the inside earth again.

She runs home, excited.

On the way home she sees Vezemba. The other boys are not around, so now he is friendly. "Where have you been?" He has found a dead snake, he tells her, and he wants to show her without the adults seeing. Something stops her from telling him where she was. He doesn't like the whites and she doesn't want to argue with him again.

JENNIFER

The next day I put on more make-up than before, wore my sleek black dress that I thought I would only wear if I had to go to a meeting with anyone - my bulldozer dress, David used to call it, and tease me that I looked even more official than his corporate woman partners as I went off to some school board meeting where I needed everyone on my side. This outfit would show Ndiriro that I was to be taken seriously.
But as I walked through the streets again I could feel my body damp under the tight black

material, and I wished I had worn my linens again. My face felt bright pink as I arrived at the archives, and it felt like my make-up was probably melting off my face.

Ndiriro was there, calm and collected, sitting at her desk, talking on her phone. Next to her were posters on the wall of the famous Herero outfits. I went over to look at them to give my face a chance to cool. One was well known, iconic, with the gaudy colours, the horns, the woman's bright smile.

"That is my grandmother." I heard Ndiriro's voice behind me.

I turned, surprised. "That is such a famous photograph - it's beautiful. She is well-known."

"Not really." Ndiriro didn't smile back. "Read the caption at the bottom."

I peered closely. "A Herero woman in her traditional dress, a style that was adapted from early Victorian missionaries. Photo by Guy Langdon."

I must have read the words before, many times. But only now I noticed that the woman's name was not there. I felt, awkward, uncomfortable, as if it was my fault. "Well she's beautiful anyway," I said, and moved away, closer to Ndiriro's desk. "Did you find me that article?"

She half-shrugged. "I will look for it now." She still acted like I had no right to read her materials, even after she had implied that I hadn't been thorough enough in my research. But I didn't care. It was her job, and she should do it with a better grace. Wasn't it important in African culture that young people respected their elders?

A bit more respect would be appreciated, I thought to myself as I waited, scanning my file of Elizabeth's letters typed out that I always carried with me, to match their dates with the notes I had taken the day before. There was a flurry of long letters in the

beginning, from when she arrived. Then a gap as they moved further north, to start their own mission. Perhaps I could find information about that journey.

Once they arrived, and they started a family, her letters became more regular again. She described her children's birth's so matter-of-factly, just one event in a list of many. Far removed from the team of gynaecologists, nurses and midwives who helped to bring my children to life through a tiny cut on my bikini line.

It is singular that our dear little one barely escaped being strangled in the birth by the navel thong around his neck. I think I forgot to mention to you that I had a sharp labour of twelve hours. I was attacked by violent spasms during the labour. But I gathered a little strength towards the end. The wife of the chief of this tribe acted as midwife and has much commended herself to us by her patience and her prudence. She asks nothing for her trouble, but we intend making her a useful present when our supplies arrive from the Cape - we hope the wagons are now on the return.

School is commenced for the children. Slowly some of the greatest difficulties of the language are slowly being overcome, but fluency in speaking is now most required. We have the help of Daniel who has been my dear Willem's help for a few years now. But other than that it is a slow and arduous journey to learn the language fully enough to spread the word of God.

In your letter you ask me in the name of your dear boy William what I have done with the halfpenny and to whom have I given it. I have given it to a little Omuherero girl who does not yet know the value of it but will, I hope, one day. Give my best love to your William, and ask him to pray for the poor little Omuherero children, who so long as they are without the Gospel, are learning from the example and teaching of their parents, everything that is bad and sinful.

Ndiriro dropped the journal at my table and then left before I could thank or acknowledge her. I looked after her - she was dressed in dark muted colours, but again her shoes were

bright - today she wore mustard-coloured sandals with embroidered purple designs. At least their heels didn't clip-clop on the floor as she moved around the shelves like her other shoes. But she had an elegance that I wished for Rachel, who would never wear shoes that I could possibly imagine putting on my feet, instead wearing big boots more suitable for soldiers.

I pulled the journal towards me to begin reading.

A while later I looked up. I could hear the lights buzzing, or the air conditioner. The carpet was brown and institutional. I had to get out.

But my eyes were drawn towards the paragraphs I had just read, words that mocked me in a shake-up of my research, my story.

Mary (then called Uatavi) was instrumental in the translation work of Reverend Heining, and in the school run by Mrs Heining. Before she arrived there were few girls at the school. But a few weeks after she had become part of the household, the classes were thriving. The only explanation could be the work of Mary, as Mrs Heining could not speak Herero…

Mary was fluent in German as well as English. According to her, she weighed up nearly every word with Heining for his Bible translation which earned him a Doctorate. However she does not appear in his autobiography, is not acknowledged in his translations, and is only hinted at in Mrs Heining's letters. She is an invisible woman of history.

I knew Elizabeth's letters to her sister intimately. And there were no regular mentions of a woman named Uatavi. In fact the characters that peopled the letters were Elizabeth and her family - the Herero remained a plural, with only a few individual names emerging here and there, but no more than that. If this Uatavi was true, then it was someone who had lived with Elizabeth, been an integral part of her life, yet she was hardly written

about. But why? Why would Elizabeth leave someone out in this way?

And this was a problem. I had written about Elizabeth being overlooked. And now this writer was saying that there was someone in the shadows behind Elizabeth herself? I couldn't believe it.

I left the archives to find a drink at a nearby café. I had given up Coke years ago, but I found myself craving its cold sweetness, its comforting sameness to those cokes I bought and sipped for the braais we hosted those many years ago, those smoky Sunday afternoons. David prided himself on his braaing skills.

I sat on a little plastic chair on the grime of the pavement. My head was reeling, going around in the same circles it had started in the archives. If she was so important, I thought, why had she not been mentioned in the letters, in Heining's autobiography? For there were few words describing her, I was sure. I couldn't believe it, I wouldn't believe it. No, this was just a case of a student fattening up his thesis, creating pictures where there were too few dots. What better than a neglected Herero woman - perfect for the politically correct historian who would be evaluating the work. I just needed to go back to the article, look up the references, and see that it was postulating rather than any serious scholarship.

I got back to the cool air of the archives with relief, and settled down to look at the references. As I thought - 'personal letters in the author's possession,' said two. But I knew I should see for myself, one way or the other. I needed to sort this out. I looked at the author's name. Karune Gertze.

I walked over to where Ndiriro was sitting. "Who is Karune Gertze?" I asked. "Would it be possible to meet him or her?"

There was a silence. For a moment I thought that Ndiriro was going to pretend I wasn't there. Then she looked up at me, and her face looked sad, more vulnerable than I had ever

seen her. “She was a good friend of mine,” she answered. “She was killed in a car accident last year.”

I had a brief feeling of sadness for the death of a young woman I didn’t know, and relief that this track was petering out. “And the personal letters she mentions in this article,” I asked. “Where are they now?”

“We have tried to find them,” she said. It felt like the first time she was talking to me, looking at me. I knew she was telling the truth. “No-one knows where she stored them. But they belonged to her ancestors, like yours. And no there isn’t a trace anywhere.”

I went back to my desk. The journal was closed. I could carry on. But I felt flustered and unsettled. I turned back to my flip file of Elizabeth’s letters. It opened on one of the earlier pages, where she had just had her first child, was still adjusting to the demands of the new mission.

‘I am sorry to say the country is in a sad state, this poor dark people robbed and murdered without mercy by their relentless enemies, Afrikaner and his men, who have come from the south. They are descended from slaves and sinners, and have the cunning of natives and the guns and skills of whites. It is a most distressing time, and were it not that many poor are gathered around us and that to them the Gospel is preached, there would be little or no missionary work to be done, as only a few rich families live near us and they seldom enter the church. “How hardly shall they that have riches enter the Kingdom of Heaven.” The riches of the Ovaherero, their flocks and herds, are their Gods, and it appears almost an impossibility for them to receive the Truth while they have them. It may be the Lord is preparing them for its reception by His present dealings with them through these wars and droughts.

May I suggest that if you hear at any time any kind friend expressing a wish to send something to us, a few useful articles for the amusement of our dear child would be most acceptable. It is our aim as much as possible to keep our beloved one from the

contamination of the heathen children who constantly beset our doors, and without proper indoor employment and amusements it is very, very difficult, engaged so fully as I am and obliged so often to leave them alone. Children are children and seek the society of such.

I have on occasion had to rebuke my maid very severely in her wanton disregard for the orders I have given her regarding the heathen visitors. Oh, Rosie, when I think of the children's room where I worked as governess for Tessa, I shudder and almost give in to the sin of despair when I compare it to the degraded social discourse evident here amongst the Herero. So little self control and dignity is evident, there is so much for these poor people to learn!

Their practices are beset with sins. One of them is dancing, a sin that runs in the Herero almost as powerfully as their blood. However I know it is not reserved for them alone. We see this sin amongst our own people, and there are some who even question the Lord's bidding. Contemplating the vice, I have to say my full conviction is that if for the Lord's sake we set aside any sinful custom which has been in use even for centuries, He will more than make it up to us in this life and in that to come. Let us, especially in these latter times, pray to be kept from a worldly, accommodating spirit and keep true to the Light we know is holy.

My husband is patient with these poor people, guiding them with wisdom and perseverance, even as they stray from the path daily. But Rosie, our difficulty is finding fertile ground to plant the seeds of knowledge.

The letters failed to comfort me as much as usual. For the first time her staunch beliefs were not such an inspiration, and I felt a twinge of impatience for her Victorian moralizing. But worse, wondered what she wasn't telling me. I had never thought of her as hiding things from me before.

UATAVI

Slowly, after days, and then seasons, Uatavi has become part of the whites' world, their servant and helper. Her days are no longer shaped by the morning and evening milking of the Headman's cattle, their thin rubber teats that she had to squeeze to get the few drops of milk to pour in the calabashes for the morning blessing from the ancestors. Instead every morning she makes the fire in the kitchen, and then joins the Heinings for prayers, when Reverend Heining speaks to their God and asks him for help and guidance.

Mostly it has happened without her noticing. First it was just a day or two every so often. Then they asked her come tomorrow, and tomorrow. And now it is nearly every day. She was happy to get the messages, as Vezemba was gone with his family to join the Headman, and she was tired, tired of scraping around for food, tired of seeing her aunt's taut face as they dug for the roots that clung hard to the dry hard soil. There are few cattle in the village kraal now, and their milk is scarce.

Her father and her aunt are pleased. She comes back with food for them, maize, dried meat. And she heard her aunt say to her father, "The whites are here to stay, I am sure of that. It will be good for the girl to speak their tongue, know their ways."

But not everyone is pleased. The other girls who also helped every now and then, they look at her sideways when she is called back. "You think you are so much better than us," one says, as she walks back one day. "But no man likes a girl who works for the whites. No-one will marry you."

"No-one would have married her anyway," says the other girl. "Her family is without cattle - why would any man want to pay bridewealth for her?"

The words hurt her. But there is just a tiny stone of truth to be found in them. All her life she has been known as the child of a man who was once a slave, from a family with little and now no cattle. The other rich children who came with big herds had looked down on

her. And now, for the first time in her life, she is special. And that gnawing of hunger that eats you from the inside is now just a memory. When Mrs Heining complains about the food, and how little of it there is, Uatavi just smiles to herself.

She still loves Mrs Heining, still feels the awe she first felt. And Mrs Heining makes Uatavi a dress. First she makes Uatavi wash herself in water. “I don’t know why you people put that stuff on your skin,” she says, as she hands Uatavi a cloth to dry herself. Uatavi remembers how she and Vezemba laughed at Mr Klein washing himself that day. She wonders what Vezemba would say if he could see her now. Once her skin is dry, it feels stripped like leather, thirsty for the fat her friends spread on her, softening her skin. But she says nothing as Mrs Heining helps her with the dress. She has a moment of panic as she is swallowed in cloth, and can hardly breathe. But then her head pops through and she sees Mrs Heining laughing at her shocked face. The dress feels scratchy on her skin, and heavy on her shoulders, trapping her so that it is hard to walk, even to breathe. But it is all worth it when Mrs Heining claps her hands. “Uatavi, you look so beautiful!” There are round things called buttons, like tiny little moons, smooth under her fingers, and they slip into their neat holes to keep the dress tightly shut. Her fingers fumble. She can’t believe how quickly Mrs Heining can close the buttons.

Then Mrs Heining takes Uatavi to her mirror in her bedroom. Uatavi cannot believe that it is her brown face above that long dress. She smiles, touches the cloth. “It is so lovely.”

Mrs Heining strokes her face. “You look like a real little Christian.”

But later as she stokes the fire, she hears Mrs Heining shouting, “Uatavi! Be careful of your dress. Look at yourself!” And she sees the black smudges on the skirt. And then it feels like she is pushing through a river with a strong current as she goes to fetch the washing. And Mrs Heining is calling again. “You are letting it get dragged in the dirt, Uatavi, and be careful of brushing it against the acacia thorns.” And Uatavi wants to rip it off and go home where she did not have to worry about such things. But slowly, or quickly, Uatavi gets used to the rhythm of her new days, the feel of the material covering

her body, until there become days when she feels unfinished when she is in the village, and she has no covering.

She loves Mrs Heining, and in the beginning Mrs Heining seems to love her. She gives her extra lessons, all on her own, and claps excitedly when Uatavi gets the right answer. Sometimes she even kisses Uatavi's forehead, and holds her hand as they walk to the storeroom. And it feels so different from Uatavi's aunt, who is always worried about something, and who seldom speaks words of love and encouragement.

But after the birth of Joseph, Mrs Heining no longer seems to love her. Or even Reverend Heining. She gets angry with him and Uatavi for small things, like if Reverend Heining slams a door, or Uatavi forgets to put the spoons in the right place on the table. It still surprises her how Mrs Heining can talk to the reverend as an equal, let alone a naughty child. For her the reverend is almost the face of the God he is always talking about. She is still wary of him, even though he is always kind to her, never raising his voice like Mrs Heining.

One day she hears Mrs Heining and Reverend Heining talking loudly in their room.
"I didn't know it was going to be like this," Mrs Heining says. "The dust, the heathens who are so deaf to the word of God."

"Lizzie, you knew it was not going to be easy," Reverend Heining answers. "I pray that you find comfort in your life here. You were doing so well with the school."

"They only come to the school because they are hungry," cries Mrs Heining. "They pretend to be listening, and learning, but once they have food they slip away and ignore me calling them. They are so ungrateful. And we haven't even had one convert yet. This is no life for Joseph, Hugo. Who is he to play with?'

Then she hears Mrs Heining start crying, and the reverend talking in low murmurs.

Uatavi does not understand all she hears, but she understands enough. The words have wrenched her heart. She thought Mrs Heining loved her, if no one else here in the village. But Mrs Heining didn't even mention her. Is she so little a part of Mrs Heining's life? The reverend comes out of the room, sees her. "Uatavi, Mrs Heining is tired. Will you manage the school for a few days?"

"Yes, reverend," she says.

"Thank you my dear girl," he says. "You are a great help." Uatavi tries to smile. But her heart is still sore.

Soon Mrs Heining is up and about again. Her temper has improved. She is becoming more and more dependent on Uatavi for her every day comfort, even if she doesn't love her like she used to.

"Your English is improving so dramatically, Uatavi," she says. And she smiles at Uatavi again, her real smiles that lights up her whole face so that Uatavi wants to do anything to see that smile shine on her again, and forgets about her cruel words. And Uatavi does please Mrs Heining, for Uatavi learns fast, not only the words and how to use a knife and fork (which still strikes her as crazy behavior, when fingers are far more efficient) but also how to read the causes of what makes Mrs Heining's forehead crumple like skin on sour milk, and what will make it smooth out again.

Soon Uatavi is the only person Mrs Heining allows to look after baby Joseph. Uatavi speaks simple English to Joseph: *bed, food, sand, wash* are the words they share.

Uatavi grows to love him. Seldom has she just been able to be with a baby without doing so many other chores at the same time, so she notices him more than she has noticed all the other little ones she has tended. She loves the serious way he considers something as she gives it to him, and how persistent he is about getting his little body mobile as he starts to crawl. And the way he gurgles at her when she makes a funny face at him, or

sings. And he loves her too, smiling and holding out his arms when she comes near.

As the days grow warmer, a group returns to the village with their cattle, and Uatavi's heart jumps when she visits her aunt, because she recognises some of Vezemba's father's cattle being herded home. She has not seen him for a while. She remembers their games, before he stopped wanting to play with her, and as she plays with Joseph, she remembers how babies love Vezemba, and he loves them too. He would make them scream with laughter as he swung them up and down, and then he would do his own tricks of hanging upside down and bringing his face so close so suddenly they would screech with fright and excitement.

So one morning she invites Vezemba to visit them. Mrs Heining is busy making candles, and Katazuma is helping her. The fire is already down to coal in the fireplace outside, and the tin buckets of animal fat are ready for Katazuma and Mrs Heining to dip the strings in.

Mrs Henning has Joseph on her hip as she is trying to hang the strings ready for the dipping onto a branch of the thorn tree. She just about throws Joseph to Uatavi. She doesn't see Vezemba.

"Keep Joseph away from here," she says. "He could get burnt."

So it is Vezemba, Joseph and Uatavi. Vezemba was keen to come because Uatavi told him he will get some food. Besides, he also missed Uatavi, and wants to see her away from the village boys who tease them so.

At first Joseph is not very sure of Vezemba. He clings to Uatavi as Vezemba starts his tricks. But slowly as Vezemba runs and grunts like a baboon, and falls over his feet, and waves his feet in the air, Joseph starts to laugh. He crawls to join Vezemba and for a moment they are like two puppies rolling on each other.

“Uatavi! what is the meaning of this!” Uatavi hears Mrs Heining’s voice as sharp as lightning. She has come outside, and her cheeks are bright pink. Uatavi is confused - she looks around to see what is broken that has caused the rage. But everything is in its place as she likes it.

Uatavi looks at her again, and sees that she is looking at Joseph. Uatavi looks at him too. He is covered in sand, and his clothes are brown with earth. She has forgotten how dirt is such an evil for Mrs Heining.

“I am sorry, Mrs Heining, I will clean him,” she stammers. But now Mrs Heining is looking at Vezemba, who is half sitting up with Joseph on top of him, pulling his ears to try to get him to play more. “Who is this wild creature?” she asks.

“This is Vezemba, my cousin’s child,” Uatavi says.

“They seem to be all your cousin’s children, Uatavi,” she says. Uatavi is confused. “What is he doing here? I did not invite him. Tell him to leave at once.”

Vezemba turns back to Joseph, pushing him softly on to the ground, then nuzzling his tummy with his nose. Mrs Heining swoops down and grasps Joseph’s arm, pulling him away and up onto her hip.

Joseph starts crying at her roughness.

“That boy is just upsetting him. Go now, before I get angry.” She is shouting at Vezemba’s face now. Vezemba does not understand what she says but he can understand her voice.

“What is she saying?” he says. Uatavi tells him he must go, and his face too screws up with anger. “You promised me the whites’ bread,” he says to Uatavi. “I came here to help. It’s your fault.”

Uatavi feels terrible. He's right. She brought him here, and she should have known that it wouldn't work. She tries to explain to Mrs Heining. "Mrs Heining," she says. But she cannot carry on. Her English has dried up in the face of Mrs Heining's fury.

She cannot deal with both of them. "I will bring you something," she says to Vezemba. "Go and I will find you."

Vezemba looks at Mrs Heining. Uatavi is shocked at how he stares. He knows he should not look at an adult in this way. But Vezemba is always one to shake the tree, when the others just accepted that the fruit was out of reach. Then he walks away slowly, whistling to himself.

"Stop that noise!" Mrs Heining says sharply. Uatavi does not translate. She wishes he would walk away faster.

"I am disappointed in you," says Mrs Heining to Uatavi. "I thought you knew better." This is a new word for Uatavi, *disappointed*. She loves new words, shapes them with her tongue. But she doesn't like this one. She can guess what it means. And suddenly Uatavi feels ashamed, ashamed of making Mrs Heining angry, ashamed of upsetting Vezemba. She watches as Mrs Heining strides inside with the snivelling Joseph on her hip. For a moment she wants to run after Vezemba. But she doesn't. She picks up Joseph's blanket and beautiful round ball that all other boys want, and takes them inside.

PART TWO

JENNIFER

It was lonely going to supper on my own, in this dingy second-rate hotel. I thought it would feel liberating - here I was, doing research in a foreign town, a professional woman, not a failed wife. But as I sat there looking at the menu a couple came in, about my age. He was balding, with a kind smooth face, like an overgrown baby, and she was plump and dowdy, bulging out in a brown nylon dress. He went round to pull her chair out, and she sat down without thanking him, or even looking at him. He sat down opposite her and she opened up her bag, taking out two pairs of glasses for them. They put them on and scrutinised the menu without saying a word to each other.

And I felt a wave of envy for this ridiculous style-less conservative couple who shared their rituals, were so part of each other's world. I knew I was being absurd, that they were not my sort of people, that I knew nothing about them anyway - maybe behind their neat lawn and front door with a singing doorbell he drank too much and beat her up. But right then I wanted someone opposite me to ask me what I wanted, and how I was. My eyes misted up in tears and I could hardly read the words on the paper in front of me.

My appetite gone, I just ate some stringy meat and dry potato as quickly as possible and went back to my room. I sat at the little table with my laptop yawning in front of me. But I had nothing to write. I snapped it shut, went to splash water on my face.

It was then I noticed the tiny strip of grey at my roots and felt even worse. Of course. I had forgotten my appointment before I left, and now here I was far from anywhere that used the hypoallergenic dye Lorenzo kept for me. How could I have been so foolish! How long would it take for this grey to grow, to eat into my auburn red?

I went back to my laptop, trying to find hairdressers in Windhoek. I found a few, but their adverts looked cheap, unconvincing. And I could not bear the idea of the kind of

chemicals they would burn me with. It would have to be hats and scarves to hide the grey till I got home.

This made me think of Rachel, and the ridiculous hats she wore, like the one that David said was like a neon version of what his granny used to wear. Rachel, for some reason, had taken this as a compliment. It had been at one of the many Sunday lunches that I tried to insist the children come home for. Rachel would complain, but she still came - probably the only good meal she got for the weekend.

I thought back to it, to myself then, unaware of what was about to hit me. I had been dieting, holding back on the wine, the pudding. It had been my favourite cheesecake, but I had noticed that I had put on a kilogram or so and so had hardly had any as I dished out generous helpings for everyone else.

Now I was at least four kilograms lighter. My flesh has shrivelled up, along with my desire for cheesecake. I should have enjoyed it all when I still could.

But then I was unaware of all that was to befall me.

“Oh, Mom, my favourite,” Simon had said as I served him. I remember him looking so fresh-faced as always, in his blue pinstriped cotton shirt, his neatly pressed pants. So different from Rachel, who even besides her hat, looked like she had cobbled together her outfit with a variety of floral cushion discards.

“Little bit heavy-handed with the lemon in this one, Mom,” said Rachel, criticising as usual. But now I remembered how David had defended me, told me how delicious it was.

“You are a star cook, darling,” he had said. That should have been a sign. He seldom gave me compliments, seldom stood up for me. Except when he felt guilty about something. What a fool I was not to pick it up.

I tried to phone Simon, but his phone just went to voicemail. I knew he was on a business trip. Perhaps it was time to speak to Rachel, see if we could have a conversation without fighting for once. I dialled her number, felt my heart rate increasing. What sort of mother was I that I was nervous to speak to my own daughter?

She sounded as guarded as me on the phone. “Hi, Mom. How’s the research going?”
A safe topic. “All fine, darling.” I tried to think of details. “Found an article that seemed to indicate some maid that was critical in Elizabeth’s life, but there is hardly mention of her in the letters, really. I’m sure it was just a historian twisting things for her own agenda. You know how politically correct things are these days.” I gave a little laugh.

“Sounds like you’re dismissing it without really investigating,” she replied.

I felt my heart increase again, this time with anger. “I don’t think you really know what you are talking about.”

“Oh come on, Mom, you’re never really good at looking at things from someone else’s point of view, are you?” said Rachel. “Especially when you’ve made up your mind. Then nothing can shift you.”

I could feel the heat of anger suffuse me. I was not going to be goaded into losing my temper. It wasn’t true! Rachel always knew how to get to me. “Why, Rachel, when I’m just trying to have a normal conversation with you, do you have to bring up the same fight? I wasn’t even talking about your life.”

“Well nor was I!” said Rachel. “This has got nothing to do with me!” There was a pause. “I was just saying that maybe you should look into it more, Mom. That’s all.”

“When I want your advice, I’ll ask for it,” I said.

The conversation was now thoroughly ruined. Who was my daughter to tell me about my

failings?

I wished I was still a smoker. Then I could drag on the cigarette to blank out my mind. But I wasn't. David and I had given up years ago, together, when I was pregnant with Simon. So I was left with Rachel's words, and they rankled. She made me sound so unreasonable, so closed minded. And I wasn't. I was no longer a suburban mother with set ways. I was a researcher, making judicious decisions. Surely I would have found more references to Uatavi in the letters if she was there. But perhaps I hadn't been looking. I took out my flip file. What was I missing?

The school is on the whole well attended, in the latter time particularly several children of the rich have attended. Mr Kolbe, who is highly gifted with poetical and musical talent, has composed many suitable hymns, some of which the children can already sing correctly, and I can assure you it is with no small pleasure I see a group on the ground singing hymns.

The education and disposal of the children of missionaries is one of their greatest trials. I think it is my greatest, for being so necessarily much occupied, from sheer necessity my own baker, soap-boiler, candle-maker, dairy woman, needle-woman, nurse, cook etc etc you may well suppose that my dear lambs cannot get so much of my time as I would most gladly give them, and they are unavoidably so exposed to the evil examples of the heathen children that we sometimes are very anxious about them.

I soon hope to hear from you, my dearest Rosie, and by another opportunity to write more to you. My dear husband and Joseph unite with me in much love to you, and Gita too, if she could talk! We all hope, if it be the Lord's will, once more to meet.

For the first time I wondered about Elizabeth's domestic help. Was Elizabeth really doing everything all on her own? Surely there would have been people helping her.
I read on. And found this. Surely this must have been Uatavi!

Even my maid, who has been with us enough to know better, can be dull and obtuse as she misunderstands our instructions and directions. As Willem learns more of the language he can hear how she butchers his simple commands and requests, couching them in her own vernacular, distorting the message so it becomes like third hand neighbourhood gossip. But still Willem uses her for his Bible translations, even as he complains about her skills, and I sometimes wonder if he does it to tease me when I need her to help me with the daily chores. However she means well, I believe, and Joseph adores her. She is the only other person, besides Willem and I, with whom we trust him.

UATAVI

Uatavi is in the kitchen, stoking the coals so they are right for the soft white dough to bake into bread. It is early in the morning, but it is already hot. Uatavi can see Mrs Heining's pink face as she walks into the room. But she is not only pink from the heat. "Where is that water tub?" She is angry. Uatavi takes a sharp breath. She knows exactly where it's gone. Many villagers have returned with the Headman and the sacred fire. One of them is her cousin Kazeri, who, when sees all these things of the whites, his fingers lengthen like a chameleon's tongue.

"Did you see anything?" she asks Uatavi. "Get up, Uatavi, I have told you before, it is rude if you do not speak to people's faces. Stop looking down."

Uatavi stands up slowly. "No," she replies. She wonders if the white God will know she is lying. But she did not see anyone take it. She just knows where it is, for when she went to take some cooked stew to her aunt last night, she saw the tub outside Kazeri's hut. She turns back to the dough, and kneads it vigorously.

"You don't need to knead it anymore," Mrs Heining says. "Put it in now, and hurry up for school." Uatavi is relieved when she leaves the kitchen. Her own face feels hot now, and not only from the stove as she slides the white loaves in.

All day Uatavi worries that Mrs Heining is short with her, as if she suspects something. But then as they are coming home after the sewing lesson, on the way to prepare the evening meal, she says, "What would I ever do without you, Uatavi?" And Uatavi's heart lightens.

But then at dinnertime Uatavi realises that Mrs Heining is not going to forget about the water bucket, even though there are seven more in the storeroom. Reverend Heining has thanked God for the meal, and Uatavi is serving the meat, putting an extra juicy piece on to Joseph's plate because she knows he loves his food so, when the topic comes up again. "We have to do something about it, Willem, because otherwise our kitchen is going to end up in all the huts and we will be the laughing-stock of the village," says Mrs Heining.

"Careful with that jug, Uatavi, I don't want it broken like the other one."

"A water bucket," Willem says, questioning. "You want me to find a water bucket?"

"It's not just the water bucket," she says. "Willem, you are their spiritual leader, they need to learn about stealing. And what better way to teach them than to have a practical example on our doorstep?" She takes a bite of bread. "You took it out a little late, Uatavi, it's on the hard side."

"I think it's delicious, Uatavi," says Joseph. "Can I have some more?"

She cuts him another slice, her dear boy.

Willem sighs. "I know you are right, my dearest," he says. "But we are making good headway. The Sunday services are growing in numbers. I don't want to spoil it for a water bucket."

"You will strengthen it, not spoil it," Mrs Heining says. "Stealing is stealing, Willem, and we are doing them a disservice if we allow it."

“May I be excused?” Joseph asks. He has heard the calls of the children who are playing outside just before it gets dark, that precious time when the chores are over and adults are not too near.

“You may, Joseph, but you are not to go and play with the heathens,” Mrs Heining says, and Uatavi see Joseph’s face fall.

“Mama,” he laments.

“You have heard your mother,” Reverend Heining says sternly. “Stay inside and read the book you got for Christmas.”

Joseph starts snivelling until he sees Uatavi. “Can Uatavi play with me?”

“Not for long, Joseph, she needs to clean the kitchen.”

Both Joseph and Uatavi have heard the ‘yes’ in that answer. They go outside. The sky is pink from the vanishing sun, with tangled wisps of clouds . Behind them Mrs Heining calls, “Uatavi, please send a message to tell the Head we need to speak to him tomorrow. About the water bucket.”

Joseph runs to the children. They are already playing a running and catching game. “Ball, ball,” they chant when they see Joseph. But he shakes his head and they continue their game, pulling him in and making him ‘it’, then running away as he darts after them. Uatavi gives the oldest boy the message, and watches them for a moment before dragging Joseph away to read inside.

That night she doesn’t go to sleep easily. She hates it when these confrontations occur, and she, as usual, is in the middle, trying to please everybody. She tosses and turns. When she does eventually sleep, she dreams of Vezemba, whom she hasn’t seen for

months, as his family has not yet returned. She wakes up restless and irritable, uncomfortable in her own skin.

The next afternoon, after the midday meal, the Headman arrives at the house as Katazuma and Uatavi are washing in the kitchen. The Head is a loud man, always talking, laughing, telling, the centre of a circle, the one to be obeyed. But now his face is still and closed, like a rebellious schoolboy. It gives Uatavi a strange feeling in her stomach to see him like this. She quickly turns back to her washing.

Both the Heinings come outside the kitchen to speak to him. Mr Heining starts stumbling through the words, and the Headman shrugs his shoulders. He cannot – or will not – understand. They call Uatavi.

She tells them about the missing water bucket. The Headman shakes his head vigorously when Uatavi describes it. "I have never heard of such a thing," he says. He knows that Uatavi saw him use it the previous evening, taking it for his first wife to carry water for the evening meal. But his face is now looking hurt. How could Mr Heining think such a thing?

Then Katazuma steps forward. "I saw the bucket in the village," she says helpfully, in English, to the Heinings. Her English is not as good as Uatavi's, but it is improving, and she can understand more and more.

The Headman does not understand what she says, but he can see from everyone's reactions what the words mean. "I will find out who did it," he says. "Tell them," he says to Uatavi, "tell them I will find this thieving rascal and beat him till he can't stand up." Uatavi looks at him, his injured innocent face. She looks at the Heinings. She knows they will not approve of the beatings. "He will find the thief," she says. Katazuma starts saying something, but Uatavi catches her eyes, and she stops.

When he leaves Mrs Heining strokes Mr Heining's arm. "I told you it was the right thing

to do," she says triumphantly.

Two hours later, as the boys are bringing the cattle back from grazing, the Headman returns with his daughter, who is carrying the water bucket. Mrs Heining sees him come, and calls Mr Heining to join the bucket welcoming party. Uatavi is called to translate again.

The Head is smiling. "I have beaten the culprit to death," he says. For a moment Uatavi is taken aback. But then she realises that she has just seen her cousin in the distance, whistling as he goes to flirt with a girl he fancies. What shall she say?

But Katazuma is there, and this time she doesn't look at Uatavi. "He says he has beaten the thief to death," she says. Uatavi winces. She wishes Katazuma would learn to translate like she does, where the speaker's intention is sometimes more important to communicate than the literal words.

Mrs Heining looks horrified. "No!" Her hand goes to her mouth. Reverend Heining starts talking angrily. Uatavi can see The Head is taken aback. "No, well maybe he is not dead," he says, and Uatavi translates this hurriedly. "But he is certainly in great pain, we have dealt with him properly."

Mrs Heining is relieved. "I hope you were not too harsh," says Rev Heining.

"Punishment is to teach, not to destroy." He tries to repeat this in Herero, but the Head looks confused, looks at Uatavi. She translates.

"I agree completely," the Headman says seriously, nodding like his head will come off soon. "He is not too badly hurt, I assure you."

Eventually he goes, his daughter following obediently.

“That went well,” Mrs Heining says as they walk back to the house. “I think they understand now.” She hands Uatavi the water bucket, no worse for wear.

Rev Heining says nothing for a moment, but stays in the kitchen as Mrs Heining starts instructing her for the evening meal. When Mrs Heining leaves he says, “Do you know, Uatavi, the Head is the only person who does not understand when I speak his language. And I understand a little of what he says, but sometimes I doubt myself, as you do not always seem to translate what I hear.”

Uatavi feels blood rush to her cheeks. She does not want Reverend Heining to distrust her. How can she explain that she does it all for the best?

But he does not seem to be accusing her. He asks, “Do you think a lesson was learnt there, Uatavi?”

“Oh yes, Reverend Heining,” she says, feeling herself beginning to nod like the Head. “I don’t think they will be stealing again.”

He looks thoughtful as Mrs Heining bustles past him. “Perhaps they might not steal the water bucket again. But I don’t think the culprit was punished at all, really I don’t.”

He gives Uatavi a small smile.

Mrs Heining stops in her tracks. “You mean that rascal was lying to us all the time? Well I never!” she clicks her tongue. “The wiles of Satan never cease to amaze me with these people.”

Uatavi leaves the room to pick some spinach from the garden. She is glad the day is over, but she does not like it when Mrs Heining talks like that. She knows that her cousin took the bucket, that the Headman was telling a story. But the Heinings have many buckets. And the Head was smoothing things over, making things right. He is a respected man and

speaks to the ancestors. And he treats his wives well. Other wives know they can go to him for help when they are fighting, and he will listen to a woman as much as he listens to a man. Can a man like that really be in the pay of Satan?

JENNIFER

My night was restless. I dreamed that I was writing some exam, a dream I hadn't had for over twenty years. And I was in the wrong hall so I had an exam paper that wasn't for the subject I was expecting. As I sat there, watching everyone else write furiously, I felt a dark shadow behind me that disappeared every time I turned. Eventually I left the hall in a panic, tripping over other people's bags, hearing their laughing behind me.

But when I woke up I had made a decision. I had found potential evidence of Uatavi in the letters last night, even if her name wasn't mentioned. So I would stop avoiding Uatavi and her interference in my story. I would prove that I was a professional researcher, not an amateur hobbyist. Rachel was wrong about me. And I would find out that Uatavi was a maid who worked for them, like many others, I imagine. But it would be interesting to gather more data on their early converts.

So I phoned Ndiriro. I had to get some more information about these other letters, about Uatavi. I could not just accept that the letters had disappeared, that there was no one left to ask. But I wanted to ask her in neutral territory, not in her archives, have a discussion as equals. I left a message on voicemail, and also sent an SMS. Then I went down to breakfast.

Today the funny couple seemed almost pitiable as they dithered together over their menu, in their cheap polyester outfits and, in the case of the wife, badly dyed hair. (Though I didn't like to be reminded of that growing grey spread on my own scalp.) Today I felt focused, assured, as I ate my breakfast, and went over things in my mind. An SMS beeped through as I was drinking my coffee, if you could call it that from this kitchen. Ndiriro could come meet me. She named a place in town near the hotel, gave me some

landmarks.

My roots were not showing too visibly yet, but I still pulled my hair together into a bun that obscured any grey. The style made me feel like an old lady, but it was better than the alternative. I had learned my lesson, and wore cool clothes, minimal lipstick. By the time I found the shop she had recommended I felt confident, at ease. It felt like a Cape Town shop, clean, sophisticated, with the smell of good coffee, and people I could imagine being friends with buying deli goods.

But when she arrived - late - I felt suddenly tongue tied, like I used to get with Rachel and her friends when she brought them home. Then it was the world of adolescence that seemed so foreign, these loud girls with no respect or interest in me, this older woman who provided them with pizza, and lifts to the parties. Their short skirts and garish lipstick, their endless giggling over their cellphones, so different from my own memories of being a teenager. With Ndiriro her foreignness was to do with her dark skin, her fierce eyes that I could not read. She was closed to me. And I was always surprised by her fancy shoes that were ten times smarter than the clothes she wore - closed pumps today, in soft leather.

She was polite, assiduous, almost like a tour guide at first, asking me if I was going to go to Etosha Pans, or other tourist spots.

“I hadn’t planned to,” I said. “I really only came to do my research. Be hard to tour on my own. The only place I want to travel to is to the Heining’s original mission.”

“It is strange that you are writing such a story, and this is your first trip to Namibia. You should explore it more,” she said.

I bridled. “I hope you’re not implying that I have no right to investigate, or write about it,” I said. “It is my ancestors after all. I own the letters.”

“Ownership,” she sighed. “If we get into that debate we’ll be here all day!” and she gave a little laugh. “No, your letters are very interesting,” she said, seeing my frown. “We would love to have them in our archives. Surely they are also owned by Namibians, being such an important part of our history, after all?”

I couldn’t help feeling that she was mocking me in some way. “I want to find out more about Uatavi,” I said. “I know you say those letters are gone, but there must be some more information about her and her role in my ancestors’ lives, if she was as much help as your friend seems to think. Even if she wasn’t, I don’t have any accounts of their converts. I think it would really add a richness to my book.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Uatavi was more than just your ancestor’s maid and helper. She has a story herself. You would have to do an enormous amount of digging and research, and I told you, I don’t know where the letters are or exactly where Karune found the information.”

I couldn’t believe that in the space of a day another young girl was telling me about historical research. What did she think I had been doing for the last year? And who was she to tell me that now Uatavi has to be star centre role in my ancestors’ story? I felt blood rushing to my cheeks in anger. “I’m sure I can manage,” I said, my voice clipped.

She leaned forward. Her face suddenly looked as irritated as I felt. “Besides, there are some hints, one or two, at some secret, something far more than your ancestors’ neglect of Uatavi,” she hissed, as if there were eavesdroppers everywhere. “Just before she died Karune mentioned that there was something that she had found out, something that changed the way people might think of your famous Heinings. How would you cope with that?”

“I think I am mature enough to be objective about my ancestors,” I said icily. By now I just wanted to get out of there. There was silence as we finished our coffee. It was the best I had tasted in Windhoek, but I couldn’t even appreciate it properly I felt so ruffled.

Then she looked at her watch.

"Ooh, I need to get back," she said in a completely different tone, almost apologetic. And almost instantly she was at the till, paying, and giving me a last wave before she disappeared out the door.

I sat there, flummoxed. What was she implying? Why was she attacking the Heinings so, when they did do such good? How could she deny it?

The Heinings were heroes. They were people who had made a difference. Of course they were human, we all are. But there were letters which proved how much the Heinings did, how instrumental they were in protecting their Herero from all of the bloody battles with Jonker Afrikaner, and with other tribes whose desperation led to their own kind of ruthlessness. And there Elizabeth and Willem were in the midst of the danger. So take that, Ndiriro, I wanted to say, your people killing each other and my relatives helping them to stay safe. Where would your Uatavi be without them?

I am sorry to say that Jonker is more hardened than ever - and determined to carry out a threat uttered years ago. He said to Daniel, our man, "We will come and shoot the Hereros before the eyes of the missionaries and will pass through their very stations on our way to those who are beyond. We will destroy the whole nation and take their children prisoners and bring them to our schools and teach them here." He is ignoring the agreement he brokered, and did we not know that the Lord reigneth and that the thoughts of all hearts are open to him, that He too is the helper of the oppressed, it would appear to us that this time really about to be carried into effect. For we have heard that three tribes joined Jonker and fell upon no less than 31 villages of Ovaherero, killing, or rather slaughtering many people, carrying off many women and children captives together with several thousand head of cattle. Let the Lord bring reason to the mind of Jonker, so that he stops this path of destruction he seems set on.

But I knew I couldn't deny that the Heinings had not managed to protect the Herero from

the bloody onslaught that followed. But nobody could blame them for what happened afterwards! When I started my research on Google, the word history and Herero would first bring up the same word: genocide. So much writing about the Germans' brutal murdering of the Herero people, it was difficult to find detailed information on anything else before. The genocide overshadowed all other stories, which was what had made my amateur research challenging.

But that did not diminish the Heining's bravery in protecting their people. Ndiriro could not take that away.

UATAVI

The next day Uatavi sees two people running down towards the mission. There is an urgency - someone must be chasing them? Then she sees one of them is Vezemba, his long legs carrying him fast towards her. Before she has time to be surprised - and excited - at Veezemba hurtling towards the mission he despises so, he is close enough for her to hear his cries. "Uatavi, Afrikaner's coming, he is going to raid us! My cousin sent word."

Uatavi's heart goes cold. Afrikaner, the deadly leader of the Nama, infamous for his brutality, his ruthlessness. What does he want with this little tribe around the mission, their few cattle?

Inside, the Heinings are sitting together over lists of supplies, Mrs Heining with a pen in her hand. Their heads are both bowed, but their arms are touching each other. But Uatavi's raised voice makes them both look up, alarmed. They have never heard Uatavi shouting before.

Mrs Heining looks at the reverend, her face tight with anxiety. "But he agreed with that peace treaty, when he met you and Mr Klein. How can he break his trust? I thought you said he had sworn not to attack these tribes."

Reverend Heining is worried too; his face a crinkled autumn leaf. He paces up and down the room. “You know Afrikaner, he is only loyal to his own ambition. He’s playing some game. Maybe he’s showing us he is not frightened of us. I don’t know what plan he’s hatching. But I will be surprised if he really attacks us.”

“I don’t know why they think we can offer protection in case he comes,” says Mrs Heining. “This is not a fort.”

But Uatavi knows Mrs Heining is wrong. The mission is like a fort, and there are even weapons that Reverend Heining has stored. And the missionaries are part of this shifting alliances and power games, as Mrs Heining well knows.

Joseph comes in. “What’s going on, Mother?”

Mrs Heining pulled him towards her, looks at Reverend Heining. “And the children, Willem, think of the children. We can’t get involved in this.”

“We are here for all the children,” the reverend says to Mrs Heining, who flushes, looks down, stroking Joseph’s blonde hair. He bucks away to stop her.

“We are part of this, my love,” Reverend Heining says in a gentler tone, “whether we like it or not.”

A hot wind is picking up, adding to the fear in the air. Uatavi feels it blast on her face as she follows Reverend Heining out to speak to the men who are gathering outside. There are a few young men, many older ones. Uatavi’s father is not among them. He is still busy with his mission duties. Even on the eve of war the cattle need to be kraaled.

The men fall silent when the reverend comes out. Uatavi follows him. But he no longer needs Uatavi for this kind of urgent, everyday conversation: put thorn tree branches to block the path through the marsh. Let the women and children sleep in the school. Here is

some ammunition for the few guns you have bought from the trader.

The Headman is there. He repeats the reverend's orders, adding details, names, to duties, and for a moment Uatavi's heart lightens at the two of them working together.

The men go off on their errands. The sound of the growing wind makes it hard for them to hear as they call to each other about where to put the guns, where to build barricades of wood and stone. She sees them wave at each other, and point, but the relentless roar deafens them all. She wants to scream in frustration as her dress is buffeted, pulled around her legs as she fetches more water to store in the house, and when she goes to fetch wheat from the storeroom.

Meanwhile the women start coming to put their valuables into the mission house. The white house is seen as safe. Mrs Heining watches them come, and Uatavi helps them to stack their skins, calabashes, herb-holders, beads from the trading store far away. The dust is still swirling outside, coming in the door, getting into her hair, her dress, her mouth.

"Out from there," Mrs Heining is shooing the mother of Tjivanda out from her bedroom. "Uatavi, this is too much. This woman was trying to hide her things under our bed." Mrs Heining's face is pale, tense. Gita is whimpering, clinging to her skirts. Uatavi does not want to think. For if she thinks she remembers the stories of Afrikaner, the butchers who raped women, even children. It seems these men are driven by evil fury, the devil in flesh. "Remember that woman we took in.." Mrs Heining's voice falters. And Uatavi knows her fears. For last season they nursed a woman whose feet had been hacked off to get to the heavy anklets she wore.

"I will help them store them in my room," she says to Mrs Heining, to stop both their fearful thoughts. And Mrs Heining nods, and even helps them stack their goods. Perhaps she too is finding solace in action.

In the evening the wind drops, leaving only the heat radiating from the baking earth. Uatavi sees flames from little cooking fires nearby, hear the soft lowing of many cattle. Other groups nearby have also come to camp near the mission for safety. Some local women come to sleep in the schoolroom with their children, spreading their skins on the floor.

“Where is my aunt?” Uatavi asks one.

“She doesn’t want to leave her hut,” the woman replies. “She doesn’t think it’s safer here.”

Uatavi feels sick with fear. But it is too late to go to find her. Besides she is busy with two small boys, whimpering in this unfamiliar environment. She looks up to see Mrs Heining walking out with trays of hard bread and dried meat. Uatavi can see the fear on her face as she comes nearer. “Here is some food. It is all there is right now. We can’t cook for everybody.” Mrs Heining’s voice is trembling, and Uatavi wants to hug her. But instead she helps her give out the food to all who need it.

The older children start playing in the dusk, their voices high-pitched with fearful excitement. Nervous mothers shush them irritably. Uatavi starts singing a hymn, and for a while everyone is soothed by the sound of women’s voices rising in the evening sky. Mrs Heining stands next to her, squeezing her hand so tightly that it is almost painful.

It is nearly dark when Reverend Heining comes to them. He smiles to find Mrs Heining and she gives a proud little smile back. “Thank you for helping, my dearest.” He looks at Uatavi. “The men have got themselves ready. Some young braves have gone to spy. So hopefully we will get warning if they come. The rest we leave to God.”

Uatavi knows that Vezemba will be one of them. He is so tall and strong now, not the same boy he used to play with. She feels sick with worry about them all.

That night, as the family gathers in prayer in the living room, Uatavi tries to feel the protection of the white God. But there is nothing that she can feel, just an empty space where the shining power of this Protector should be. She closes her eyes tightly during the prayers, and tries not to think of her aunt. She knows the Headman must be invoking Makuru and the ancestors at the sacred fire. Surely one of these would hear their cries.

She lies in bed. For a short while she hears, through the mud wall, Mrs Heining crying, and the reverend's low voice soothing her. Then there is silence, as silent as any night can get. But with every faint hyena cry, every owl hoot jerking her into wide-eyed wakefulness. She hears a baby's wailing, and the mother's low voice shushing him back to sleep. And then the long hours of darkness, as she watches the lines moonlight slowly cross her room through the thin curtains.

As the moon sets, she hears the cocks crowing, the murmuring of voices as women go to milk the cattle. The dawn light is pink on the hills. No attack. A god has heard them. She wonders who heard their prayers, the white God or Makuru, as she turns over to get a few minutes sleep before she has to get up to do the morning chores.

Mrs Heining looks as tired at Uatavi feels. But for once she tries to laugh with the women who are packing up their sleeping skins, though her Herero is still weak. She smiles and pats the small children on their heads as they pass. "At least they won't attack in the day," she says.

Later they hear the news as the spies return. Jonker Afrikaner has passed them. He has gone back to his home, and the danger is over. The young men have returned.
The women and children pack up and walk home, weary but relieved. Uatavi walks with them to find her aunt. Some people are preparing to go back where they were, to leave the safety of the mission now the danger has passed. A group of local men are sitting in the shade of an acacia as Uatavi walks by.

"Your white man was good to us," says the father of Tjivanda. "I will come to his church

on the day he calls Sunday. And tell him we are going to slaughter an ox to thank the ancestors for our safety. He will join us."

"The whites seemed frightened," Vezemba's father says. "Didn't we get told that they never die, but live forever?"

"Of course they die," says Uatavi's uncle, who comes to church some times. "We are all part of the same family, that is what Reverend Heining says. Didn't you hear about that trader who died, and he was white. But the whites go to a place they call heaven. Not like the ancestors."

"How can we be brothers with whites?" asks the Headman's brother. "Their skin is like the lizard's underbelly."

"It is like cattle," Uatavi's uncle says. "Different hides, but all the same cattle underneath." He looks at Uatavi. "Isn't that true, girl?"

"Yes, uncle," Uatavi replies.

"Tell them about the feast," says the father of Tjivanda. "We will expect them. You must bring them. They have a powerful god. We must keep them on our side."

After seeing her aunt is safe, Uatavi returns to the mission. Now her life is not in danger, but so quickly a new problem is weighing her heart. The Heinings won't want to come to the feast. And then the brother of the Headman will blame her when they don't come.

As she expected, Mrs Heining is horrified. "Attend one of their heathen celebrations? How can you even mention such a thing, Uatavi. I hope you are not attending." Mrs Heining is sitting at the table, teaching Joseph his numbers.

"Oh mother, let me go, it will be good for my Herero," he begs. "I will go in your place.

Let me go with Uatavi."

"You will do no such thing," Mrs Heining says. "I will hear no more of this. Uatavi, we need to get the school children returning again. I want you to tell them to come back now the danger is over. Get the sewing girls - nobody came this morning."

Gita comes toddling in, looking for her mother. Her pants are sodden. "Oh where is Katazuma?" Mrs Heining complains. "Gita, my dearest girl, go with Uatavi who will clean you before she goes."

Uatavi scoops Gita up. She doesn't want to go back to the village. They will be disappointed that the whites aren't coming to the celebration. Surely they remember that the whites hate dancing, hate their gods? She hates always being the one to remind the Heinings and the villagers just how different they are from each other.

Like in the translation discussion she has with Reverend Heining that afternoon, when they work on his Herero translations. They sit together, on the one side of the desk, hemmed in by his makeshift bookshelves on all the walls around them. When she first started, she sat on the opposite side. But then she kept on having to crane her head to see. Now they sit like two schoolchildren studying together. It is the coolest room of the house, and usually no one disturbs them on their important work. It is Uatavi's favourite time of the day.

"What is the word for boundary," he asks. He has a way of pushing his hair back when he is intent on finding an answer that eludes him. "Where one person's land ends, and another begins."

Uatavi has heard this word before, and puzzled over it. "There is no such word," she says. Their knees touch, and she pushes a distance between them. "When you first used it, I thought it meant the end of the marsh, because that was what you were referring to when you were talking. Then I heard Mrs Heining use it differently. It is a line that isn't there, I

realised, a line that is only in your mind. But we have no word for it."

The reverend is amazed. "No word? So how do the people agree on how the land is organised?"

"The land does not belong to one or another," she answers. "People own calabashes, cattle. Not land."

The reverend slams his hand on the desk, and Uatavi jumps in fright. The wilting rose that Mrs Heining put in a little vase in the corner of the desk drops its last petals. "Of course," he says. "I have noticed that, made notes on it. But it slipped my mind. So interesting. Language is an eye to the soul of the people." He looks at her. "So you worked out the meaning of boundary like that, from hearing the word used in different ways?"

She nods. He looks at her for a moment in silence, and she suddenly feels nervous. She stands up to take out the vase.

"Leave that for now," he says. "Sit for a while longer." She sits, and scoops up the dry petals, dropping them in the vase. The rose's smell is decayed, cloying. She wants to throw it out.

"Uatavi, you are even more intelligent than most whites I know," says the reverend. You are a credit to your race." He smiles at her, is about to say something more when Joseph bursts in.

"Papa, Mother says you must come now." It is only Mrs Heining who dares to interrupt the reverend's important work. Joseph comes around to Uatavi, pulls on her sleeve. "Tavi, have you asked my father if we can go to the feast?"

"What is this about a feast?" the reverend asks, and Uatavi tells him.

“I’m afraid your mother is right,” the reverend says to Joseph. “We cannot be seen to sanction such heathen festivities.”

“Reverend, may I attend?” asks Uatavi. She knows how angry her aunt will be if she doesn’t, and how the villagers will talk about her. She may live at the mission, but still some of her heart is in the village. She stays on the outskirts of these occasions, wears her dress, but she is still present.

“You may go, Uatavi,” says Reverend Heining. Joseph starts to complain, but his father gives him a stern look as they leave the room to find Mrs Heining for evening prayers.

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Sometimes the Heinings have their own small, very different feasts. An explorer comes to visit, Mr Anders. It is like Mrs Heining comes alive. She wears her favourite green dress, and a string of pearls around her neck. She has been fussing all afternoon about the table, and the food.

“My dear, I am sure you have enough girls to help you,” says Reverend Heining, finally exasperated. “I need Uatavi a little longer - just let me finish this page.”

“But she is the only one who understands the table settings properly,” says Mrs Heining. “Please, my love?”

Reverend Heining sighs and nods. “Anyone would think the king is coming for supper,” Uatavi hears him mumble.

Mrs Heining’s excitement has been so high that Uatavi is disappointed when Mr Anders finally arrives - he has a browner face than the Heinings, and it is shrivelled and cracked, like land thirsting for water. He comes on a fine black horse, his servants on his wagon

behind.

He greets Mrs Heining enthusiastically. “Mrs Heining, I have brought something specially for you,” he says, pointing at his servant unpacking the wagon. “Not that, fool, I want that chest brought in, the other one is full of my skins.” His voice is like a whip when he talks to his man.

He walks past Uatavi, not seeing her. “This is a comfortable place you have established here, Mrs Heining, but still far away from civilized company, for a lady like you.”

It is a long time since Uatavi has heard Mrs Heining laugh, and talk with such life in her voice. “Oh, Mr Anders, it is hard work, I assure you, bringing the Word of God to the Herero. But I must be at my husband’s side.”

“These thieving savages don’t deserve you,” says Mr Anders. “They will never learn. Sometimes I think you missionaries are wasting your time.”

Just then Reverend Heining comes out. He has heard these words, Uatavi can see from his frown. But Mr Anders gives him a wide smile, “Reverend, what a pleasure it is to see your lovely station.” The two men shake hands, but Uatavi can see that the Reverend is angry.

“I hear you were nearly under attack,” Mr Anders says.

“It was terrifying.” Mrs Heining is leading him inside. “I thought it was our last day.”

“This is a very dangerous place for a woman,” Mr Anders replies.

“I am not sure what you mean,” says the reverend. “Many women live here. This is not a nation of men.”

Mrs Heining gives a forced laugh. “He means white women, of course.”

Reverend Heining turns to her. “Did you really feel so under threat, my dear? If we had been attacked, Afrikaner would have been far too terrified to be responsible for the death of missionaries. I would have been very surprised if we had been hurt. No, it was our people who were at most risk.”

Mrs Heining snorts. “As if Afrikaner controls everything. You seemed to be frightened too, I seem to remember.”

“Well thanks to our Lord we are safe, and so are our people,” says Reverend Heining.

“Thanks be to the Lord, our savior,” says Mrs Heining. But the way she says it reminds Uatavi of how the schoolchildren recite their prayers.

Later, after the supper, Mr Anders takes a parcel out of his chest. “I remember when in Cape Town, Mrs Heining, how you loved to paint. Here are some water colours, and some good paper.”

“Ah!” Mrs Heining unpacks the parcel eagerly. “Oh, these are beautiful!” She strokes the soft white vellum with the tips of her fingers. “So soft.” They all look as she opens the tin of watercolours. “Look at how bright these colours are,” says Mrs Heining, touching the peacock blue, the ruby red. “Colours that just don’t exist in this dull land.”

“I’m not sure that Mrs Heining will find the time to do such a worldly activity,” says Reverend Heining. “Life is busy on a mission station.”

“I’m sure it is,” says Mr Anders. “But it’s always good to give the ladies what they want.” He winks at the reverend, who looks away.

“I will paint a portrait of the children,” says Mrs Heining. “And of my one rose bush. I

can already picture its composition."

Later, as Uatavi is clearing the table, she hears the Heinings talking in the little room adjoining their bedroom.

"I don't like that man," says the reverend.

"He may be crude," says Mrs Heining. "But he is still a breath of fresh air from the civilized world. And he brought me paints." There was a pause. "Remember my painting set I had. You said there wasn't room on the wagons."

"That's because there wasn't room on the wagons!" The reverend's voice is exasperated. "Can you remember all we had to bring?"

"We had room for your volumes of heavy books," retorts Mrs Heining.

"Because they were needed for the Lord's work." The reverend's voice is low. "Sometimes, my love, I wonder if you were not deceived by the book you read that inspired you to come to Cape Town to spread God's word. I can see sometimes that this life is not easy for you."

Mrs Heining is furious. "What fault are you finding? I work hard here, I am dutiful! I am in the school, I run this household, a household that no English woman can imagine with the boiling of soap and tanning of skins! I came out to help when I feared we would be attacked. I cannot believe you find me wanting!"

"No, you are the model of efficiency, I am not finding you wanting, my dear, not at all -" the reverend tries to explain. Then there is silence, just the muffled sound of movement. Perhaps he has taken her into his arms. Uatavi can't imagine what that must feel like. Uatavi has stopped wishing that she can make Mrs Heining happy. She knows that Mrs Heining loves her, in her own way. But she can see now that Mrs Heining is a human,

like any Herero, a person with a quick temper, a bit like Uatavi's aunt. But now the person she wants to please most is the reverend.

JENNIFER

I wouldn't have gone with him if I thought it was a date. He was a distant relative, a descendant of another Heining child, Gita. Divorced, living in Johannesburg, and when I traced him he seemed to hint that he had some information for me, and was visiting Cape Town. Could he come round?

Geoff was a bulk of a man at the door of my little flat. Thinning hair, tie, and a little boep buttoned in by a green and red stripy shirt, which I couldn't decide was pleasingly flamboyant or utterly tasteless. As he ushered me down the stairs I smelled his aftershave, the same as David's, and I had to control myself not to gasp. But he looked so different from David, had such a different energy as he opened the car door for me, something David never really did. I enjoyed that feeling of being cherished.

He drove fast, confidently. I thought I would have to direct him, but he gave a little laugh as I pointed towards the road. "Don't worry, sweetheart, I know this place." I decided to forgive him for the 'sweetheart' for the moment.

I am not uneducated in the way of wine, but just after ascertaining I wanted white he examined the wine list and made an order. David always used to leave it to me, joking that I was a wine snob. But this man felt he was the expert.

"So we are descended from religious nuts," he said to me, once we had ordered, and then laughed heartily. "Not that I am a non-believer," he added, "don't get me wrong. But you certainly wouldn't catch me going into the bundu trying to bring God to those crazy Hereros. Braver than me, that lot, I tell you." He tasted the wine the waiter brought.

"Well done, chief. This is tops." The waiter - who was tall, willowy, the colour of dark

chocolate, bent over and poured our glasses full.

“Mind you, I wouldn’t mind seeing the bush then, no roads, just nature. Would go in my 4x4.” Geoff sipped his wine. “And take a quad-bike. Really see the country. Now it’s mines and locations and trees chopped down for firewood.”

I sipped my wine. It was a very good chardonnay.

“Do you have any information at all about our ancestors?” I asked. He waved his hand vaguely.

“My father had a Bible owned by the wife, Elizabeth, but I’m not sure what happened to it when he died. I have some photos of the family somewhere, on one of their trips to Europe. I can try to find them and then show them to you when I come down for business again.”

He looked at me hopefully. “I’m also divorced, you know,” he said. “Not easy, being on your own. And the kids always seem to stay more in touch with their mother, if you know what I mean.”

I didn’t want to tell him about the hurt those words caused.

“When did you split?” I asked.

“Five years ago. It gets easier, Jen. This will be the hardest time for you.”

I regretted telling him anything in our email correspondence.

But then he gave me a disarming smile that turned him into a youthful schoolboy for a moment. “You are an attractive woman, I’m sure you’ll find a whole world waiting for you.”

I blushed, fiddled with my napkin. It had been so long since I had considered myself more than just groomed, stylish. A thrill to feel that this man could sense some sexuality below my long skirt, could find me attractive.

He worked in a bank. “Yes, a little grey man,” he joked. By that stage he looked anything but grey, with his cheeks going florid as he got close to the bottom of our wine bottle. He waved the waiter over and ordered another one.

“What can you recommend for pudding, chief?” he asked the waiter. I had admired how handsome our lean waiter was. Now he showed himself to be smooth and professional too. If he was insulted by this ‘chief’’ all the time he didn’t show it. Many of his customers had loved the lemon meringue, he said, and the cheesecake was a secret recipe, known only by the chef.

“Let’s have one of each, and we can taste each other’s,” Geoff half suggested, half ordered. He looked after the waiter. “Now there’s a guy getting off his backside, doing honest work. Not like so many of our blacks. I bet you h:e’s foreign.”

I was tired of this sort of conversation. I had had it many times with David and his friends. Why do ill-informed men think that sitting around pontificating about the problems of the world is going to solve anything, I wondered. I stretched my arms in the air, looked around. But he didn’t pick up the hint. “And the way this government blames everything on apartheid, as if it just finished last week. I’m sick of having to feel guilty about what I’ve done, and how hard I’ve worked.” He waved his fork at me. “My parents didn’t have a lot of money, it wasn’t easy for them, whatever anybody says. But I made it.” He paused. “And now the country’s going the way of Zimbabwe, I tell you. It’s enough to make you want to weep.”

I did not answer. He noticed the silence. “Don’t you agree?”

I shrugged. “Obviously there’s truth in what you say. But my children have had so many political arguments with their father that I’m afraid I switch off. I’m not really interested in politics. I’m far more interested in people, really.”

He patted my hand over the table. “I’m sorry, Jen, you’re quite right. Let’s not spoil this evening with boring politics. Tell me more about yourself.”

“There’s nothing to tell really,” I said. “Grew up in Johannesburg, went to UCT, worked as a PR assistant for a few years, then became a full-time mom.” It sounded so empty, shallow. “So now I’m on my own it’s been interesting to do some work again.”

“Work?” he asked.

“My research, the research into the Heinings. For my book.”

“Oh, that. Sadly you’re not going to make too much money out of that, are you?” He took his last sip of wine. “Not unless you change your writing to porn, like that fifty shags of gray, or whatever it was.” He gave a burst of laughter at his joke. “My secretary loved that book. Kept on finding her reading it under her desk. Made a change from Facebook, at least. Dumb blonde.” He winked at me.

I so wanted to like this man, but he was making it increasingly difficult.

“No, I certainly won’t make money,” I answered. “But I find it fascinating. How they lived, survived. In that land. Forms of bravery we can’t even imagine.”

“I can’t imagine you in that sort of environment,” he said. “Too wild for such a beautiful lady as you.”

That was it. I finished the pudding as quickly as possible.

“What’s the damage, chief?” Geoff asked the waiter. He paid with his card, then slipped a R100 note into the waiter’s pocket. For the first time I saw a real smile on the waiter’s face as he escorted us out.

Geoff parked outside my flat, came round and opened my door. “Shall I come up for coffee?” he asked.

“I’m tired, sorry, not tonight,” I said. He suddenly looked like a child deprived of his favourite toy. I took pity on him. “Maybe next time.”

He looked relieved. “Oh good, so there is to be a next time,” he said. “Don’t give up on me now. It’s a long time since I’ve had such elegant company.”

I slammed the door shut harder than I needed to. It was the first time my new flat felt like a refuge, rather than a trap. I slipped off my high heels and lay back on the couch.

***

It seemed that ever since my marriage ended I got waves of insecurity and self-doubt that I hadn’t felt since being a teenager, and had hoped never to feel again.

After an afternoon of editing in my hotel room I opened a bottle of wine and my laptop, my date for the night. With every sip of my wine I became angrier at my friends’ lives glowing on the screen, leaving me behind.

> *I am so proud of Peter and Julia - they both got over 80% for exams, and Peter is captain of his rugby team. #proud mum*
>
> *What a run! Well done girls you rock!*

This from my running club. Obviously they were doing fine without me.

Another one, from someone who was on the school board with me.

> *We all need caring thoughts and loving prayers right now. If I don't see your name, I'll understand. May I ask my friends wherever you might be, to kindly copy, paste, and share this status for one hour to give a moment of support to all those who have family problems, health struggles, job issues, worries of any kind and just need to know that someone cares. Do it for all of us, for nobody is immune. I hope to see this on the walls of all my friends just for moral support. I know some will!! I did it for a friend and you can too.*

I wanted to spit. If she was thinking of me when she pasted this post, I hoped she would stop immediately. If she hadn't, then she was a silly cow who didn't see pain when it was under her nose. As if her stupid Facebook post was any consolation for the loss of my life.
I took another big gulp and scrolled down to see the comments.

> *God bless you Debbie, you are such a carer*, said one.

> *Thanks Debs*, said another. *God bless*.

It was time to de-friend. Debbie went, along with half of the running club. Then I had to check on David. He hardly went onto it so I didn't expect much. 'To see what they share with friends, send a friend request', it said. I couldn't believe it. He had defriended me. David, the Facebook beginner, had been active enough to find my name and remove it. In a fit of rage I sent him a friend request. Goddamit I had taken his profile picture. "Take my best side," he always joked. And there he was, laughing like a fucking schoolboy into the camera. Someone needed to wipe that smile off his face. But no, I couldn't let my mind go there. Thinking of David was still too painful, too raw, like a tooth removed. David was a rotten tooth. Good to have him out of my mouth. I snorted at that particular image.

More wine.

Imagine Elizabeth and Willem, I thought, on Facebook. Or Twitter.

> *Help the Nama are coming.*
> *Quartered a giraffe today.*
> *Built a hut and had a baby.*

Not like the crap that spews across the page daily on my feed. I slammed the laptop shut and poured out another glass.

"Here's to finding your home this week," I said to the letters. To find real lives, real loves. Not like my failures.

PART THREE

UATAVI

The letters have arrived, those crinkled papers that have the power to make the Heinings laugh, cry, tremble. It is late afternoon, but Mrs Heining hasn't come in to the kitchen, hasn't set the evening on its track with orders and lists of what to feed the staff and the family, what chores to complete.

Katazuma nudges Uatavi. "You go find her." Katazuma is nervous of Mrs Heining's sharp tongue.

Uatavi hears the Heining's voices in the dining room. She knocks, pushes open the door gingerly. Mrs Heining is at the table, letter in hand. The reverend is standing next to her. She knows they know she is there. But neither of them look at her.

"So my sister was married." Mrs Heining's voice sounds tense.

"That is wonderful news," the reverend replies. "You have been worried about her."

"Yes. And my dearest friend Jane was her bridesmaid. They never even knew each other very well before." She reads from the letter. "Your friend Jane has been a blessing after the loss of your constant company. We have become the best and sweetest of friends. She is a dear, companionable soul. I don't know what I would do without her. She is here with me as I write on Mother's old desk, and bids me send her fond love."

"That is wonderful news," the reverend repeats.

"Jane could have written to me herself," says Mrs Heining. "I wondered why she stopped writing."

“Oh come,” says the reverend. “She can be friend to your sister and you equally.”

“I wish I had been there,” says Mrs Heining. “It was in the church I was christened in.”

They have both forgotten Uatavi, standing there in the shadow. She doesn’t know what to do. If she leaves they will notice her. But to stay is to feel the charge of unsaid sadness and resentment.

The reverend touches Mrs Heining on her shoulder. “My dearest, I am sorry you were not at your sister’s wedding.”

“I am an instrument of God’s will,” says Mrs Heining, in a different voice. “This is where my duty lies.”

“Oh, Lizzie,” says the reverend. “God wishes your duty to fulfill your soul too. Perhaps you should visit home soon. That will get the colour back in your cheeks.” He leans down to embrace her, his face pressing gently towards hers. But she turns away from him.

“My place is here with you,” she says, her voice even, calm. Then she looks at Uatavi. “I will be with you presently,” she says. “Willem, please go and see to the men. They will be needing the key to the store room to get the shed fixed.” The reverend starts to say something, then follows Uatavi out the room.

Later, when Uatavi cleans the room, she finds the letter crumpled behind Mrs Heining’s sewing basket, with blotches where water - or tears - have smeared the ink.

The next morning, Mrs Heining is on her knees, under her big white bonnet, patting the soil in her flowerbed. She does not often venture out here when the sun is so hot, except when she has received letters.

And coming out to her garden seems to soothe her, tending to these seeds and flowers

that come from far away. The roses are pretty, Uatavi thinks, with their delicate pink petals, sweet fragrance. But there are so few of them, and they are so greedy for their own special water, not like the fields of yellow daisies that blossom after the rains. But Mrs Heining calls these ‘weeds’ and pulls them up in her patch.

Today her movements are even more vigorous than usual, Uatavi can see. But then she sits back on her haunches and wipes her face with her sleeve, streaking it with dirt. And it is that soil on Mrs Heining’s forehead, that dirt where no dirt is ever allowed, that makes Uatavi feel a tenderness towards her, and she goes outside.

“What is it, girl,” Mrs Heining says as she approaches, and wipes her face again on her sleeve, quickly.

“Should I -” Uatavi doesn’t know how to finish - “should I cook the rice for tonight?”

“Yes, I’ve told you already,” Mrs Heining says, surprised. “You of all people, Uatavi, shouldn’t forget. You’ve got a memory second to none.”

And they smile at each other. Then Mrs Heining sighs. “But I must come and see to the store. It’s getting far too hot out here.”

She half stumbles as she gets up, and Uatavi runs to help steady her. “Don’t worry, Uatavi, I’m not an old lady yet,” Mrs Heining says, as Uatavi bends to pick up the mat that had been under her knees. But she holds on to Uatavi’s arm as they walk together.

Two young men who are helping the reverend digging irrigation channels walk past them to get water for the team. They greet Mrs Heining politely, but their eyes are on Uatavi. Mrs Heining turns to look at her too. “That dress is tight on you,” says Mrs Heining, that familiar sharpness entering her voice as she drops her arm. “I hadn’t noticed how you are growing. We need to let it out in sewing.”

Uatavi has felt her breasts press against the bodice of her clothes, her chest feeling constricted. She has also started her bleeds. Luckily she had heard of them before she lived with the Heinings, otherwise she might have thought she was dying. Sometimes she misses being with the village girls, who she sees talking and singing, bonded together in a way that she can never be anymore. It is hard at such times to remember that she is the chosen one, and that they might all be going to the place called Hell, reserved for sinners, and, according to the Heinings, hotter even than the dryest summer days.

Mrs Heining follows Uatavi to the kitchen. “Keep away from those young men, they are not all churchgoers. Oh, and yes, fetch four of the dried sheep strips. We will feed the men with that today. I also want the corn ready - Uatavi, will you grind it now.”

It is a hot day for grinding, and Uatavi opens the kitchen door wide to catch any air that moves. It is then that she sees Vezemba outside the door, coming down the path to the house. He has got taller, bigger. He has grown into a man.

Her heart lurches - she has missed him. He has been away with his family, and the cattle, and now they have returned.

Uatavi turns to check that Mrs Heining is not in the kitchen – she does not like it when people visit, and she never liked Vezemba. Last time he had come to warn them about Jonker Afrikaner Mrs Heining had hardly seen him, it had all been so chaotic.

But if she had recognised him - and if she recognises him now - she would not be happy to see him. After she chased him away when he played with Joseph, those many seasons ago, he just came to school a couple of times to get food, and was not polite. Uatavi remembers how he laughed at a Bible story, and was told to leave. “My father says that the white god is only for children,” he said, spluttering, poking the boys next to him with his elbows. “That soon Makuru and the ancestors will curse these whites and they will dry up and die like a plant in the dry season.”

Mrs Heining didn't understand him but she could read his tone. She took his thin little arm and pushed him out of the schoolhouse. "How can you behave like that, you little heathen," she hissed, "laughing at the word of God. You will burn in hell!"

Later Mrs Heining felt guilty. "I wish I did not lose my temper so easily," she sighed to Uatavi. "I did not mean to threaten the child so."

"Don't worry," Uatavi answered. "I do not think he will be too distraught." She didn't tell Mrs Heining that Vezemba was proudly telling the story of how he made the white woman red.

But Mrs Heining would not be able to push him out the schoolhouse now. His arms are wiry and strong. He whistles now as she comes outside to greet him. "Uatavi!"

"Vezemba! You are returned!"

There is a silence. Uatavi wonders what to say.

"Will you come to the church on Sunday?" she asks.

"Don't ask me that, Uatavi," he says. "You know I will not come."

"But you need to hear the word of God." She so wants to see him again and there is little chance if he doesn't come to the mission.

He gives a laugh that is not a laugh. "The word of God! I tell you, Uatavi, what I have seen with some of these whites, I wish them and their God would go back to where they came from!"

Uatavi is shocked. She looks behind her to check no one can hear them. "They have come to bring us to the light, Vezemba!"

“They have come to make slaves of us all. Look at you, working in their kitchen, looking after their children. What are they doing for you?”

Uatavi can’t believe he can say these things. “They do a lot for me. I have learned so much from them. I can read and write now.”

He spat. “Reading and writing? And what do you do with this reading and writing? You read their books and write their words. No, it’s trouble, I tell you.”

“But remember when Afrikaner was attacking, if it wasn’t for the Reverend..”

“Uatavi!” It is Mrs Heining. “You haven’t finished the corn. What are you doing outside?” She sees Vezemba, and nods her head to him. She hasn’t recognised him, Uatavi realises, with relief. “No time for gossip, Uatavi, you know that. Remember what I told you.”

She goes back into the kitchen. Uatavi looks at Vezemba. She so wants to talk to him, but she doesn’t want him to say these words about whites. She wishes it was like before, when they played and laughed together, rather than these awkward silences, hostile words.

“Come and visit me, Uatavi,” he says. “Come and see my cattle. The Headman gave me my own two.” His eyes are shining with pride. Uatavi is about to say yes when his next words knock the wind out of her lungs. “But take off that dress. I don’t like to see you in it. Come in your real clothes.”

Uatavi can’t imagine taking off her dress now, showing her bare skin. But she wants to see him again, and she knows he won’t come back to the mission. He walks back up the hill, not knowing the storm he has left in her heart.

JENNIFER

The next day I woke up with a sour taste in my mouth, and a heavy head. It was a long time since I had a hangover. But I forced myself to get up. Staying in bed was dangerous because then the point of getting up became harder and harder to find. I had to find accommodation to stay at Otjimbiwe, so I could visit the ruins of the mission.

I had looked at the Internet previously and there were only two places listed at Otjimbiwe. One was a nature reserve 25km away from the village, and when I clicked through to the website it was completely in German. The other was just a name and a phone number. Mrs Lisa 084 389 4412. But when I had tried to phone from South Africa the line had gone dead.

So I had to try again. I wished I felt fresher. This time a child answered the phone. "Hello?"

I asked about accommodation. There was noise in the background, talking, static from a radio. The child spoke a local language, seemed to be shouting for his mother. And then the line went dead.

I didn't want to go there. It was probably like one of those local township experiences that were in South Africa, those bed and breakfasts as part of enterprise developments, and frankly I didn't feel up to the cultural challenge. I wanted a hotel meal, a hot bath and a comfortable quiet bed. Not the Namibian equivalent of chicken feet, pap and a the sounds of a shebeen all night.

I phoned the chairperson of the historical society. "Ask Ndiriro," she said. "She comes from there, didn't she tell you? She might know of somewhere. It's very small, you know."

My heart sank. Ndiriro who had made it quite clear she wanted not much to do with me.

Perhaps it was best to go to the game reserve.

I started googling it again. After a few minutes my phone buzzed. I answered, squeezing the phone with my shoulder as I carried on searching. “Hello?”

“It’s Ndiriro here.” Her voice sounded cool, amused. “I hear you’re looking for accommodation in Otimbingwe?”

I dropped the phone in surprise. It clattered on my keyboard, and I quickly picked it up.

“I was,” I said, “but I think I will go to the game lodge.”

“I hope you’ve got a 4-wheel drive,” she answered. “Do you know how bad the road is there?”

I was already nervous of driving a hired car, all on my own. David had always been the driver. “Oh,” I said. “Do you know of a place?”

“My aunt runs a little place,” she said. “It’s on the internet.”

“Oh,” I said again, brightly. “Can you give me the number?”

“I will organise it if you like,” she said. “When do you want to go? And how long for?” One night, I told her. Tomorrow night - Saturday.

“In that case,” she said, “is it possible for you to give me a lift? I need to take something to my family.”

When I put the phone down I didn’t know whether to be furious or relieved. She was using me, I was a mere convenience to her. But I was glad to have company on the road. The journey had been intimidating me. I wondered why Ndiriro, a young professional

woman, hadn't managed to get herself a car yet.

Then I started dreading the journey for a different reason. What on earth would Ndiriro and I have to talk about?

I started making notes, things I wanted to see. Would there be no signs of the mission? It had rained recently, I knew, so it would not be as dry as Elizabeth mentioned in so many of her letters.

All is very dull here. To the missionaries it is peculiarly a waiting time, a time for the full exercise of patience, when they see that the Word is, so to say, daily preached to them in their own language, the people still are as the 'deaf adder that stoppeth her ear'. They have been sore chastened, but they feel it not. There has been tribal fighting, yet they know not that their sins have brought these things upon them. And now it appears the Lord will try them still further. Last year was a very dry one, and although the rainy season has long set in, we have had but two or three good rains - if the Lord withholds rain, famine must inevitably ensue, for those who have cattle will lose it if there is no water, and those who are dependent upon the roots and fruits of the earth, must perish. Already several have died of hunger, a few on the place, principally children, and others round about in the outskirts. O that they would be wise - that they would feel the hand that chastens them and begin to cry to Him for help.

Then a few weeks later..

The Lord has answered our supplications, and we have during the past night enjoyed a very heavy refreshing shower, accompanied by violent wind, thunder and lightning. Much rain has also fallen on the road to Walwich Bay for a day or two so we hope that before long our fellow missionaries will be able to undertake the journey thither. Bless the Lord, O our souls and all that is within us, bless His Holy name!

It would certainly be a different journey in my air-conditioned car, petrol and coke

available on route. I wished I could travel there on a wagon. That would certainly clear my head.

I filled in all the paperwork for the hired car. It was something David had always done. It felt like a rite of passage, the first time I did it myself. I used my maiden name, giving the last ‘g’ the flourish that I had developed as a teenager. The men were friendly, calling me ‘Ma’, impressed at my independence. I was surprised at how easy it all was.
I had never driven such a tinny little box car before. At first it made me nervous, but it was almost like driving a toy, it was so small and easy. Why had I driven that big Subaru for so long? And the irony was that this was the first time I really needed it.
I checked that my scarf was covering my head before I picked up Ndiriro from a little block of flats near the centre of town. She came down quickly with her tartan suitcase. I wondered how many pairs of shoes she’d packed. We loaded it into the boot, and she helped me navigate out of town.

And then the road slowly opened up in front of us and she no longer needed to direct me. We sat for a while, the road stretching before us flat and straight. I wondered what on earth we would have to talk about. As if reading my mind, Ndiriro started fiddling with the radio, trying to find a channel. Soon discordant pop music was blaring out. “Sorry,” she said. “All I could find.”

“What about we just have silence,” I said. She switched it off. And so we sat and I drove. The road stretched on and I regretted the radio off. The gap between us felt deep and empty.

Her phone rang. Her voice changed completely as she spoke in her language. She was animated, laughing, and far too loud, like so many black people when they talk to each other. It emphasised the silence once she disconnected. Perhaps she felt it too.
“That reminds me,” she said. “I need to phone my mother.”

She dialled the number. I could hear her mother speaking on the other end - another

shouter. But Ndiriro spoke in monosyllables, hardly getting a word in. Her voice was flat, lifeless. I didn't know if she was getting a lecture about something or if that was just the way her mother talked.

It made me think of Rachel. I felt this gap with her too, often. "You sounded a bit like my daughter on the phone," I said. "Were you just saying yes mom, no mom, see you later mom?"

"Have you got a daughter?" she asked. "How old?"

"Twenty," I replied. I regretted bringing her up, even though it at least gave us something to talk about. But just thinking of Rachel made me upset.

"What does she do?" Ndiriro asked.

"Well if you must ask, she has just given up a Science degree at UCT to study fashion," I said.

"You don't sound very happy about that."

"Who could be happy about such a stupid decision?" I answered. "She is bright, got an A for Science - like my father, he was a Science Professor, it's in her genes. And now she is choosing to do something that is so superficial and shallow." I had so not wanted to get upset about it all over again but I couldn't help it. The idea that Rachel would leave Jammie steps, the ivy and the degree to go to that cheap little tech to talk about clothes.

"What does your husband think?" asked Ndiriro.

"It's my ex-husband soon."

"Oh?" I heard the question in her voice, but that was one topic I wasn't going to tackle

now.

“He’s taking her side, but he’s really doing it just to spite me, he’s not stupid. He must see how crazy she’s being. He’s an accountant, for godsakes.”

“Maybe he doesn’t think it’s such a bad idea.” Ndiriro’s calm voice shocked me. That wasn’t what my friends said. They were comforts to me as we discussed how dreadful, irrational, David was being. How could this little chit of a girl stick up for him?
“I mean, maybe it’s good that she’s doing what she wants to do, instead of what you want her to do,” Ndiriro said.

“She is far too young to really know what she wants to do, or the consequences of her actions!” I felt so angry my knuckles were white on the steering wheel. “She will regret it later, I know it. Do you think I should let her do anything she wants to do? Sometimes parents have to put their foot down, as I’m sure you will find out one day.” I felt tears in my eyes from frustration.

“I’m sorry,” Ndiriro said, more gently than she had spoken to me before. She patted my arm. “But you mothers are all the same in your different ways.” She looked at me as if wondering whether to carry on speaking.

I wiped my eyes, glad at the opening for another conversation not about me. “You’ve got a problem with your mother?”

“My mother was very proud of me for a little while, for my job. And now? She wants me to get married to a man who grew up with me, who’s also from our village. He’s a businessman, successful. She wants me to have children. And stop working now that I have caught a man.”

I felt her eyes on me, assessing my responses. I made a sympathetic noise.

“And she just doesn’t understand I love my work, and I don’t love Sam. And I’m not ready for children.” She sighed. “My younger sister is getting married, and it’s sending my mother into a frenzy now because I should be as well.”

“Difficult,” I said, not knowing how else to respond. I couldn’t imagine why her mother was being so unreasonable, when her choices were obviously far more sensible than Rachel’s.

We drove in silence again for a while, but it felt different now, more comfortable. Ndiriro checked her phone, tapping out messages or whatever these young people do on their cellphones.

We stopped to get a cool drink at a little café at the side of the road. “Have you got a photo of your daughter?” Ndiriro asked.

We sat outside in the shade of a spindly acacia sipping our drinks and I showed her pictures of Rachel.

“She is gorgeous,” said Ndiriro. “I love her clothes.”

I looked again. There were so many what I called Rachel’s ‘showing-off’ photos, with her in slinky skirts, shirts with funny straps, bits of synthetic fur, and make-up that I never understood because it screamed at you that it was artificial rather than enhancing your natural colouring.

“You’re the right generation, I guess,” I said. “I confess I can’t stand these outfits.”

“Oh no, she has great style,” said Ndiriro. “I would love to meet her.” She got up to go to the toilet.

I looked at the photos again. My favourite one was Rachel in plain pants and a shirt, the

one when we were on a family walk in the mountain. But for the first time I noticed how different her expression was in that one - sort of resigned, unlike the other ones where, I had to confess, she looked simply happy, with that cheeky smile that had sometimes so infuriated me when she was a child. Now I hardly saw it anymore.

We got back in the car and travelled on through the dusty landscape. Ndiriro put her hand to the radio, and I nodded. I could cope with a bit of this modern music if she really wanted it, even though it sounded like it had been recorded in some industrial manufacturing plant.

As we crossed a dry river bed, even after the recent rains, I thought about how many letters were about water, or the lack of it, and how it shaped those lives in the past. The land and its supplies were so much closer to their existence than us, with our air-conditioned malls.

For a moment it felt like Ndiriro had read my mind. “This harsh land, it made people hard too.” I thought of the Heinings. Would I describe them as hard, I wondered. But I was glad I didn’t say that aloud, as she went on - “the constant struggle to get green pastures and water for the cattle. And what could grow easily? No wonder so many peoples in Namibia were nomadic.”

But they were used to it, I thought to myself. The Heinings, though, coming from lush Europe. I remembered some of Elizabeth’s vigorous descriptions. How well she had coped.

If you come and visit we would be obliged to kill an ox to welcome you. ‘How extravagant’, I think I hear some say, and I grant that it does appear until it is remembered that here meat has been till now the staple article of food for the workmen, who used to get about 6lbs a day when we had nothing but meat to give them. No we are able through the quick transport from the Cape to give them rice, barley and bread as well, which makes the consumption of the meat less, for which I can assure you I am not

the least thankful, for upon me devolves the butchering work of cutting up every bit of meat we consume, for I cannot trust my kitchen maid to do that, or here a little bit and there a little bit would be pilfered, and then by doing it myself I remove temptation from her. But I assure you I have many times trembled from head to food merely from the exertion of cutting up the meat of our workmen, and lost all appetite for it into the bargain, so that often for days I never taste it.

So close to nature, she lived. I thought of all I would miss. No Organic Zone for veggies, no bottled spring water, no washing machine (though to be honest Victoria did most of the washing - I hardly knew how to work the thing), no air conditioning. No restaurants with chilled white wine - these jumbled loves of mine all a far away life from Elizabeth. And from the people we were passing, in their little huts, pimples on a bare scraggy skin, their forlorn cattle trying to find something green in the sands of the desert. They must share the knowledge that Elizabeth learned.

But I could relate to the pilfering maid. Even Victoria, who worked for us for over fifteen years, couldn't resist taking soap, fruit and potatoes, sugar. And denying it vigorously later, of course.

Our garden, upon which we depend much at this time of year, has, with the Lord's blessing, brought us much in: pumpkins, maize or Indian corn, vegetable marrow, which here grows to great size, calabashes, which while young are very much eaten, and when ripe and hard, being freed from a pithy substance and the seeds, make excellent vessels for saving milk and for keeping water cool, beetroot, carrots, a few cucumbers, melons, and watermelons have been and still are the produce of it during the last six weeks. However without rain soon our little dam will dry, and our garden will wither. We are praying and watching the skies for the sign that the Lord has heard us. We are using tepid river water to wash and cook, and the spring where we get our drinking water is only a trickle. It is hard to keep our home going on and keeping the requirement for cleanliness where water is so scarce.

One day, I thought, I would like to come and camp here, to really experience the land. And then I remembered that David had all our tents and camping equipment. How could he ever use the tent, sleep under it with someone else, when that green canvas stretched above us had seen so much of our happiest embraces… My emotions swept down the familiar channels of loss and hurt they had carved out, and then damming in my heart.

UATAVI

Mrs Heining is ill. Her face is pink and sweaty as she leans up on her elbows from her bed. "Uatavi, you have to be me for a while," she croaks. "I need to rest. Just remember that today you need to wash the bedding. Maybe Katazuma can do that because I want you at sewing school. And also remember.." Her mind is full of what has to be done, and Uatavi is glad she can't follow her to the kitchen to check she doing it all properly.

"Just rest, Mrs Heining," she says reassuringly. "I will be you." And they both smile for a moment at the idea of shy brown Uatavi bustling around the mission telling everyone what to do. Then Mrs Heining slumps back onto the pillow as Uatavi leaves the room.

Uatavi looks out at the garden through the kitchen door and wonders what to make for the invalid. Everything is dry and shrivelled. There are no green leaves Mrs Heining loves so much, no fresh meat in the drying shed. The worry of the harsh blue sky is part of what has sent Mrs Heining to her bed, she thinks. She puts out a few onions, takes the precious key Mrs Heining has given her, and goes to fetch some supplies from the store room.

Later she takes Gita with her to sewing school. Joseph is too big for such things, he is helping his father and some other men with garden work. The girls are younger than her, and do not remember her from the village now that she lives at the Heinings. They are polite with her, and lower their voices when they are joking and gossiping so she can't hear them.

But they love little Gita, and this morning there is little sewing as they all try to entice her

to come and sit on their laps, competing with each other at they try to charm her. Gita becomes overwhelmed with their attentions and hides her face in Uatavi's lap. The girls laugh, and Uatavi picks her up gently.

"Back to sewing," she says, and they groan. They are never so free when Mrs Heining is there.

They are all relieved when it is lunch time, and they get some bread and water. Uatavi hears their voices sing a new church song as they go back to the village. The mission is keeping these poor parched families here. Some might move away again when the rain comes. Uatavi feels lucky to be going back to the mission house where she has food every day, and shelter, and safety. And learning. Her best times are when she is learning the strange slides and pops of these new languages, the new words that make the world around her change colour in subtle ways. Her English is good now, but next she is learning German, a whole other white language with different patterns that she loves to master.

On the way back to the house Uatavi's heart lurches: Vezemba is walking away, up the path from the house. She wants to run after him, but Gita is heavy. And she is wearing a dress. She watches as his figure gets smaller and smaller, and then disappears over the ridge. Her insides churn.

"Tavi?" Gita says. The little girl can feel how Uatavi's body has stiffened. She turns to her, forcing a smile. "Lunch time, Gita-girl," she croons, and forces down the storm inside her.

Inside Mrs Heining is sitting at the kitchen table, instructing Katazuma who is skinning a plump rabbit. Uatavi feels her mouth water. Such fresh flesh has not been cooked for a long time.

"Did Daniel get that?" she asks. "I didn't realise he was back from hunting."

“It was a present, for you,” Katazuma starts saying. “He says you must-” Mrs Heining looks at her and she stops talking.

“We will enjoy the rabbit,” Mrs Heining says. “But Uatavi I am going to get angry if you encourage that man to come to visit. He is disrespectful to me and is openly mocking of the church. I do not want him corrupting our people.”

Uatavi is glad when Mrs Heining goes back to bed for the afternoon. Usually Mrs Heining is her guide when following the White God, and Uatavi follows her word. But when it comes to Vezemba there are other pulls on her heart. She wonders whether Vezemba would ever become Christian, take her as his one and only wife. But she cannot imagine him in trousers and a shirt. She knows this is a fantasy, as far away as the one of her being able to take of her clothes and Christian years to go back to live with the heathens.

“I would like you to help me again with the translations,” Reverend Heining says in the afternoon. “Katazuma can look after the Gita. And one of the other girls can prepare the meal.” Uatavi feels a great relief at hearing this. The reverend’s room is a sanctuary where she is not sewing, cooking, cleaning, running. But instead she is drinking the new words, making them part of her. And then she is weighing up their meanings in a way increasingly only she can do. And it is a pure process, unmuddied by speaker’s feelings and intentions, like all the other oral translations she does.

She sits in the room, surrounded by his home-made bookshelves, and they pore over the pages, looking at the words, one by one. It is the one time of the day when the sun hits the little window, dances on the floor. He gestures to it, and she quickly gets up to draw the simple calico curtains that she had made under Mrs Heining’s sharp eyes.

She returns, sits next to him, looks at the sentence he is pointing at. She loves his open questioning look, when he doesn’t look like God’s representative, but an ordinary man

who needs her.

“But when we use the word people here,” she says, “we mean it as people who are not us, foreigners if you like.”

He is surprised. “it isn’t a simple collective noun?”

“No,” Uatavi smiles. “It is ‘the others’, certainly not those who belong. And here we need a word to describe the followers, the people who belong to our Lord.”

Reverend Heining carefully transcribes what she says, the only sound being the pen scratching across the page as Uatavi reads the next section of his translation.

The room darkens - the sun is no longer beating against the curtains. Uatavi goes to the window, pushes the curtains open.

“Rainclouds!” she cries. He comes to the window to see. As they watch, a gust of wind blows dust into the air, catches the drying bedding on the line so it looks as if it is dancing. The clouds are heavy and dark.

“God be praised,” he says, “our prayers have been answered.”

“I must fetch the washing,” Uatavi says.

“Get Katazuma to help you. It’s coming fast.” Reverend Heining peers out of the window.

“She has gone to milk the cattle,” Uatavi says. “And the other girls have gone back to the village.”

The clouds are massing, and they feel a few drops in the air. Reverend Heining pulls the

shutters closed.

“I will help you,” he says. “Come.”

And together the two of them run out into the wild blowing wind, feeling the welcome moisture in the air. They both feel a celebratory relief - water at last. Uatavi laughs as Reverend Heining clumsily bunches up the sheets over his arms. She can see he hasn’t done this often. He grins back at her, and together they rush back and forth.

In the last trip they get wet as the rain starts pouring properly, the thunder getting closer, the wind drowning out their words calling to each other: “nearly done”, “I’ll get that last one.” Then they stand in the kitchen, their clothes steaming, the rain pelting on the roof. “Thank you,” Uatavi says, catching her breath from all the running.

“Go and get dry clothes on,” he says. “Look at you!” His eyes are dark.

She looks down at her dress clinging to her body. Then she looks at him. “You too,” she says, and they both laugh.

“Willem!” they hear a voice, Mrs Heining is coming down the passage. “Willem, the drought has broken, God be praised!” She comes in, stops at the sight of the two of them. “What were you doing?” she says. Uatavi feels guilty, as if she has been caught doing something wrong. Willem points at the washing. “Couldn’t you have got one of the girls to help?”

Uatavi runs to her little outside room to get her clothes off, a dry dress on. That night, as she goes to sleep, instead of seeing Vezemba, she sees Reverend Heining’s eyes on her in the kitchen.

JENNIFER

For the last hour of the journey the air-conditioner stopped working in the hired car, and my mood had soured. By the time we arrived my dress was sticking to the seat with sweat. My hair was limp under my scarf, and I felt a wreck. “It’s shocking,” I fumed, “the one thing you need in this place is the air-conditioner. Do you think they would come out here to fix it or bring another car?”

Ndiriro shrugged. “Highly unlikely,” she said. “Take this turning.”

We bumped off the main road and Ndiriro directed me as we drove into a rural township-feeling place, with little homesteads surrounded by rickety fences, and cattle, dogs and chickens roaming the dusty streets. And children. Children playing, children running up to the car as we pulled into one sprawling yard. I had often driven through places like this on the way to our holidays. But I had never stopped, let alone stayed. The thought exhausted me and I felt my body tense. I was probably the only white person in miles. A big fat black woman came up to the car to greet us. “Welcome,” she said. She shouted in her own language and a young boy came running up. “Peter will take your case,” she said, in passably good English.

I looked at his tiny thin arms. “Don’t worry, I’ll manage,” I said, but that wasn’t an option. Peter had already opened the boot and was lugging the suitcase towards the house.

“Be careful,” I said, as I saw it getting dragged in the sand. He heaved it onto his shoulders and disappeared inside. I wanted to check that he wasn’t going to unpack it inside - it had some precious possessions. But I still had to take Ndiriro home to her mother.

Ndiriro was already out of the car, greeting the woman. The woman embraced her, and they exchanged a few words in their language. I wondered if they were talking about me.

Then she came and introduced herself properly. “I am Ma Lisa, and this is your home for tonight. Anything you want, we will get.” She shook my hand. “Let me show you to your room.”

“Let me take Ndiriro home first,” I said. Ndiriro got back in the passenger seat, and directed me to a similar house nearby, although this one wasn’t so freshly painted, and there was junk piled in the yard. Again a big fat black lady came out to greet us. She opened the passenger door for Ndiriro, pulling her out and hugging her, but berating her for something at the same time. I almost recognised the voice from the earlier phone call. Then she came around to me. “Thank you, madam, thank you very much,” she said, her head bobbing and her face smiling, so different from the voice she used with her daughter. I saw Ndiriro watching us, felt the wide smile on my face. I was relieved when I could reverse out of there, get away from her watching eyes.

“Have a good night,” Ndiriro said, and banged my car as it passed her, making me jump. Back at her aunt’s I went to my room to check my suitcase. It hadn’t been opened, and I felt guilty about my suspicions. There was a bed covered in a brightly coloured crocheted blanket. The only other pieces of furniture were a little cupboard and a table with a paraffin lamp. I groaned quietly. No electricity. At least if I plugged in my laptop I could have lost myself in my work later tonight. I sat on the bed and it sagged beneath my weight.

I undid my scarf that had been making my head hot. There was no-one here I needed to worry about, with my spreading highway of grey at the top of my skull. Luckily there wasn’t even a mirror to remind me of the devastation above.

Ma Lisa came in with a cup of tea that she pressed into my hands. It was hot and sweet. “Anything you want,” she said again.

“I will be going into the village to look at the ruins now,” I said. “And I will be back later before dark for supper.” I wondered what the evening fare would be. As if she could read

my mind Ma Lisa pointed out into the yard, where a young girl was plucking the feathers off a chicken.

“Supper,” she said beaming. I was glad I had stopped being a vegetarian.

“Ndiriro is such a clever girl,” she said, walking me out on my way to explore the village. “She is the one who helped me with this bed and breakfast. Because she says there will be whites like you who want to come and look at this mission. And she always says I cook better than her mother.” She laughs. “But she never says that when her mother is here.”

I was wondering how this little establishment had got itself onto the Internet. “It’s a good idea,” I said. “How many visitors have you had?”

“You are number two,” she said. “The other one was an engineer. Nothing to do with the mission.” But then she looked hopeful. “You must tell people about us.”

Out in the village it was still warm, even though the sun was low, casting long shadows. I had a scribbled map from Willem Heining’s biography, and I had found some photographs on a Christian website that had pictures of the old mission church and dwellings, as well as the church which was still standing.

I first made my way to the church. A little group of children swarmed me like a clump of fruit flies, their faces caked with snot and dirt. “Sweets, sweets,” they clamoured. I ignored them, hoping they would get bored and drift off. I wanted to be alone in this pilgrimage. Their little giggles and shouts behind me made me uncomfortable, out of place, but I walked ahead of them and they peeled off.

It was easy to recognise the ruins of the mission house, next to the church. There were just some mud walls standing, a shell of what had been Willem and Elizabeth’s domain. I walked around the walls. Grass was growing through the dust, and there were trees

sprouting in shady corners. It brought tears to my eyes. This vibrant centre of Elizabeth's world, and what is it now. But to think of her here, her long dresses brushing through this dust, this bush, made her feel more alive to me than ever before.

Nearby there were even more tumbledown walls that in some cases were just heaps of earth. The outhouses, where seeds and tools had been stored, along with all the other supplies. An old rusty piece of windmill lay like a skeleton, half-covered in dust. It made me feel tremendously sad, all of it.

The church was preserved, still used perhaps. It was small, but its ochre tower was higher than the other buildings, and it had a stillness and dignity to it, and the grass was short around its perimeter. Someone cared for it. The door was locked. I knew that Willem Heining himself had laid the first brick, and many others that followed, as he described in his autobiography. I took out my camera.

Before I knew it I was mobbed again. "Photo, tek a photo," the children were back, some posing, some stretching hands to see the camera.

"No touching," I ordered, and took a few photos of them. "Now off you go, shoo," I waved them away again. Most of them went off. Just one little girl sat watching me as I walked around the church, touching the warm bricks, taking photos at different angles. The sun had just about disappeared now, and the light was fading.

I started walking back home, recognizing the tumbledown trading station that had also been depicted on the Christian website. It was there at the end of the Heining's time, and had been a going concern for over a century. But now it was being reclaimed by the bush, and villagers, as any removable bits of building material had been removed, and there were plants sprouting in the crevices. The Christian site had said that there was much AIDs and poverty in the community. Perhaps it was a pity that there were no more missionaries.

But on the way back I passed a clinic, freshly painted, and a community hall that was obviously still used, as there were no broken windows, or invading bushes. Nearby was a communal tap where girls were filling up containers of water, chatting and laughing. They waved and greeted me, again some little ones detaching themselves to ask for sweets.

I passed a pig sty, the walls of which were made up of rusted car panels, and recognised that I was near Ma Lisa's. When I got back I needed to wash, use the toilet. I couldn't believe I had to use the long drop at the back of the yard. I tried not to look horrified - I hadn't thought of toilets at all, just assumed there would be some. Now I had to use a hole in the ground that so many other people had defecated in before. I closed my eyes and hovered above the hole. How my standards had dropped!

But Ma Lisa had some water ready for me to wash myself in a little room off the kitchen, and I relished the feel of the few scoops of the cool liquid more than I had ever enjoyed my lengthy showers at the hotel. For the first time I wondered about the Heining's toilet arrangements. Certainly no flush toilets for them either.

I went to scribble some notes in my room. The lamp was lit, casting strange shadows on the walls. I had been deeply moved at moments, I wrote. But modern Namibia had intruded too much on the experience - the people, the decay. I would write to the historical society to suggest that some of the mission buildings are restored and preserved for posterity. Otherwise they would be gone in the next 10 years.

A young girl knocked on my door. "Supper," she announced.

I sat squeezed in at the table with Ma Lisa, an old man with a wizened face and white hair whom I hadn't seen before, a lanky young boy and then two smaller children, the girl who called me and Peter. The lamps flickered, and I could see most eyes on me. I tried to smile.

“We say grace,” Ma Lisa said, and then proceeded to intone a long prayer in her language, with the old man chipping in with ‘Amen’ loudly. Then they watched me again as I took the first mouthful. Well nearly all of them. The old man started eating noisily with his fingers, and ignored me for the rest of the meal.

“Delicious,” I said, and Ma Lisa beamed and began eating herself. I was impressed, actually. The stew had looked amorphous and fatty, but it was surprisingly tasty. And no bits of giblets that I could identify, thank goodness, in the dim lamp light. The others all ate with their hands and I tried not to watch them, it looked so greasy and gross. Luckily they finished fast and sat there again watching me chew each mouthful. The moment I ate my last rice grain the young girl jumped up to take my plate and rushed off to take it to the bowl on the sideboard. Then she brought out a soft instant chocolate pudding served in an orange plastic bowl.

“No, I’ll wait for everyone.” The old man was still chewing and sucking on his bones noisily, and it was making me queasy.

“No, no, Ndiriro told me. You people need pudding fast,” Ma Lisa said. “She told me you will not sit here all night.”

I spooned the soggy mass into my mouth as quickly as possible. This had obviously come straight from some expired packet at the local store. I could see the children watching me enviously, and wondered if they were also going to get some. I wished I could give them mine.

“Now you go to your room and I bring you coffee,” Ma Lisa said authoritatively. I was glad to get away from the watching eyes. I heard laughing and talking when I was gone, the silence broken. I wondered what they were saying.

Back in my room I thought I would do some more note taking. But I realised I was tired. After I had brushed my teeth I got into bed, the mattress groaning under me.

I wasn't used to the deep darkness. I had left my curtains half open and could see the stars brighter than I had ever seen them. There were the sounds of people talking, laughing, living, just like the sounds that the Heinings might have heard, perhaps. For there were no TVs, no blaring sound systems. But as I thought that I heard the low beats from some ghetto blaster starting up. Luckily it was too far away to grate on my nerves. My body felt heavy and warm. I usually hate the feeling of getting into bed without being freshly washed, but tonight it didn't seem to matter.

"Goodnight dear, you have everything you need?" Ma Lisa called into my room. "More tea? Coffee?"

"I am fine, thank you, Ma," I called back. And I felt myself falling into a more relaxed sleep than I could remember. Perhaps it was because there was no Wi-Fi or electricity in the air. These things apparently have quite an effect on one.

UATAVI

The rains have been, and with it has come a bulging river, water for cattle, young grass for grazing. Some rich families with big flocks have come to settle. And there is a marriage. Uatavi's aunt is telling her all about it on one of Uatavi's rare visits to the village. They are sitting outside her aunt's hut on the side of the morning shade. Uatavi's dress feels uncomfortable as she squats on the rock. Dresses are designed for chairs, she thinks ruefully, seeing the bottom of her dress dragging on the sand.

"It is Ngonga, the daughter of Hoke and Mbetjiura. She is a few seasons older than you. You must come, my child," she says excitedly. It has been a long time since there has been a wedding.

"And you will see Vezemba," says her younger cousin.

“I will have to ask the Heinings,” she says.

But she knows the real reason for her hesitance. It is her dress. She has realised, since Vezemba asked her to stop wearing it, that it has got harder and harder to remove her dress, to put on the clothes of her people. Nakedness and flesh have become a shame. She cannot recognise herself any more if she does not have cloth covering her body.

It is as if her little cousin has read her mind. “It will be nice to see you in our clothes again.”

Some people have got old clothes from the missionaries or the traders. Slowly there are old jerseys that are worn in winter, and some richer women have got bright cloths from the traders. And they are used to Uatavi wearing her dress for most occasions. But for a wedding everyone will need to look right. And Uatavi can’t imagine it.

“The whites won’t want you to come,” says her sharp little cousin. “Kauzende has got two wives already.”

“She still needs to respect our ways,” says her aunt. “She cannot forget the ancestors. Even the Christians know that.” She pinches Uatavi’s cheek. “And one day it will be her turn. Her father and I are talking about it.”

Uatavi cannot tell her aunt that she cannot imagine marrying a man, and that the whites think that the heathens worship ancestors as idols, and so see these ceremonies as evil. For she herself finds it so hard to understand. Her ancestors have been on her shoulder from when she was little. But now they are fading, and mostly she feels they have left her, withered up by the white God.

Later on her way home Uatavi sees a girl her same age, but now with a baby on her hip. Uatavi picks the boy up, bounces him.

“How is it there with the whites?” Tjingauri asks curiously, after the greetings are over. She has been away, hasn’t seen Uatavi for a while.

“All is well there,” says Uatavi. And when she goes on her way she thinks about Tjingauri’s life, and hers. Sometimes there feels a tearing inside her, as if something is being pulled away from her heart. She feels it when she sees the sacred fire that the Heinings despise, and remembers the specialness of it when she was little; and she feels it when the dancing starts, the dancing so important to her people, so evil to the Heinings. The twinges come too when villagers come to the mission, and want to use the mirror, or gape at the knives and forks that others have told them about, things that have become part of Uatavi’s world.

But then she thinks of Vezemba. She wants to see him, wants him to see her. His strong body gleaming, taller than all the other young men, with his wide cheeky smile. She imagines getting dressed in her traditional clothes for the wedding celebrations, her skin shining with ochre. She hums a childhood song under her breath, so different in its repetitive chant from the measured hymns that she is used to. Her body starts swaying as she begins to imagine the dancing, her breasts jiggling under her beads for all to see, her legs bare. Her arm goes to cover her breasts instinctively, even though they are enclosed by her dress, and a sudden image bubbles up unbidden in her mind: the faces of the Heinings - their shocked face if they ever saw her nakedness, saw her as part of that other world.

It is then she realises she cannot do it. She cannot do the dancing anymore. For the white god is the one she needs to please now, the one with the Heinings’ eyes. Oh Vezemba!

It is a relief when she gets home, and Gita runs to meet her, and she can forget the currents of her life slapping against each other within her.

Gita leads her inside, wanting to play. Like Joseph she learning Herero fast, faster than her father does, Uatavi sometimes thinks. It feels healing in her heart that these white

children can speak her tongue so fluently. And the Heinings encourage it, although they are not encouraged to play with other children.

“Ask it like that when you are talking to your friend, Gita, not when you are talking to your mother or father,” Uatavi tells Gita now, giving her a drink of water from the calabash in the kitchen. Mrs Heining was amazed at how cool the calabashes keep the water, and they have replaced the buckets for water storage in the kitchen.

“But what shall I call you, Tavi,” Gita says, “You are like my friend and my mother!”

Uatavi gives her a quick kiss.

“Can we play the donkey game again today?”

“Ask it in Herero.”

She repeats herself as Reverend Heining walks by.

“You are a good teacher, Uatavi,” the reverend says. “You are creating a family of Herero speakers out of us. You just need to work on my wife.” They both smile. Mrs Heining has made many efforts to learn, but in her impatience soon gets so angry with herself that she can hardly concentrate.

Can you come to the study with me?” the reverend asks. “We need to go over some texts today. So no donkey for you now, Gita-girl. Besides, you’re getting too big now. Poor Uatavi, you’ll break her back.”

Uatavi follows the reverend to his study. It is also a place where she feels whole again, examining her language, polishing the words so they shine like a necklace around her throat. They sit together, side by side.

Today she is helping him with the story of the sheep and the goats. The reverend has done well - she had very little to change. He is pleased with himself. “It’s thanks to you. I am nearly fluent now. Even the Head cannot pretend to misunderstand me any more.” They both laugh.

Once they are done, she says shyly, “Reverend Heining, I want to be a sheep.”

For a moment he looks at her like she is mad. Then he understands. “Uatavi, what you are asking will change your life, you know that?”

She nods.

“For if you join God’s table, you will no longer be able to live the life of your family. You won’t be able to marry a heathen, and there are no Christian converts. You know that. You will be the very first Christian convert in Damaraland.”

She can see he is excited. She knows how every night during the family service he prays for people to see the light, to join the Church. But although people come to the service, and take the food and sometimes classes offered by the missionaries, no-one has asked to become baptised. It is a great worry to the Heinings. She has heard the reverend talk about how their money might stop coming if there are no numbers of converts to report.

“I do not want to marry a heathen anyway,” she says, pushing away the picture of Vezemba in her mind.

“This is not a light decision, Uatavi,” says Reverend Heining. “For once you join you can never go back.”

She nods again. She knows this.

He stands up, looks down upon her. “You must pray for guidance,” he says. “You must

be sure that this is what you want to do." His eyes are shining. He is giving her his real smile, the one she sees with his family, not his general smile he gives in church.

Uatavi has always been part of church prayers, evening prayers. But the idea of her giving a private prayer, separate from the mission, strikes her as strange. "But you are the one who prays," she says. "It is one of the only things that is the same at home. The chief is the one who speaks to the gods."

Reverend Heining's professional interest is engaged as he looks at her sharply. "So you believe that you cannot pray yourself to our Lord?"

Uatavi nods nervously. "That is what you do for us."

He bends over her, grips one of her hands. "Uatavi, my God can be your God. Once you are baptised and accept him into your heart, He is your Lord and savior, and it is your duty to pray to him." His voice lowers, takes on the chanting cadence he uses when quoting from the Bible: "And all things, whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive."

He becomes aware he is squeezing her hand, and drops it. "Tell me, is this belief something prevalent in your people?"

She frowns. "Prevalent?"

"Common, usual. Is that what people believe - that they cannot pray directly to God? Is that what I've been overlooking? Perhaps that is one of the obstacles I have not even seen in my blindness." He sits down again next to Uatavi, looks into her eyes. "Uatavi, you are a gift. God sent you to us. You will pave the way for many after you."

His voice changes again. "But this is no light decision you are making. Are you completely sure that this is the path you will take for the rest of your life?"

Again she nods, feeling tears in her eyes. She doesn't know whether they are for fear, loss, excitement or love. He sees the tears, strokes her cheek, then whips his hand away.

"God will guide you, dear Uatavi," he says. "Do not be afraid."

She shall not be afraid because he is there, and God. But it is easier to trust Reverend Heining, for he is closer, and she can touch him.

That evening Reverend Heining tells Elizabeth the news.

"My dear girl," Elizabeth comes to embrace her. "I am so happy for you. May God be praised. I am so proud of you."

Uatavi feels a warm glow inside. Everything feels right with the world. That night she kneels at her bedside, her hands clasped. But it still feels presumptuous to be addressing the Mighty God directly, and so she jumps into bed before he can be offended. She tries rather to send prayers to Reverend Heining, so he can send them on her behalf.

But in her baptism classes with Reverend Heining she becomes braver, as he asks her to repeat prayers, and she gets used to the feeling of being in direct contact with the Lord. Or at least she speaks to Him. Perhaps it will take longer for her to be able to hear His commands that Reverend Heining is able to translate so confidently. Perhaps He does not speak to you until you are already baptised and confirmed, eating of his flesh and blood.

The day comes. Katazuma helps her into her white dress, given to her by Mrs Heining, and braids her hair neatly the way the whites like it. She is almost breathless with excitement and nerves.

They have arranged it when Mr Klein is visiting, so he can be the one to baptise her. Villagers are coming for the excitement, the day that one of their own is becoming

something else, an honorary white, a Christian. People are talking about her, she knows. She doesn't like the feeling of her name being on everyone's lips. She doesn't want to know what they are saying. She doesn't want to think about Vezemba.

The church is full of the curious. Her aunt is there, and her father too, regular helpers at the mission now, in return for food and clothes. They sit at the back, awed by the whites' focus on their child, proud of her and the opportunities they hope this will open. They are hoping that she will attract someone who can give a healthy bride-price. She hasn't made it clear to them yet that she will only be able to marry another confirmed Christian - and there are certainly none of them about.

The children sing the hymns that Uatavi has taught them, and she feels tears in her eyes as she hears their voices harmonizing in the songs that have become part of her daily rhythms. Mr Klein is at the altar. He uses the water in a small bowl to make the sign of the cross on her forehead. Behind her the villagers are craning to see this new ritual they haven't seen before, and there is a murmur of quiet discussion. She says the vows clearly, though her voice trembles a little. She has always been nervous of Mr Klein. He smiles at her encouragingly as she takes her candle, and now that he has baptised her she feels a new trust for him.

Above the little burning flame, as she walks out, she sees Reverend Heining's smiling face, Mrs Heining dabbing at her eyes with a handkerchief. The children sing loudly for their beloved Uatavi. She feels happier than she has ever been. Outside she gazes at the sky, looking for a sign from God that she has been welcomed. A little breath of wind comes from nowhere, blows the candle out.

"Mary," they say now. No longer Uatavi, but Mary, child of God. The name of the mother of Jesus.

JENNIFER

It seemed to me that Ndiriro was relieved to be getting into the car. Today she was wearing ridiculous platform shoes that made her look in danger of a broken ankle, or worse. But she managed to negotiate into the car without mishap. Her mother gave us buckets of food to take that we loaded in the back seat. Eventually we got going.
She looked at my hair and I realised I had forgotten my scarf. I was surprised at how it didn't bother me so much today.

"Excuse my grey," I said. "I left my hair dye in South Africa."

"And we don't have any here for you in Namibia?"

"I like a special kind," I said. Even I could hear that sounded ridiculous. But equally ridiculous was how she was taking offence at nothing.

"Thank goodness the air-conditioning is working again," I said, trying to change the subject.

"Good thing you didn't try to get a replacement," she answered. I felt her looking at me. "My mother was upset that you did not come in for tea," said Ndiriro as we got on the open road. "She thought you felt we were not good enough for you. That my aunt's is better than our house."

"Oh, no, Ndiriro," I said, mortified. "You should have told me. I am sorry. I didn't know."

But I also felt angry with her. Why was she telling me this after the fact? Did she enjoy watching me squirm with guilt? Was she trying to point out my white ignorance?

"You know that's not true," I said. "I hope you told your mother."

My mother's not very good at listening," said Ndiriro. I felt her look at me again for a few seconds after saying that. I was not sure what she was getting at. There was an edge to Ndiriro this morning. I missed that comfortable bubble we had created yesterday.

"So did you enjoy visiting where your ancestors did their business?" she asked. "Any new angles for the book?"

"No," I said stiffly. "I was just doing it to get the ambience, the atmosphere of the place. But sadly I did not get any messages from my ancestors."

At least that made her smile. "Any message you might get would be to get to church on Sunday," she said. "Are you as religious as they were?"

"No," I said. "I'm more open-minded, I guess. I do go to church sometimes, but I'm not as sure as they were about what the Bible was all about, and what God wanted."

"Open-minded," she repeated, almost mocking me.

"You don't think I'm open-minded then," I said. I could feel my hackles rising.

"Not when it comes to your daughter," she said. "Not when it comes to your history."

I felt heat rise up in me. "You have no right to lecture me about my daughter," I said. "And it is not MY history. It is history. Full stop."

Ndiriro snorted. "You surely don't believe in the one objective story, do you?" she said. "You know that saying - it is the hunter who writes the history. It is time for the hunted to give their version of events."

"You know, I am so tired of feeling guilty for being white," I said. "I don't know why we

can't get over this whole race thing. Apartheid is over. Obviously my story will be from a particular perspective. But there's no need to bring politics in to everything."

"Apartheid is over!" Ndiriro spat my words. "That's like chopping someone's legs off and then once the wounds have healed, saying, okay, sorry, now let's get on with the journey."

I rolled my eyes. "Look at you," I said. "You certainly don't seem legless to me. You are a competent young woman making the most of your life. Don't bring race into it."

"Don't you tell me about my life!" Ndiriro shouted. "Don't you tell me about race! You in your little comfortable world. You have no idea of what you are talking about. I am made to feel black every single day, every single day when…."

I had had enough of this tirade. "Fine," I said, to get her to stop. "I obviously don't understand."

"Do you really think that's fine?" Ndiriro was not going to let this go. "What does it mean for the history you're writing, your white blindness, admiring your ancestors' fantastic work at trampling our customs and lives."

I felt the blood rush to my face again. "You don't know everything either," I retorted. "You just want a two-dimensional story, the bad old whites again. Well it's not that simple either."

"I never said it was!" Ndiriro's voice was nearly a shout.

We drove a while in silence. I didn't like Ndiriro being so angry. But I also wanted her to listen.

"Don't you think," I started carefully, "don't you think that you are being a little over-

sensitive?"

"There's no point in discussing this," she said. "You don't understand." She reminded me of Rachel.

I felt the yawning gulf between us again. We drove in silence again until we got to the little café we had stopped at before. It was good to get out of the trapped tension of the car, and stretch my body, get away from Ndiriro.

The shop was cool, and dark. The woman behind the counter nodded and smiled at me. We both selected our drinks, and chips. Ndiriro was not looking at me. Yesterday I had paid for both of us, but today she ostentatiously avoided being near me.

The woman's eyes summoned me, and I gestured towards Ndiriro, who had been at the counter first. "That will be 23,89 dollars," the woman said. Ndiriro handed it over in silence and went out to the car.

"Good morning," the woman greeted me. "Did you enjoy your trip?" I realised that it was a relief talking to a white person - I didn't have to weigh my words.

"Yes," I answered, getting my purse out. "It was very interesting."

"Did you go to the hot springs?" she asked.

"No, no, just the little village Otjimbijwe."

The woman looked at me. "But there's no-one there. Nothing to do."

"I am doing research," I told her. "My relatives were missionaries here a long time ago."

"That's interesting," she said, but I could see her eyes glaze over. Obviously historical

research wasn't her thing.

She rang up my ginger beer and packet of chips. "That will be 21,50," she said. "Enjoy your day," she added, as she handed me the change.

Back in the car, we started on our journey again.

"Did you notice that I was invisible to that woman?" Ndiriro asked.

I was glad she was speaking to me again. But I didn't know what she meant. "Sorry?"

"That woman ignored me, wanted to serve you first. Didn't you notice?"

"I thought she just hadn't seen you." I thought back. "But she must have greeted you. She was very friendly."

"Was she?" Ndiriro said. "She didn't talk to me. The only thing I heard her say was the price."

I thought back to the way up. "Didn't she talk to you yesterday when we went in?"

"No," Ndiriro said, "but you were buying, so you didn't notice. But I could see then even that she was someone who doesn't see black people."

I kept going over the encounter in my head, trying to find some explanation for the woman's behavior. But I had to admit that Ndiriro was probably right.

"I'm not denying that there are some racists around," I said. "It's shocking that people can still be so prejudiced. I'm sorry." For a moment I hated that shop woman who made me feel guilt on her behalf.

“Really, Jennifer, that’s not even the kind of racism that gets to me,” Ndiriro said. “It’s the fact that I am the only one in my family to get a degree, the fact that my cousin is so excited because she’s found a job as a hotel cleaner. And she was the one who always encouraged me at school, helped me with Maths. She’s clever, I tell you. But she never had any chances. Just because everyone can vote doesn’t mean that everyone suddenly has qualifications and houses and all those things you whites take for granted.”

I hated that ‘you whites’. But I still felt awkward about the shopkeeper so I didn’t say anything. Then I thought about her cousin. It was hard to imagine that Ndiriro herself could have been a cleaner. I tried in my head to replace her elegant outfits and shoes with a cleaning overall and a doek. It was surprisingly painful. I had never thought of it like that before.

As we drove for a little while in silence, through the barren land stretching out on all sides, I thought of the opportunities offered to my children, and their friends. Very different for my domestic worker’s kids, who had dropped out of school. Their choices had exasperated me when Victoria had brought endless tales about her children’s disasters, and requests for money to bail them out or pay for a deposit for something or other. Now I wondered if they would have been different if they had been born into a different world.

I remembered a supper party, when the story of Victoria’s daughter came up - dropping out of school in grade 11, falling pregnant. I was telling the story at table, fresh from Victoria’s tears in the afternoon. “That girl had a choice,” David said firmly. “She could have made something of her life, but she made a choice and she has to live with it. We all have to live with the consequences of our actions.” At the time I had nodded agreement, irritated with Victoria’s sob-stories and requests for yet more loans.

But now I felt a deep regret. “The only choice you had to make at that age,” I should have said to David’s smug face, flushed with the best merlot money can buy, “is whether you went to Hilton or Michaelhouse. Not whether you stay in a shit school where you and the

rest of your huge class are failing maths because your teacher is drunk or absent." In fact, thinking about David and his latest choices now made my hands tighten on the steering wheel. He also was pretty good at following what seemed the most attractive short term option.

And Victoria's daughter had actually been a clever girl. I had given her books and she had written thank-you notes, good spelling, I remember noticing. Now she was a domestic worker like her mother. She had come one day when Victoria was sick. But she had been surly, and I had told Victoria I didn't want her coming again. But now I imagined another life for her, was sorry that I hadn't done enough. Lord knows Rachel would be surly in such a situation. Who wouldn't be?

"Perhaps," I said slowly, "perhaps affirmative action is not even such a bad thing." I was talking to myself, really, forgetting how Ndiriro might react.

She snorted, as if she was going to get angry again. Then - "coming from you, I guess that is quite a statement," she said. "You're quite right. Perhaps it's not such a bad thing after all."

I was glad she wasn't furious with me again. I realised, surprised, that this was the first time I had ever had an honest conversation with a black person about race. In fact the only other black people I knew, besides Victoria, and Goodness, the gardener, were some parents of kids who had been at school with Simon, and I hadn't ever got to know them. They had seemed like us, though. Race didn't seem to be an issue. Now I wondered what they had really thought of all these other white parents who came from such different lives.

By then we were in Windhoek, and she had to direct me to get to her flat. "Thanks, Jennifer," she said. "I do appreciate the lifts. And I hope I wasn't too rude."

"You made me think about a lot of things," I said. "And I hope I wasn't too rude either.

In fact, I enjoyed our conversations. It's fine."

And to my surprise, it was fine. Somehow I didn't feel that rawness that I got after a fight with David, or even Rachel. I actually felt energised, able to look at the world in a slightly different way, and I felt a wave of warmth for Ndiriro.

She looked relieved. "I'm glad I haven't upset you too much."

"I will see you at the archives," she said.

And I thought, almost sadly, that we would go back to the same stiff politeness that had defined our encounters. But I was very wrong.

MARY

Mrs Heining is sitting writing her letters home. Unlike the letters received that unsettle her, she is in a better mood after writing her pages and pages - she laughs more, and doesn't get irritable about little things, like the pots being in the wrong order on the shelf.

Mrs Heining looks up, sees Uatavi looking at her. Uatavi quickly averts her eyes. But Mrs Heining speaks gently. "My mother is old, Uatavi. I don't know if I will ever see her again in this life."

Uatavi wants to comfort her, doesn't know what to say. Mrs Heining sighs. "It is a hard life sometimes to follow our Lord. To be so far from home."

Uatavi thinks of her aunt's hut so close. But that is no longer home for her. This is her home now. She wishes Mrs Heining felt at home here too.

"But this land is my land too, now," Mrs Heining says, as if she has read Uatavi's mind. She says it as if it is a lesson learned and recited, but also with an acceptance, as if it

something that has come to be true. Then she stands up. “But what am I doing, writing, when we have so much to do. Come, Uatavi - I mean Mary, I want you to help me to hang out the washing.”

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Uatavi - or rather Mary - is finding life only slightly changed since she has been Saved. Her daily workload is the same, and as yet God has not spoken to her directly. She feels even more like a visitor when she goes to the village, and she never sleeps over there anymore.

At the Mission she feels her position is more secure now, she is an insider now in a new way, a bit like Daniel, who has been with the Heinings from the beginning, whom she and Vezemba watched those many many months ago.

Daniel has just come back from a hunt. Some of their cattle had died, and so the mission wanted to get wild meat rather than slaughter domestic animals for this month.

“Letters!” Mrs Heining cries, as he comes in on his return, bringing a parcel that he had picked up for them. And she snatches them up and takes them to her workroom. Everyone knows they will not see her for at least an hour.

“How was the hunt?” Mary asks Daniel, as he walks back to his house, where his wife and children are waiting. She likes him. He is a quiet man, but kind, and wise. Reverend Heining calls him his ‘right hand’. Mary hardly notices him, but when he was gone the mission felt the lack of him when the canal blocked up, when one of their cattle got its leg caught in a harness. For it was always Daniel they called on to solve any problem, with his calm helpful way.

He smiles tiredly. His clothes are dusty, his boots worn. “I am glad to be back. We had to go a little further than usual, I think a recent group of hunters must have scared the

animals." It was no longer a rare thing, these white visitors exploring and killing, collecting bugs, leaves, horns, skins, skulls. He seems to want to say more, but then his wife is calling him and so he bows his head and walks away.

As Mary walks back to the house from the drying shed Joseph finds her. "Tavi, Tavi, I am going away to school, across the sea, to the motherland." He is half excited, half scared. "And my parents are taking me home." Joseph never calls her Mary, despite Mrs Heining's constant corrections, and Mary rather likes to hear this name on his tongue.

But now she is trying to understand what his words convey. The Heinings - gone? She cannot imagine being without them now, for her world is one that they created, every space and duty that define her days. Where will she go? Will she live back with her aunt? Will they expect her to stay and keep the mission wheels turning slowly without them? Who will receive the supplies, keep the crops watered, the floors clean, the children taught, if the Heinings are gone? It will only be a few months before the weeds appear in the cracks, and the children will not come regularly to school without the whites to encourage and feed them.

But then Reverend Heining and Mrs Heining sit her down in the afternoon. "Mary," Mrs Heining says, "we have something to tell you." So it is happening. Mary starts thinking about what to hope for - the weight will be too heavy if they want her and Daniel and the others to keep the mission going. She realises she has hardly been listening. "So you see, Mary, the Lord has willed it that I will see my mother in this lifetime. We got the letter from the Mission Office." Mrs Heining is looking happier than Mary has seen her for a long time. "And it is not only for Joseph. Reverend Heining will also be arranging for the Herero Bible to be printed."

Then Reverend Heining leans forward, his voice gentle. "Uatavi, I mean, Mary, you have been so useful to me in the translation. It would be greatly beneficial if you came with us to help with the final stages of the manuscript."

“And you could also come and testify with us at meetings,” says Mrs Heining, “when we are raising money for the mission. Your words will mean much.”

“You are asking me to accompany you to England?” She can’t believe what they are saying - and they are both looking at her expectantly.

“England and Germany. You need to speak to your family and the Head, and get their permission,” says Reverend.

Yes, yes, yes, she thinks. They all know that that is just a formality. Mary no longer belongs to her people. She is a mission girl now. And of course she wants to go! To this mystical far away world, where the whites make their guns and sugar and glass, and all the other wonders they have brought. Where everyone is good and Christian, with no stains of sin on their white skins. She can’t believe it. She will be travelling away from her land, her family and home. For a moment she feels as if she is on the top of a cliff, about to throw herself off into the abyss, and do the impossible - fly.

“I will ask them,” she says. “I can speak to them today, if you like.”

“Thank you, Mary,” says Elizabeth. “Just be quick so you can help me with Gita this afternoon.” She smiles at Mary. “Joseph will be so excited that you are coming. You will miss him nearly as much as me, I’m sure, when we leave him there. Such is the trial of the missionary.” She sighs.

“Perhaps I should come with you to your father,” says Reverend Heining. Mrs Heining looks like she is going to say something, but then she stops herself.

The two of them walk to the village. People are up fixing the thatch of the huts after the rains, and the boys are already back with the cattle as they didn’t have to go far and dig deep to find drinking water. Young children run to greet them, and the Reverend greets them back. A few little ones who have attended some school greet them in English:

“Hello, how are you, hello, how are you, I am well, thank you, praise the Lord, let us pray.”

Mary looks at Reverend Heining, worried that he might be offended. She knows Mrs Heining does not like it when the children seem to use white languages as their own, singing the words with no meaning. But he is laughing. “What gentlemen you are,” he says, and digs into his pocket where he finds a few pennies. The boys take them, and Mary remembers the first penny Mrs Heining gave her. “They probably don’t know what they are,” she says.

“Then they are lucky,” he says, as if he half means it. The boys pat him on the back as they leave. “Come to church on Sunday,” he calls after them in their language, and they laugh and wave.

The reverend is nearly as proficient in Herero as Mary is in English. But although he knows the traditions and rituals of the villagers, after taking copious notes when he arrived, he is still oblivious to the rules that should govern his behaviour - possibly, thinks Mary, because no-one has had the courage to teach him. He marches across past the sacred fire, where no guest should go. But it doesn’t matter, and nobody bothers to correct him. He stands waiting for Mary, who took the long way round, so as not to disrespect the space. Together they carry on walking, and they find Mary’s father outside his hut, sitting on a stone with his pipe. He stands up when he sees them. He looks so small, so old, compared to the reverend.

“You must be proud of your daughter,” the reverend says slowly, in his Herero, and Mary’s father nods and smiles widely. He looks relieved. Perhaps he was expecting trouble.

Two women passing stop to hear the conversation, and so soon it is all over the village that Mary is going to the white man’s land. For Mary’s father gives permission quickly. Mary can see he wants them away, wants the reverend to go back to where he belongs,

not here in the village of which he knows so little. It is far easier when her father is the servant on the whites' territory. Now that the reverend is standing here, her father is awkward, not knowing whether to treat the reverend like a normal visitor, or remain rude by not offering him anything, not discussing the issue with many words and considerations. So he looks relieved when they turn to go. Mary turns back as they walk away, and her father gives her a formal wave, his face solemn. She no longer knows what he really thinks. She has become part of the other world, the world of the whites.

On their way back to the Heining house the sun is setting in the sky above the mission that stretches far beyond the blue mountains in the distance. The clouds have softened, picking up the pink and orange of the dying sun. "This is a beautiful land," says Reverend Heining. "I will miss it while we are away." He looks at Mary. "I think you will miss it too."

"I am sure England is even more beautiful," Mary says. The way the whites talk about the dust, the flies, the heat, she has come to think that England is like the Paradise in the Bible with cool rains, ripe food gardens and grass as soft as a blanket. "It must be hard for you and Mrs Heining to be so far away from it."

"What will be hard for Mrs Heining will be losing Joseph," says Reverend Heining. "Not that he will be lost. He will be at school, and one day, God willing, will join us back at the Mission. But I am sure I can count on you to support Mrs Heining when she misses him."

It feels strange to talk about Mrs Heining like this, as if she and the Reverend are the adults, and Mrs Heining - who controls Mary's waking hours - the child. "I will help her," she says seriously. But in her heart she knows there is nothing she will be able to do to comfort Mrs Heining. And she cannot imagine a time when she is back in Africa, after having been in Europe. Surely after seeing and being so far away she will not be the same person that she is now.

PART FOUR

JENNIFER

Strangely I rather missed Ma Lisa, back at the bland hotel. I was happy to sink onto a flush toilet, look forward to a hot shower. And to eat without an audience. But I did miss her attentive warmth, her friendly presence compared to the hotel workers who hardly met my eyes, except for the restaurant manager who hadn't been trained in the art of subtle service. But they were, I reminded myself, people too. I noticed as I got my key that the woman behind reception was wearing a cross around her neck.

"You are religious," I asked, pointing at her cross.

She looked confused.

"You believe in God, Jesus, go to church?"

She beamed. "Of course, I am a believer. I am saved. Have a nice evening, Mrs Wilkinson." She must have served me before - I hadn't noticed her. It was a shock to hear my surname on her lips - David's surname. I should have checked in with my maiden name.

My thoughts returned to Ndiriro. Was she a Christian? Because, I said to her in my head, you can thank my relatives and other missionaries for that. They were the ones who brought the word of God. And now I was the doubter, and many black people like the hotel receptionist were the ones with the fervent beliefs.

I had always gone to church, of course. I remember when I was little, how I found an old wooden painted cock, a toy I didn't want anymore - the back wings were broken and the beak was chipped - and I kneeled over it in the corner of my room to pray fervently for God to take it as a sacrifice from me. It seemed fitting, I imagine, that it was a cock -

perhaps that is why the idea occurred to me, after another Bible story sacrifice described at Sunday school.

I opened my eyes, and, surprise, the cock sat there still in its implacable wooden state. Either my gift was rejected, or there was no God. Slowly, imperceptibly, I moved to the latter belief as I grew older. Though thinking now of the quality of the gift, perhaps I had been a little unfair.

My grandmother was the most devout Christian in my life. My parents were both church-goers, but God and Jesus did not spend occupy their consciousness except, it seemed, on Sundays. Whereas for Gran God was an intimate friend, almost an invisible room-mate once my grandfather had died.

When we stayed with her when we were little she took us to her church in Duiwelskloof, where she lived. Sally says that she remembers how shocked she was that blacks were separated from us in the church, sitting right at the back, at how even at her young age she knew this was some terrible irony as the priest talked about brotherhood and compassion. I don't believe her. I was older than her anyhow, and all I remember is how she had a tantrum one morning before church because she wanted to wear my new hair bobbles, pink and sparkling, to show off to new friends we had met the day before who stayed next door. Granny had given her a little smack. "Why can't you be more like your sister?" she had said, and I felt the warmth of a virtuous heart. It wasn't often that I was favoured over pretty little Sally.

I still remember Granny's proud face for my confirmation - she even came down to Cape Town for the occasion. We went shopping for a white dress. I bought one that she chose, a virginal sack that had no relation to the other items in my wardrobe, and for a long time it hung there afterwards, a visible reproach, until my mother threw it in the pile of old clothes for our domestic worker.

In the confirmation ceremony I tried - again - to feel the spirit as the bishop put his hand

on my forehead, but again nothing happened and I felt oddly empty afterwards - a bride without a groom, just handsome but pimply Anthony who had been to confirmation classes with me, and now I wouldn't see him anymore because I was too shy to show I liked him.

Afterwards we went out for supper - something my parents hardly ever did - and my gran kept beaming at me in pride over the charred steaks at the local restaurant. But once she went back to Duiwelskloof I started going to church less and less. My parents did not force me, but carried on attending in their quiet way until they died - my father of cancer, and then my mother much later. And even after her funeral, when I sought her soul, some comfort for her daughter, it felt like an emptiness. I couldn't believe she was now in heaven. If she still existed in any form she would find me, I was sure of that.

So some of my friends were puzzled when I became so interested in my missionary ancestors. "But you're not really a fanatical Christian," said Sandy, who knows me the most and so can say these things. Neither of us are as devout as some other friends. We share the traditions, you could say, rather than the beliefs.

"But it's so much more than that," I said. "They were the pioneers of their time, the spiritual leaders. True, I don't believe the Bible literally like they did, but I believe in their integrity, their intention. And you don't get people who are so determined to do good like they were. And she's been overlooked, Sandy, but she was as important as him. I am setting the record straight." I remember I got a bit tearful at this point - Sandy and I were out for lunch at Groot Constantia, under the oak trees on a hot afternoon. She had run away from her children for once as it was during David and my break-up, and I was raw and wounded - even she could see that demands for ice cream and her iPhone to play on were not going to help our friendship at this stage.

"I think it's a good thing, your quest," I remember her saying quickly. "You're right, in this modern world there's so little belief in things." She stretched out her hand and squeezed mine, her chunky gold jewellery cutting into my hand. "After that asshole

David, this research is exactly what you need." She sat back. "You haven't used your brain properly for years, because of David and the children. It's your time now." And I took that as my mantra in the weeks that followed, as I became stripped of all that had surrounded me.

I slowly followed Elizabeth's trips to Germany, Willem's homeland, to England, her own, and her heartbreaks as she left her children in Europe and returned to Namibia. The letters gave me a purpose, a reason to get up every morning. And then the letters describing how she had to leave her son in Europe made me weep, this small boy left behind. Perhaps I was weeping for my own children, who were now leaving me behind.

My dearest mother

Here we are home in my dear husband's land, and we will be coming to England soon. I could not help but force back tears when we arrived at the port and I saw so many white skins and heard European languages shouted across the dock. But this land has its sinners and its suffering and we can but pray to our Lord to guide us all in these times. I have been guilty of remembering the Christian strength of our home, and forgetting the evil that besets sinners everywhere.

The voyage was long and trying. Poor Gita suffered the most, and stayed in the cabin for days. But now we are safe and here to raise money for the mission's future and to take Joseph to his school. He will be attending the Gymnasium selected by his father. This is the greatest burden of the life of a missionary: leaving our dear ones in the homeland for their education. If we could have it any other way we would, but it is impossible to teach him ourselves, and the heathen influence is dangerous for young minds.

And later:

Joseph was so brave when I left him. It was Gita who was crying, and he kissed her on the cheek and told her to be good and to look after Mother and Father for him. I could

see the tears on his cheeks as he said goodbye to me. Later I got a message from the teachers to say that he has settled in, and prayed for our safe journey. He has our portrait and the Matron says she saw him kiss it goodnight. Oh Rosie, if I did not know that the Lord blesses us and keeps us safe it would have been difficult to get through the last few days. Joseph, though so young, has always vowed to return join us in missionary work, and I have no doubt that with our Lord's guidance he will one day take his father's place.

MARY

The meeting is held outdoors in a cobbled square, like the others she has seen in these small German towns. The wind is icy, but lots of people are out to see the real Christian African. Many of them have never seen a black skin before. Mary surveys them from the platform where they are about to testify about the mission. A roar goes up as the reverend nods to her and she steps forward to the edge of the platform. People are pushing to see her, hands outstretched to touch her, pointing bony white fingers like worms coming out from under a rock, and she quickly steps back, out of reach.

"Does her cleaning water go black from her skin?" she hears a child in the front row ask. She tries to smile at the little girl tugging at her mother's hand, but when she does the child shrieks and hides behind her mother's skirt.

Mary feels a sickness inside her. She is so tired of being the freak here in this cold foreign land across the sea. It reminds of how they used to jump up to touch Mrs Heining's hair, stare at Reverend Heining's white skin. That old reverend used to slap their hands down when they got close to touch. But now Mrs Heining says, when people touch her, "Be patient, Mary, you have to forgive them. They have never seen anyone like you before."

The faces are all looking at her, even when Reverend Heining begins talking about his mission, about her land. His voice booms out over the crowd's faces. At least he has

stopped describing her people as so evil and base that it sounded like they were animal rather than human. She had said something after the first meeting, and he had had the grace to look embarrassed. “I know the Herero are not evil, Mary, but they are sinners, you cannot deny that.” But since then he has toned down how he talks about the Herero, now they are the ‘poor deluded natives’ rather than the wife-swapping beasts of the first speech.

She had expected to find a country full of Christians, people following the white god, obedient and with everything as ordered as the mission. But it hasn’t been like that at all. Some whites are crude and cruel. And she has seen poor white people, in rags, with no teeth, putting their hands out to get pennies, and other whites in soft thick clothes just brushing past them. This is no perfect world. And yet most people are Christian, Mrs Heining keeps telling her.

“And now Mary will tell us about her people, and how they need to find the Lord Almighty,” says the reverend, and he turns to smile encouragingly at Mary. She steps forward again. The sky is grey, clouds heavy with rain over all these faces turned towards her.

She starts speaking. As they hear her German, the crowd roars again, and then starts shushing each other so they can hear her words. “It’s like hearing a monkey talk,” she heard at the last meeting. Today it is better. She sees the mother of the little girl smiling at her, the little girl coming out from behind the mother and giving a shy wave back when Mary waves at her.

The reverend asks her about wild animals, about hunting, for the benefit of the audience below them. She doesn’t know what this has got to do with the mission, but she answers obediently. Then she hears him tell the story about the lion which came near the mission, and Mrs Heining also talks about the dangers and difficulties of their lives. It is not like they are lying exactly, but it certainly makes mission life sound dramatic and exciting, as if every day they face danger and death. It makes her feel strange, having her world

dressed up like this for these whites who know nothing. But at least it is raising their money, the reverend says, enough to keep going and perhaps even start a teacher-training school. The crowd is like a tamed animal, gasping or laughing at the right moments, and then taking out their purses for coins to give to the mission workers.

It happens afterwards, as she is handing out pamphlets to the crowd. People rush up to get the pamphlet from her rather than the other mission workers, and she is trapped in a throng. People try to touch her hands as she gives them the pamphlets. Some even touch her cheeks. The mission worker who has been asked to look after Mary - a young woman who hardly smiles - is jostled away and Mary is alone in the crowd. Never ever has she felt so alone, surrounded by white faces like the cold snowflakes she has recently seen for the first time. Two men in torn clothes come closer, leer at her. One has a beard that has bits of food caught in it, the other is short with broken veins in his red cheeks. She tries to hand them a pamphlet, but they ignore her outstretched hand.

"Do you think there's the normal workings of a woman under that dark skin?" the bearded one says to the other. "Wouldn't mind a taste of that."

"Only one way to tell," the red-cheeked man says. And before Mary knows what they are doing, the bearded one has pushed his hand between her legs, and she can feel his fingers push her hard on her vagina even through the thick material of her dress. She winces, pulls away. The other man smacks her bottom, hard.

"Built like all of them, I think," the bearded man says, pinching her cheek. "But it's hard to tell with all that fancy dress. Need a bit of fun with a white man?" he asks. He is so close that she can see the little black spots on his nose, smell the stale alcohol on his breath. She wants to be sick.

She pushes herself away from them into the crowd, ignoring the hands outstretched for brochures, the excited faces as the black Christian comes their way. She is trying to see the Reverend. He is still on the platform and she pushes her way to him, grips his leg. He

bends down to her, loosens her hand on his shin, and helps her up next to him.

"What is wrong, Mary," he says. She only now realises that she is crying, tears are streaming down her cheeks. "We will take you home now," he says, peering around to find Mrs Heining.

Mrs Heining sees the reverend waving, comes towards them, her cheeks flushed. "There is a lot of interest today, my love, many are donating to the cause." She has been so happy here in Europe. She sees Mary. "Mary, what's wrong?"

Reverend Heining can guess. "It's those riff-raff again, I imagine, taunting the poor girl. We must get to the carriage and get her back."

"Is that true?" Mary can only nod, trying to stop the tears. "You poor thing," says Mrs Heining. "What a pity," she continues. "It is a good crowd today."

Together they hustle Mary to their carriage, bidding farewell to the Mission House workers who have helped to organise the meeting. The horse's hooves clatter on the cobbles. A soft rain starts falling. "Just in time," says Mrs Heining. "God has been good to us with the weather."

The words cut Mary's heart. Does God care so little for her?

Back at the house Mary still feels the man's hand between her legs, as if he has left a print that cannot be erased. Mrs Heining follows her to her room, tries to find out what happened. Mary gives her a very brief description. Mrs Heining looks embarrassed as they try to find the words to describe what cannot be said. Eventually Mrs Heining pats her hands, and gets up. "I will heat up some water for you to wash, Mary. That will help to feel better."

Then later once she has gone to bed early, warm for once after her bath, she hears them

talking about her through the thin wall that separated their bedrooms.

“I wonder at how badly she reacted. You would think that being a Herero, where they swap wives all the time, that it wouldn’t be so disturbing as for a white woman,” says Mrs Heining.

Reverend Heining’s voice was harsh: “How can you be so unfeeling, Elizabeth. She is a Christian now. And besides, the Herero have strict rules about wives. It’s not like any man can take a woman he chooses.”

“Well it’s not as if the women have much choice, I imagine,” retorts Mrs Heining.

“You may be right, my dear. But all I am saying is that it is not surprising that Mary feels so violated. She has been protected by us, she is still an innocent.”

Mrs Heining’s voice is now lower, and Mary has to lean towards to door to hear. “I don’t mean to be unkind, Willem. I do feel for the poor child. She really was terribly upset. I think this was all so different from what she expected.” And then, her voice going even lower, “I know what that’s like.”

She is surprised at how she feels nothing about their words, as if she is trapped in a bubble. But that night she cries out in her sleep, and little Gita wakes her up. She cannot remember her dreams, and can hardly sit up to reassure her. She falls back into a dark sleep and the next morning she has a fever. Mrs Heining is irritated, but as the fever grips her Mrs Heining becomes worried, even sitting with her into the night. In the day Mrs Heining brings her soup, tries to encourage her to eat. But her body aches, and she has no appetite. Although awake, she feels asleep. It is almost a comfort. Two nights later she wakes up. She sees Mrs Heining sitting at her bedside. She cannot believe Mrs Heining is there, as if she is Joseph or Gita.

“How are you feeling my dear,” Mrs Heining says gently, and takes her hand, and then

strokes her forehead. She loves these rare moments of tenderness from Mrs Heining, and tears prick her eyes.

"The Lord be praised," says Mrs Heining. "The fever has broken." She stands up. "Sleep well now, Mary, and you will feel better in the morning." At the door she looks back. "I am sorry it has been so difficult for you here," she says.

But the next day, as she is weak and feeble, she sees no traces of Mrs Heining's tenderness. Mrs Heining is fretful and impatient, snapping at the children cooped up in the house while the reverend is out to sort out the printings of his bible. The next day a young German maid comes to help them. "She does twice the work of you, Mary," says Mrs Heining to her as she is sitting in the front room, listening to Joseph's reading. "I think I will need her even when you get better completely."

Mary wonders if Gretchen also helps Reverend Heining in the study with his translations and final proofs, but she doesn't reply. Besides, she also likes Gretchen's cheerful manner, the way she can get Joseph to eat his greens like Mrs Heining and Mary have never been able to. She is someone who has always known the Christian way, thinks Mary, and so has never had any wars in her heart. She envies her, especially when Gretchen confesses that she has a sweetheart who is waiting to marry her when they have raised enough money. Mary remembers Vezemba, and wonders about her future. She envies Gretchen.

That evening in the big cold house with draughts that sneak in worse than the sand back at home she hears the Heinings talking again. They are sitting at the table and she has taken the plates through to the kitchen. She is coming back to see if she has forgotten any washing up when she hears her name and stops just outside the door. "I must thank Mary for all her translation work," says the reverend. There is a pause. "I was thinking of putting her name in the acknowledgements."

"Is that really a good idea?" asks Mrs Heining. "She is already getting ideas above her

station. It's already going to cause trouble back home when she is the special one, who's come overseas. You know how jealous people get."

Mary holds her breath. What will Reverend Heining say?

Mrs Heining continues. "It has been so wonderful to have an maid like Gretchen, Willem, I can't tell you what a relief it's been."

"You have enjoyed the visit home, haven't you dear?" the reverend says.

"So much," she says. "But it is strange. I thought I would find it hard to think of going back to Damaraland. But I am almost looking forward to it. Perhaps it has become home after all. The difficult thing is going to be leaving Joseph behind."

Another pause. "Are you mentioning me in the acknowledgements, my dear?"

"Of course I am acknowledging you, my dear wife," says the reverend. "I could never have done any of it without you."

Mary turns back to the kitchen so she cannot hear any more. A few days later, she sees the proof pages that the reverend is checking with her. When he was out of the room she checks the acknowledgement page, but her name does not appear.

JENNIFER

Before breakfast that morning, skimming through the letters, I found a reference to someone in Germany - Mary perhaps?

I have been much occupied particularly in house affairs, having only my Herero maid with me, who, although she did what she could, was not efficient in a household where all must be managed with strict economy and where the work is not more than one good

servant can do, whereas I was obliged occasionally to hire help to assist her. But why do I write thus? She is now on her way back to her native land, accompanied by Willem, as he is returning to the mission while I spend some time settling Joseph in, and letting Gita spend time with her cousins. How I miss Willem already! I got a letter from him and from my girl, in which her expressions of affection are quite affecting. She will be happier in Africa, and I hope her visit in this country will not have been without a blessing to her, although she did not find everything and everybody so good as she had at first expected.'

I went down to breakfast, thinking about this information, ready to do more research to investigate Mary. I was not even comparing myself to the other people at the tables when the call came from David's lawyer.

"Please can you get the papers to us as soon as possible," the voice said. "Mr Wilkinson obviously needs everything in order before the marriage."

I thought I had mis-heard. "What marriage?"

"I am sorry. I thought you must have been informed. Mr Wilkinson's marriage to Miss Henderson."

I disconnected the call. Slowly I went upstairs. For a moment I panicked as I could not find my door key. But it was in my pocket. I unlocked the door - it was a sticky key, and I had to jiggle it. I pulled the door closed behind me and ran to the toilet where I vomited out the breakfast I had just eaten. The sour mass of fried eggs, bacon and tomato splashed into the toilet.

For a moment it almost felt like I was watching a movie, mildly surprised at this extreme body reaction. But only for a moment. Then I retched again until my stomach was empty. I splashed my face and went back to my bed, pulling the blankets over my face. I wanted the world out. I wanted to be out myself.

I am not sure how many hours passed. Perhaps I slept. But then I heard the buzzing of my cellphone. Instinctively I stretched out my arm to find it. I answered it and then panicked that it might be the lawyer again for some reason. It was Rachel.

"Mom," her voice was awkward, distant. "Mom, have you heard from Dad lately?"

"No. But his lawyer phoned me." My voice sounded rusty, clogged up.

"I just wanted to check that you're alright."

I felt tears in my eyes. Rachel resented me, was furious with me. Took her father's side usually.

"I'm struggling, darling," I said.

"I didn't think it would happen so soon."

What did you think? I wanted to spit. I have told you what a mean, manipulative asshole your father is. Why does this surprise you? But I didn't say anything.

"I think Becky must be putting pressure on him," she said, "I can't imagine that this is his choice."

"Rachel, stop." I could not listen to this.

"Sorry, Mom," she said. There was a silence. "I just wanted to check you're okay."

"I'm not okay," I said. But the words shocked me. I could not say this to my daughter. I cleared my throat, tried to sound normal. "But I'll be fine, don't worry. It's just a bit of a shock."

“I’m sure it is.” Rachel’s voice sounded relieved now. “But anyway, Mom, I need to go to class. I just wanted to see how you were doing.”

I didn’t resent her desire to get off the phone. I didn’t want to speak to her about this either. It would end in a fight, as usual, and we both didn’t want to fight right now.

“Thanks for calling, darling,” I said as lightly as possible. “Keep in touch.”

I slumped back on to the pillows. I wondered if I should call someone, someone I could really talk to. Sandy. I dialled her number.

“Hi, Jen, how’s Namibia?” I was flooded for a desire to be home.

“Oh Sandy, I’ve just heard that David’s getting married.”

“No!” her voice was shocked. “That prick. Roland, careful there, you’re going to spill it.” My heart sank. She was with Roland. There was no way we could have a conversation now.

“You’re busy. Can I phone you later?” I said.

“Oh Jen, I’ve got to take Roland to OT now, and then he’s got a birthday party. Let me call you as soon as I can, okay? Roland, NO!” There was the sound of clatter and then crying in the background. “Fuck, Jen, sorry, I’ve got to go. Hang in there, darling, I’ll phone later.”

I lay there, the envy of Sandy’s life almost a physical pain. How I missed that part of my life, with the children small, needing me, the time when I thought I could direct their lives forever, make them happy with a cuddle and a story.

Nobody needed me now. I was a chore to my children, and my husband had gone. It

would probably be a relief if I just slipped off the planet. Self pity washed through me, and I welcomed it. Fuck being well behaved. Look where it had got me now.

Elizabeth's box of letters sat on the table. Today they felt like no refuge. Just a bleak reminder of how my failed marriage, pointless life contrasted with hers.

I tried to imagine getting up. For what? To go where? Here was the only place I wanted to be, or rather, there was nowhere else to go.

My cell buzzed again. I reached for it without looking at the number. Perhaps Sandy had realised this was an emergency, left the children's party.

"Jennifer? Are you okay?"

I recognised Ndiriro's voice, and tried to answer. But my yes sounded like a croak. "Jennifer, what's wrong?"

I cleared my throat. "Just some bad news from home."

"Oh no," her voice was concerned. "Not your daughter, I hope."

"No," I said. "Nothing too serious. Just my husband's getting married soon to a woman half his age. Who he met through our daughter." And then I felt a wave of hysterical laughing hit me, and I couldn't control myself.

"What's going on?" I heard her voice again, and my laughter turned to wracking sobs. "Are you in your hotel room?" she asked. "The Queens'?"

"Yes," I gasped out.

"I'm coming now," she said, and the phone clicked.

MARY

Mary sees a distant line on the horizon, where before there was endless blue. She has spotted land before, and has always been disappointed, for it has never been the right land. She will not allow that excitement to well up in her again.

"Reverend Heining," she calls. He is walking on the deck, talking with the other missionaries coming out to South Africa. The wind is up, ruffling the reverend's hair so it looks like Joseph's unruly curls, and catching the ladies' wide skirts. The sails are flapping above them, and the ship is rolling under her feet.

On the voyage out she was confined to her cabin she shared with another maid for days, sick and frightened of this watery world that felt so unnatural, home for fish and whales, and the strange creatures she saw lurking under the surface, not humans.

Now every rock and slide of the ship below her is taking her closer to home, and she eats healthily at meals, sitting at a table with some Irish girls who are going out to work in the Cape. Two of them are often sick, and she pities them, moving further and further away from their home towards this distant land. But they keep to themselves, not coming to prayers, or Bible study. Besides, she can hardly understand their English, they speak with such a strange accent.

She hasn't seen the reverend much on the voyage, except for prayer times and meal times. She is shy now to interrupt him. But he smiles, leaves the missionaries holding on to the deck rail, and comes up next to her. A gust of wind sweeps her bonnet over her head and he rushes to pick it up. "Lucky it didn't blow out to sea," he laughs. "I'm afraid no gentleman would be gallant enough to retrieve it from the depths." Mrs Heining is staying a few months longer in Europe, with Joseph, and without her the reverend is more carefree, almost like a young boy.

She points to the land. “Is that the Cape?”

“Yes, that’s the Cape,” he smiles. “I heard word from the sailors that it had been spotted.” She is so grateful, so relieved, she wishes to fall on her knees to the white God. For it is Him they have been begging for safe deliverance for the last few weeks on the expanse of endless sea, of nights being rocked in the waves, the days in the desert of blue. And now her prayers are almost answered.

The hours it takes to get close to land are agonising and delicious at the same time. She wants to push the sailors to hurry as they shout to each other, throw ropes this way, put sails out and then pull them back again to catch the afternoon breeze. But she just grips the deck tightly watching the thin line of land bulge out into a mountain, then houses that pop out beneath it, and at last the dock that opens out to greet them.

Back at the port she almost cries to see people with her dark skin working, shouting, laughing. Home where she belongs! She might not understand the languages being yelled by the workers, but there is no-one looking, or pointing at her, and the air is warm on her skin. She remembers the excitement of when she left and almost pities this past self who has no idea of the terrible times ahead of her.

But she is not home yet. There are days in a small house with the other missionaries, days of doing very little except cook and clean as the reverend organises the supplies, the wagons, the drivers and the horses. It is only once the four wagons are packed and the oxen harnessed that she begins to breathe freely, knowing that she is on her way back home.

Reverend Heining spends most of his time with the other missionary couple, Reverend and Mrs Stephenson, riding next to their wagons. They are new to the country, and she can see that Reverend Heining is enjoying telling his stories, sharing his knowledge.

“This journey should never be attempted after the rainy season. The rivers swell and are

almost impassable."

"There in the distance is the homestead of a good Christian farmer who can give you shelter if you are ever in need on this journey. I had a lame oxen once, spent the night there. He was very helpful."

"That is a little bush pig, very tasty meat. I will ask the driver to try to find one for our supper."

Sometimes he tries to include Mary, but she is tired, and shy, and would rather just sit with the driver of the third wagon and watch the bush go by until it is time to stop and then she does most of the meal preparation as the drivers make the evening fire.

After a few days Mr and Mrs Stephenson leave them to go to their station, and it is just two wagons, four drivers, and Mary and the reverend left to continue their journey.

It happens the following day, as they are jolting down a bank towards a dry river bed. There is a dry wind, and the oxen are agitated, pulling hard down the uneven rocky slope. Suddenly the wagon shudders, lurches beneath her, like the ship in the storm. She has no time to grab hold of anything before it collapses underneath her, on top of her. She is thrown down into darkness, the canvas has smothered her, and all she can hear is the frantic braying of the oxen. Her heart is thudding, shock shooting through her veins. She feels no pain, just some bruising on her arm trapped underneath her. She heaves her body, pushing against the weight of the canvas. It doesn't move. She feels a wave of panic and pushes harder, finally releasing her arm. And she can lift it and move it, it is not broken. She tries pushing herself out, but the canvas is pinned down and she is trapped.

"Mary!" she hears a cry. "Mary!" It is Reverend Heining's voice. But she has never heard him sound so agitated, so - afraid.

She calls out, "I'm here!" But her voice is choked and dusty, and lost in the muffled

darkness. She pushes her arm out to try to show where she is, and the canvas shifts, but something heavy has weighted it down.

"Mary!" She hears his voice closer now, and then he talks to his driver as they slowly move the trunks that have spilled out. Finally the canvas is free, and she can push it open. She suddenly sees light and sky as she sits up.

"You are safe!" he grabs her hands, bends over to support her as she stands. The driver is pulling himself out at the other side, and he goes immediately to free the oxen which are bellowing in pain at the tangled harness.

That evening Reverend Heining and the drivers prepare the meal, letting Mary sit. Her arm is painful and her ankle is swollen. It feels strangely unreal to watch the reverend and the drivers fumble with the pots and plates that have become her tools for the journey. The wind is up, and she laughs to see the cloths dance in his hand as he takes the pot off the coals. They find a sheltered place behind a group of boulders to eat, and she feels the warmth of the stone on her back.

She feels light-headed, like now she is home nothing can touch her. Reverend Heining keeps smiling at her, touching her arm as he hands her food, praying for her health, thanking God for sparing her. "Where would we be without you," he says. "You are vital to our mission. I can't imagine our station without your presence." He goes back to the fire, stokes up the coals to boil water, and brings her some hot coffee as she sits in the dusk. "Mary," he says awkwardly, "you are very important to me and my work. And in my next printed translation work I am going to acknowledge your role in all the work you have done for our Saviour and for your people."

"Thank you," says Mary softly. Her foot has a dull ache, but she has never felt happier in her life as this moment under the wide darkening sky, sipping the sweet coffee that the reverend has made her.

When it's dark the drivers go off to make their beds amongst the softest bush they can find. Mary has been sleeping out too, but with thick blankets to spread. Reverend Heining sleeps in the one wagon that has a bed squeezed on top of the supplies - the other wagon is packed to the top canvas.

"It might be more comfortable for you to sleep in the wagon tonight," Reverend Heining says. "Your body is battered."

"No, I can't do that," she protests. "I will be fine."

He shushes her. "Come, let me make a bed for you."

She is shy to challenge him again. She watches as he gets the bed ready, and then she limps to the wagon. He helps her climb up. His hand is under her arm, pressing into her flesh. She turns to thank him, his face near hers in the darkness. And she realises - he is being more than just tender. He desires her.

The thought comes to her again as she lies in the dark, under the canvas. The warm touch of his hands, the feel of his arm across her back. She cannot dare to think of him in that way, she cannot believe that he looks at her so.

She wakes up to loud rumbles all around her. The threatening storm has finally arrived, and the rain is pelting down on the canvas above her. There is lightning, thunder, and the wind grates on the canvas so it vibrates above her. She is in a cosy cocoon, but she feels terrible, imagining Reverend Heining getting sodden on her wet blankets outside. He could crawl underneath the wagon, she supposes, but she cannot imagine the reverend squashed underneath the base, with the ground wetting around him.

The wagon lurches, and she feels rather than sees his face peering in. "Mary? It is so wet out here."

She shifts over and he squirms his way in, the mattress high up on top of the trunks and bundles. There is not even room to sit.

She can feel his wet clothes next to her.

“You will catch cold if you stay wet,” she says. But his trunk of clothes is in the other wagon. He will have to get out and wet again to fetch them. The thunder rumbles above the wagon, and it rocks in a gust of wind.

Reverend Heining lies next to her, and starts unbuttoning his shirt. “My hands are wet,” he says. “Help me, Mary.”

And she does. She lies on her side, and his shirt opens up to his chest under her fingers. He takes her hand just as the last button is undone, and puts it to his cheek.

“You are so warm.”

And then he finds her underneath the blankets. He finds her soft skin in the dark, strokes her face, puts his hand into her nightdress, gently touches her breast.

And Mary? She can hardly breath. She can hardly think. She likes it when he strokes her. “I am so glad you are safe,” he whispers. “I was so worried about you today. I thought you had died. But God spared you for us.”

The lightning cracks outside. It sounds like the world is ending.

They lie there together, the rain smashing the canvas above their heads, his hand now just warm on her stomach. The sound is so loud that he says something, and she cannot hear him.

He moves his body close to hers. She cannot sleep with his warm nearness, the heat of his

male body, his hand still on her. She has never been so close to a man before. She hears his breathing change - it sounds like he is sleeping. She stretches out her hand and touches his chest. But he catches her hand and presses it to her mouth. Then she feels his hands on her body, pulling her towards him.

She is pressed against him now and she feels his private part swelling against her pelvis, foreign and strange. His hands drop beneath the covers, push her skirts up slowly, gently. She could stop him, she knows, but she lies there, still, almost holding her breath. She feels him between her legs. It feels like an animal as he thrusts inside her, and she gives a choked cry with the sudden burning pain. Quickly it is all over. The rains has also softened against the canvas to a steady whisper, and little drums of soft drips.

"I am sorry," he says, over and over again. "I am so sorry."

"I am not sorry," she whispers back. She doesn't like to see him so agitated. "I am glad." She remembers the story of Jesus, the son of God becoming human. That is what it felt like tonight - God became human, a man. Reverend Heining, who has been like the father of the village, the god who looks after them all. And she was his woman.

When has crawled out of the wagon when the rain stopped, she realises she does feel glad.

But then she thinks of Mrs Heining. And the white God who is not like her ancestors' gods, who do not get angry when a man has more than one wife, but smile upon such a man as he gathers riches. She imagines living with Mrs Heining, like her older aunt lived with the other wives of her husband. Perhaps it would be no different from the life they lived already, except that Reverend Heining would be visiting her at night as well as Mrs Heining. But she can't imagine gossiping with Mrs Heining about the reverend, like her aunt gossiped with the other wives.

The next morning she wakes up, shy to see the reverend. She wonders if he will help to

stoke the morning fire, difficult now with the wet wood, and heat the water for coffee. Her body is still bruised. But when she sees him he avoids her eyes, and seems to have forgotten about the accident and their night together as she moves stiffly around for the modest morning meal, her eyes burning with the smoke in her eyes.
Before they start travelling he holds prayers as usual. But this morning he prays for his beloved wife, and for her safe return, and expresses his gratitude at his God for giving her such a partner, and asks for strength as he misses her.

And he does not look at Mary or give her a word. She sits next to the driver, waiting to be freed from this heaviness by even just a smile or a look.

Much later that day, when they have stopped to water the oxen, she tries to find him. "Reverend," she starts saying.

He can't look at her as he speaks. "Oh Mary I have wronged you, and I have prayed for forgiveness," he says. "Or perhaps it was a dream, I cannot believe it happened. Satan was close in the storm." He looks up, his eyes wild. Now he looks at her and she sees terror on his face. "You cannot tell anyone, Mary," he whispers. "Our sin would destroy the mission, you know that." And then he hurries off to talk to the drivers, with no sign of the pain and fear she has just seen etched on his face.

She is left standing, a hollow in her heart. Last night he was her human Jesus. And now he calls her a sin. She has tried so hard to understand what sin is, and how not to do it, how to recognise these every day things that have over the years tricked her with their evil that was so hidden to her, like the herbs the men smoke, like the dances that were part of her earliest memories. And now it is the reverend himself who has led her to sin. Surely it was only evil if they called it so.

It was you who sinned, not me, thinks Mary. But that thought is too big, and doesn't fit into the pattern of her life that she understands, and it shrinks smaller into a speck that she buries in her mind. And then when he calls for her to help with the preparation of the

hare that the driver caught she comes as quickly as she can, limping on her painful ankle, and everything seems the same as it ever was.

But it can never be. For she has a new ache between her legs, and she can never see Reverend Heining as Jesus again.

JENNIFER

I could not let Ndiriro see me like this. I controlled my crying, went to the bathroom to splash my face. I peered at myself in the mirror, and wished I hadn't. Swollen eyes, disheveled hair - a witch, a monster of a woman. I pulled a comb through my hair, pulled the bed straight.

She came in the door. I tried to be polite, normal, but she just came and hugged me, which started me crying all over again. She stood there for a while, then gently pushed me away. "Come, Jennifer, stop now." I managed to gulp the sobs back.

"I'm sorry," I said. I was so shamed that she was seeing me like this. But I was also glad she'd come. I don't know what I would have done otherwise.

"Don't be sorry," she said. "Come out with me. You cannot sit here and hide. We're going out."

"I can't go out looking like this!" I was horrified.

"You look fine," she said.

I managed to pull my clothes and face straight, and we went out through the air-conditioned lobby into the heat outside. The world felt surreal, as if I had landed from a different planet. She guided me to the coffee shop where we had first chatted.

“They say there’s a storm coming,” she said. “Shall I order you a cappuccino?”

I nodded. We sat together in silence. I was concentrating on not crying. Just when I thought I had come to terms with my divorce this news had rocked me in a way that took me by surprise.

“My mother would never come in a place like this,” she said. “I can just imagine what she’d say. All that money for coffee you can make at home? Wasting your money like that.”

I tried to smile. I couldn’t imagine her mother here either. There were only slick city-goers getting their caffeine fixes. “Must be strange for you, living in a different world from your mother,” I said. I was glad I had something else in my head to chew on, trying to imagine Ndiriro as a little girl. No OT or dancing lessons for her, I imagined.

“Oh, I don’t know,” she said. “It’s more all her expectations of me that are difficult.” I didn’t want to think about daughters and expectations right now.

“Besides,” she said, “my mother is quite a modern woman, you know. She does business with her cellphone. Selling her eggs and things to the local market.”

I couldn’t help smiling at the idea of Ndiriro’s mother as a businesswoman.

“It’s true,” she said. “There is a whole project, and my mother says that she is one of the fastest learners of how it works. She is very proud of herself.”

We sit for a while, finishing our coffee. “And your father?” I asked.

Her face closed. “My father disappeared a while ago. He left without even telling my mother he was going. Then she heard he found a job and a new girlfriend. My mother was very upset. She cried a lot.” She looked at me. “I thought white men were better

behaved than blacks."

"Are you joking?" I asked.

"Only sort of," she said. "We had this joke at varsity, that we needed to find a white guy because they would cook for you and look after the children as well as paying for everything."

"Take it from me," I said, "that's just a story."

"Did your husband help with the children?"

I had to nod. The thought of David and the kids choked me up. They loved him, though I had done so much more for them. He had been there for bath time, bed time, played cricket with Simon. But all on his own bloody terms, I wanted to say. When it suited him. But I couldn't discuss all of this now. "Do you see your father now? Does he support your mom?"

"My mother had always supported him. He wanted to be a musician. She worked to look after all of us. And now he's gone off and got a job in a furniture store and got a young girlfriend who is a student." She shook her head. "Bloody men."

For a flash I felt humiliated - Mrs Wilkinson, graduate and home-maker, just like any other abandoned African woman in a shack. But it was a weak current, swept away by the torrent of anger I felt at David, at Ndiriro's father, these men who treated families as clothes you could discard when they got old and used and grey.

"How old were you?" I asked.

"Seventeen. I was doing my last exams. At the time my mother found out." She looked so stern.

“I take it that’s made you very careful about who you choose.”

She nodded. “Don’t worry about me, Jennifer. I am not going to be messed around. I have quite a list that my husband is going to have to live up to.” She clicked her tongue. “That’s what’s so infuriating. My mother’s marriage collapsed, and now the only thing she wants for me is to get married.” She looked at me. “Mothers can be so difficult sometimes.”

She leaned back, stretching out her legs. I hadn’t even noticed her shoes today. But yes, it was a pair I hadn’t seen before, strappy with strings that wound around her legs like a grape vine on a trellis. She noticed me looking at them. “Like my sandals?”

“Ndiriro,” I said, relieved to change the subject, “you must have many pairs of shoes.”

She smiled. “I confess I do have a shoe fetish. Always have. When I was little I looked forward to going to school mainly because then for the first time in my life I would get a new pair of shoes.” She laughed. “And there in the summer, putting my feet into shoes and socks off to school in the middle of a heat-wave, you’d think it’d be agony for feet that had never experienced that before. But I was delighted. My mother would have to force me to take them off in the afternoon.”

“Seems surprising,” I said, “for someone so serious-minded as you.” I remembered wondering about her transport situation. “I am surprised that you haven’t focused on getting a license, and a car.”

She frowned. I realised how that might sound. “I’m not saying that you shouldn’t enjoy shoes, I just mean..um, I’m just surprised, that’s all. My daughter loves her independence, and I thought you would like it too.”

“I have been meaning to buy a car,” she said. “But every time I save a nice amount, someone from the family needs to go to college, or do a course or something. And there it goes..” She smiled ruefully. And I was reminded yet again of the different worlds we lived in. I was learning to admire Ndiriro more and more.

Slowly we walked back to the hotel. The world had settled back to being normal again. I even found myself admiring the cloud formation in the sky just for a moment, and then being appalled that I had come out with my uncovered greying hair, until I remembered what the heavy drag around my heart was.

Once we got back to the hotel she came back with me to my room.

“Jennifer, you need to come back to the archives,” she said. “I have found something interesting for you, about Uatavi.”

“I don’t know if I can concentrate enough.” I didn’t know if I could retreat into that world again, when my own was in such a mess.

“I’m sure you can.” She took my hand. “I’ll fetch you on my way tomorrow morning.” At the hotel she made me order a sandwich for the evening. Only when she saw me eat some of it she left. I sat there munching dutifully, watching images flicker on TV, changing the channel whenever there was a happy couple, or someone looked like David.

Ndiriro had been so kind, I thought later. I was touched by her compassion. I wished Rachel could meet Ndiriro. But it was hard to imagine them actually meeting. Ndiriro’s experiences of the world are a far cry from the sheltered world my Rachel has inhabited. I don’t think Rachel would feel comfortable in Ndiriro’s home at all. Then I remembered Ndiriro’s comments on Rachel’s clothes. Maybe they could talk about fashion…

MARY

It is when her dress feels tight that she realises - she has not bled for three months now. The knowledge hits her like cold water: she has a growing baby inside her. Reverend Heining is just a man, she knows that. And this is even greater proof.

She knows enough of the way of the whites to realise that this is not something that is going to be easy. She heard in Germany about bastards, children who do not have married parents. It is a cruel thing, she remembers thinking, that a child has to suffer for its parents.

She has never felt so alone in her life. What will her father think? This is no one she can marry, or who can give cattle for damages.

She knows her father feels that she is lost to her, especially since she has been away, and since they now know that she can only marry a Christian man. And for Mary herself, it has been a long time since her aunt was the woman who knew everything, was always there. Her Heinings became like her parents a long time ago. She visits her aunt, brings her gifts of food, and feels comfortable in her hut. But only because she knows she will be going back to the white house, where she is learning about God, where she belongs now.

But what will happen to this belonging, when Mrs Heining finds she is carrying Reverend Heining's child. She remembers Mrs Heining speaking about another child with an African mother. "It never works when they mix," she said to Reverend Heining. "Brings out the bad in both strains. That child had a weak mouth, did you notice?"

But she cannot ever imagine what Mrs Heining would say if she found out what Reverend Heining and Mary had done that night in the wagon. She does not even want to try to imagine the storm that would follow. All she knows is that all their lives would never be the same again.

She doesn't have to say anything. For Mrs Heining, with her sharp eyes, has noticed. She is getting up to go to the latrine outside when she hears them talking in low voices in the living room.

"Willem. Have you noticed that Mary is getting fatter?"

"No dear." His voice sounds unsteady. "I don't really notice what people look like."

"If it was anyone else I would think it may be that she is expecting," Mrs Heining said. "But she would never be like that." There is a pause. "Surely," Mrs Heining continues, "surely Mary would never betray us like that?"

"Impossible, my dear," says Reverend Heining. "But you never know with people. Perhaps I should speak to her."

"You?" Mrs Heining is shocked. "I must speak to her, as a woman. Perhaps she is merely growing into herself now. Or over-eating now she is so glad to be back. This is not a man's business."

Mary feels sick to her stomach as she returns to her bed.

It is the following afternoon. "Mary, I need you to help me," he calls.

"Are you starting on a new translation?" asks Mrs Heining. "I thought you had finished your work."

"There are just some things I need to tidy up," he answers. Mary wonders if Mrs Heining can hear the awkwardness of his voice.

The two of them are in the room together. But it feels very different from before. He

quickly goes to his normal place behind the desk. She stays standing near the door.

“Are you alright, Mary,” he says. She wonders what he is really asking.

“I am alright,” she says obediently.

“You haven’t said anything about the night?” He looks so ashamed when he says that.
“I have said nothing,” says Mary. “There is no-one I can tell.”

“Mrs Heining thinks it’s time you got married,” he says. “And we thought for such a good Christian girl as you we need to make sure you find a man who will look after you. A man -“ he pauses, looks out the window. “A man like Daniel Gertze. Now that his wife has died he is alone with his children.”

“Mr Gertze!” Mary cannot stop her words. “But he is old!”

“Only a little older than me, Mary,” Reverend Heining says, and he blushes. “It would be a good Christian union,” he says.

“But Reverend,” she wants to touch his arm, feel the man who came to her that night. “I cannot marry Mr Gertze. I cannot!”

“Mary, is there not a reason that makes the matter of your marriage urgent?” He cannot look at her. “It is either that or Mrs Heining will turn you and your baby out of the house.”

It is like he has put a knife into her belly. She looks at him disbelievingly. How could he say those words? And the idea of a baby - her baby. It is too much for her to think about, too much for her to feel. She feels her body begin to shake.

“Mary, what is wrong with you?” He looks at her now, looks outside helplessly as if he

wants to run away. “Sit down.” He pushes a chair towards her. She sits down, but her body won’t stop shaking.

“Mary, we have sinned, and we need to atone for our sins,” he says. “Daniel is a good man. He will look after you.” She shakes still. “Stop it now.” His voice is harsh. “Stop it right now.”

She manages to stiffen herself. “Reverend Heining,” she begins. She doesn’t know where to start, what to say. She feels adrift, tossed like the ship in the storm they had in the crossing. But at least in the ship she could put her head under her blankets, and feel that everything would pass, because God willed it so. Now the storm was inside her heart. “My baby,” she whispers. “Our baby.” She knows that it is a man’s seed that starts a life.

“Don’t ever say that again.” It is like he has slapped her. “You have no idea of how I have wrestled with my sin, Mary. That has been between me and God. But you cannot destroy God’s work for this child who was conceived under Satan’s spell.”

They both hear Mrs Heining coming down the passage. She opens the door, looks at them both curiously. “Willem?”

“Mary is not feeling well,” he says. “I think Penelope should make her some sweet tea.” There had been a small batch of baptisms on their return, and Katazuma-Penelope had been one of them.

Mrs Heining looks at Mary sharply and her mouth tightens into a thin line. “Come with me, Mary,” she says.

Mary looks at Reverend Heining, but he has gone back to his desk and will not look at her.

She follows Mrs Heining out, feeling like a goat about to be sacrificed to the ancestors.

Mrs Heining walks to Mary's room, closes the door behind her.

"I cannot believe that you have done this," she says. "You have betrayed us and betrayed our Lord. You have lain with a man who is not your husband. I couldn't believe it of you, Mary."

Mary has heard many of Mrs Heining's angry words. But now her voice is not loud and sharp. It is low, icy, like the snow they left behind.

"You are lucky my husband has more of God's mercy than me," she continues. "Daniel Gertze needs a wife to look after his children, now that his wife is dead. And Reverend Heining needs him to run the mission's farming station. He will need all the help he can get. So we are not going to turn you out. You will be looked after. But you will never care for my children again."

"No!" Mary's cry wrenched out of her. Gita, her beloved, how could Mrs Heining take her away from her 'Tavi'.

"You are not the girl I thought you were," Mrs Heining says, still standing at the door. "This has hurt me more than I could have imagined." She walks out down the passage. Mary closes the door behind her and lies on her bed. The heaviness she felt in Germany, the heaviness she thought she'd left behind there, was sitting again on her chest.

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But just as in Germany, life drags on like an injured animal dragging its leg. In fact life has returned to as normal as it could. Mrs Heining still lets Mary look after Gita - there is no-one else, after all, whom Gita loves like that.

The translations are finished, and Reverend Heining does not seem to have started any more translation projects. Or if he is, he is not using Mary to help him. The most they see each other is in morning and evening prayers. And the feel of his hand as he gives her

communion on Sunday mornings.

There are preparations for her marriage.

Daniel came and finds her after the Heinings had told her their plan.

“So we are to be married,” he says, and she nods. She feels his eyes look her up and down. She guesses what he was looking for.

“Did they tell you I am expecting,” she asks.

And now he was the one to nod. His face looks severe, hard. Does he think she is a sinner?

“I will never ask you about the father,” he says. Mary wonders what the Heinings have told him. What would the reverend have said?

He looks at her face searchingly, and his expression relaxes slightly. “Your baby will be my child too,” he said. And for that Mary’s heart softens. She knows he is a good man, kind. He was another favourite of Gita’s.

“I am not of your people,” he said. For he was Nama speaking.

“My family is the Christian church now,” she answered obediently. She knows her aunt and father will be disapproving, but they are so far from her life now. She has no-one who really cares where she goes, what she does. She pushes down this wave of self-pity.

“You are good with children,” he says. “I have seen.”

A wave of weariness washes over Mary. Yes, she is good with children. Good for anything the mission might need. Just not good for the reverend.

Daniel now wants to talk, tell her about himself. “I was an orphan,” he says. “I was living as a slave of Jonker, and ran away, found a trader to work for. Then the Heinings took me on. I knew bits of the languages to help them. And they have always been good to me.”

“They have been good to me too,” she says. And the lie comes slipping off her tongue like honey. But then she turns away from him abruptly, leaving him standing, looking after her. Sometimes she feels like she cannot go on.

The day feels like her baptism. She even wears the white dress she wore for baptism that she lets out at the waist. She has read that white is for virgins. But the Heinings cannot have their first convert’s sin be on display for all to see. So she is married in white too. But this time she is alone as she struggles into the dress in her little room in the Heinings’ house, the room that has been her home for so many years.

Everything is strange. Her baptism felt like a marriage. This feels like a leave-taking, a farewell. She walks up the passage in the middle, the one they call the aisle. It is the reverend who walks next to her. He is going to ‘give her away’, Mrs Heining says. The words cut her with their truth.

Reverend Stephenson is at the altar. He gestures to the congregation to get up, and most of them do, shuffling and talking, except for the granny who is sleeping peacefully at the back of the church. Mary’s aunt is there, wearing a dress that Mary has made for her, one with red and yellow swirls, much brighter than Mrs Heining has ever allowed for Mary. She has also wound matching material around a traditional headdress, and two women are admiring her outfit, rubbing the material between their fingers. Mary looks for her father - but it seems he is not back in time from escorting Mr Klein to a neighbouring mission. Reverend Stephenson is leaving tomorrow, this was the last day he could perform the ceremony.

He gives a short sermon, aimed at the villagers, about Christian marriage and the evils of

polygamy. Mary notices that Reverend Heining spends most of the time looking at his hands knotted tightly on his lap. Mrs Heining cannot understand much as it is in Herero, but she looks attentive, nodding at the few phrases she understands, looking around the church to see if the words are having any effect.

Daniel mumbles through the vows, not looking at her. He doesn't look at her either, when she makes hers, so she ends up looking down at the space between them.

His children are in the front row. Mary notices the youngest one's buttons are done up wrongly. She knows that in future it will be her job to help him.

They come out the church. It is autumn, cool in the evening. Gita throws a handful of rice over her, a strange white custom. It feels like a terrible waste. Mary has to stop herself from bending down to pick up the grains from the dusty ground.

Her aunt and some other family members come to the mission for a small celebration, and eat the food that Mary has helped prepare. Daniel is not Herero, there is no connection to celebrate this union in the village, so it remains a mission affair. But everyone is subdued - the villagers are not comfortable at the table outside, trying to use knives and forks, and Reverend Heining, who usually has a friendly word for everyone, easing the gap between them all, is sitting silently. Only Mrs Heining is merry, trying to ask the villagers about their children, or the new fields being planted, but she keeps fumbling for the right words, so Mary leaves Daniel's side to help her with translation. "Come, Reverend," Elizabeth calls, "Kazi here says that she has planted the mielie seeds we gave her, isn't that good news?" Reverend Heining forces a smile.

Finally Daniel and Mary leave, walking slowly to Daniel's house nearby. Mary looks back, but Reverend Heining has already gone inside. Only Mrs Heining is left, pulling her shawl around her as she directs her maids in the clearing up under the darkening sky. Mary doesn't see the face at the study window, watching her go.

That night Mary lies with Daniel in his little house in the mission compound. She has said prayers with his children and helped them to bed. Now they are in his tiny room, on his small bed which has hay pricking out of the sheet covering it. The place he lay with his wife for years and years. He turns to her. He smells different from Reverend, sourer. His body is smaller, but harder. He smiles nervously. “Don’t be afraid, Mary.”

She doesn’t feel afraid. In fact she doesn’t feel much at all as he takes her in his arms. He, like Reverend Heining, is for a short time transformed into a grunting animal. But it doesn’t last long, and then he is back himself again.

PART FIVE

JENNIFER

It took me a day to gather myself again. I phoned Ndiriro, told her I'd see her the next day. I opened the letters, wondering if I could do some quiet work at the hotel. But my eye caught on one about marriage.

Dear Rosie
I have felt an accountable lightness of spirit after a time of drear and darkness, where the sin of despondency was hard to stave off. But at least our Lord is steadfast, even if humans are weak, and let you down when you least expect it. Even my dear husband has struggled to find the strength and cheer usually so part of his disposition. It is not usual for me to be the one soothing a tetchy spirit! But the weather is cooling, and it looks like we may be able to raise funds for a teacher training institute.

We have also had our first Christian wedding. You would not recognise it perhaps as a wedding with the villagers hardly managing to cover their naked bodies, and the rather sparsely furnished church with a humble dust floor, but it is still a Church in the sight of our Lord, and we are blessed to have a Christian union in our midst.

I closed the letters again. It was the despondency I could relate to today, but didn't want to read about this innocent marriage, so free of the heavy white silk and expensive champagne and lengthy gift list that I remembered from mine.

I went out, wondered Windhoek like a zombie, slowly thawed by the signs of all this life going on oblivious to me, to David, and warmed by the small kindnesses of waiters, and the lady who cleaned the toilets. At one little restaurant with plastic tablecloths and false flowers I scrolled through old photos on my phone. And when I came to one of David, his head tilted, his face smiling showing his newly whitened teeth, I surprised myself by feeling just a faint pang. I had taken that photograph on an afternoon walk with Sandy

and Graham, but even as I had tapped that little button, I had been feeling irritated with him, his smug smile, his previous boasting about his gadget to Graham that measured everything about his exercise schedule, completely oblivious to my requests to him for help to get a thorn out of Molly's paw and find the juice and biscuits we had bought. I remember saying his name at least twice to get his attention, but he had had that way of ignoring me completely when we were with friends, and so I would stop asking him to do things because I would be so embarrassed at how he was treating me in front of other people. We had been very far away from each other for a while, really. I had to stop remembering the good times, because they had gone for ages.

That night back at the hotel I dreamed of another man, not David, a man who had kissed me…. And in the morning I remembered how long ago it had been that David had made me feel that way, how long it had been since our marriage wasn't just a convenience. Perhaps it was more humiliation than hurt I felt. What's hard is to think of him being in the world with that young thing on his arm, going to the places we used to go, with everyone knowing and talking about me.

Would I even want him back? I had come too far now. Yes, it had been a shock. But not a shock of love and longing. A shock of rejection, of having to face my lonely future where there was no-one beside me as I grew old and grey, while David swanned around with his little chick. It was a loss of the friends we had, as now they had to choose between us, no longer a neat couple to invite to dinner parties. I hoped that David would lose all his hair as fast as possible, as he had been fearing lately, and that everyone would ask if this younger woman with him was his daughter.

Before I left for the archives, I paged through the letters, looking again for clues. My eyes snagged on one letter that had always moved me.

Dear Mother

We are slowly making plans for Gita to leave the country and join Joseph. She needs a

change as much as me and my dear Willem, her face is pointed and almost as white as the paper on which I write. Without friends she is just with me in the house, and sometimes I am poor company. She is getting very thin, even though she drinks fresh milk from the cow every morning, and bathes also in it. I do not allow her to cook, iron etc so that I hope with God's blessing she will soon be quite strong again. I cannot imagine this house without her, but I know that it is best that she go. Like her mother, she is not suited to this climate.

Life of trial and anxiety takes its toll. If you see me you would exclaim, 'O how old Lizzy is!' The flesh shrinks from the thought, it is true, but if the heart, through God's grace, is set on things above and not on things of the earth, one can rejoice that I have been able to serve our Lord in this way.

Poor Elizabeth. My heart ached for her at this point, old before her time, her children gone. For a few months later her daughter did leave. Her letters to her daughter have been in the public domain for years now, used by Willem's biographer. But they are different in tone from the ones to her mother as they strive to give Gita moral and religious education from afar.

I didn't have breakfast, just went straight to the archives. Ndiriro searched my face, then smiled. "You look better."

I was surprised. I hadn't even thought about what I looked like. But I guess anything would have been better than my witch appearance the day before.

Then she gestured towards the desks. "Go sit down. I have something for you."

She brought me an old yellowing newspaper, flipped through to a back page.
I looked at the faded print, the grainy black and white photograph. The caption read: *Mary (previously Uatavi) Gertze, first Damara convert, with her five children*. She was here, and she was real, looking at me through the years, the woman erased - or rather

overlooked - by my ancestors.

The paper was a church newsletter, dated 1916. I couldn't believe that Ndiriro had found it. I peered at the photo. She was old, and small, but she stood straight up, looking at the camera calmly. Her children flanked her, all grown up too, all with serious expressions. What must have been her youngest daughter was holding her hand, almost unseen by the camera - a gesture that wasn't for show. A tall son loomed behind her, paler skin than the others, his hand on her shoulder. She looked loved.

There was a short interview with her. How she found God when she lived with the Heinings, how she had even gone to Germany with them. The interviewer had asked her what she thought of Europe. "It is very beautiful, for those who live there," she had replied. "But it is not a place for Africans."

I wondered what she meant, why she had disliked it. Perhaps the miserable weather had got to her.

They also asked her about the Heinings. "I helped with Reverend Heining's translations," she was quoted as saying. "That was one of my most important areas of work at the mission."

Pressed further for details about the early missionaries, she also said, "They were true to God, and did everything in His Holy Name."

It was a strange comment, it seemed to me, with what it didn't say about them. Did she remember them with love? With gratitude?

I took out Willem Heining's biography, flipped to the section about his translations. There was even a photograph of him, smiling proudly, on acceptance of his honorary doctorate for his translation work. The biographer had named the people he had thanked, in his acceptance speech: his wife, his fellow missionary Mr Klein, and a sponsor who

had helped to fund the mission. No mention of Mary.

Ndiriro came to me. “So you are feeling okay?”

“Much better than yesterday, thanks to you.”

“But also, how are you feeling, now that you are finding more out about Uatavi-Mary?”

“I think I’ve been prepared for it, funnily enough,” I said. “If I had found all of this out on day one, I think it would have been hard. But it’s been a process. And it would have been a terrible gap if I hadn’t found out.” She patted my shoulder and went back to her desk.

I thought about what I had said. How had my feelings changed for the Heinings? I looked at those familiar letters. When I looked at the letters now, was she still my Elizabeth?

She had become more of a real woman, I guess. Not the perfect woman I had admired, almost painted as a saint in my mind. But funnily enough it was a comfort - she too was human, with her imperfections - like me. But that didn’t take away her bravery, her selflessness, that life she lived, so much bigger and more exciting than mine - so driven by a purer morality and purpose. But she was also was a woman constrained by her time, who had not acknowledged a young dark-skinned woman who must have been vital to her life - but was overlooked, invisible, like so many servants today.

But what about Willem? It was not up to Elizabeth to make Willem mention Mary in his translations. True, she was not named in Elizabeth’s letters, but perhaps that is because when you are writing home you talk about the people that your readers are interested in. No, Elizabeth remained in my heart.

What had changed more were my feelings about Reverend Heining. His biographer had always emphasised his compassion, his easy connection with the Herero. But if this was

true, then surely he would have acknowledged Mary's contribution somewhere. This in a funny way proved my point - too much recognition has been given to him, and not to his wife - and now his assistant Mary - in their supporting roles. He was a flawed human being - a man after all! but still a courageous one, still a man with integrity and passion.

I would write a chapter on Mary, a chapter on their first convert, and her life. I would mention that the Heinings had overlooked her instrumental role in their lives in their writings. I was pleased at the idea of this groundbreaking new research. But it wasn't going to tip my whole book off balance.

I looked down at the article. Perhaps I should even include the photograph. Mary's story was no longer to be forgotten.

MARY

Penelope brings the news. "Vezemba and his brothers stole cattle from Jonker. They said they were getting cattle back from the raid before. But they took some of Jonker's favourite heifers!"

The mission, the village are all soon buzzing with Vezemba and his bravery or utter foolishness, depending on who tells the story.

All Mary feels is fear. Fear for Vezemba. For what can happen to him now.

The Heinings are furious. "After all these negotiations we have done, what do these young men think they are doing?" the reverend fumes. "They have broken everything we agreed on."

"Jonker will think that we have no control here," says Mrs Heining. "And then what?" She looks meaningfully at her husband. "We will appear weak, vulnerable. He will come and attack the whole village."

Little boys are full of stories of the men's bravery. "Did you know it was only eight of them?" Daniel's son tells her, his eyes shining wide. "And they got through Jonker's men, only killing one on their way out?" He and his little brother play at riding horses, capturing cattle, shooting guns.

"Stop it now," says Mary. They are surprised at her impatience, usually she is kind, encouraging of their games. But now she is different, short-tempered and grumpy. After she has taken the sewing class she goes to find Mrs Heining. Gita runs towards her, happy to see her nanny who's now got swallowed up by a new family and doesn't have time for her anymore. Mary carries her inside. "Go and find a book to read to me, Gita," she says, then quickly finds Mrs Heining.

"Mrs Heining, those men are in terrible danger."

"They have brought this trouble upon themselves," says Mrs Heining. "Why are you coming to discuss it with me?" Mrs Heining is still unfriendly to her, but not entirely unkind. She is polite and formal, and Mary is polite and formal as she has always been.

Mary doesn't know why she has come to ask for help from Mrs Heining anyway. She hasn't been in contact with Vezemba for months now, doesn't know his plans. But she wants to be able to offer him shelter. She wants to save his life.

"Mrs Heining, the only place they might be safe is if they hide here," she says. "Otherwise they are dead."

"They cannot hide here," Mrs Heining says. "Jonker will find out and they'll be dead anyway. As well as a whole lot of others here."

"But just for a few nights," begs Mary. "When no-one knows. Just until Jonker has stopped looking so hard. So it can blow over."

“Mary, this is nothing to do with you,” Mrs Heining says. “I refuse to discuss it.”

And Mary leaves the house, with Gita calling after her that she is ready to read, and why is Mary leaving without listening to her.

As she expected, that night there is a rustle outside her window. She doesn’t know how Vezemba found out where she lived on the mission now, just as she doesn’t know how she knew he’d come. She tiptoes out of her bedroom, out of the door, pulling it closed behind her. There is no moon, and clouds hide some of the stars. But she can still see Vezemba next to his horse.

“Uatavi-Mary, I have come to say goodbye,” he says. It is the first time he has even acknowledged her Christian name.

“What have you done?” she asks, her voice breaking.

He becomes angry. “You sound like my parents. I have done what we should have done a long time ago. Stood up to Jonker. We have let ourselves be herded and killed by Jonker for far too long.”

“But Reverend Heining made an agreement, he said that -“

“I am tired of being controlled by the whites too,” says Vezemba. “Who are they to start negotiating on our behalf? We have given away our power, I tell you.”

Mary is also getting angry. “What power, Vezemba? When we were young we were just chicks in a nest hoping the vulture Jonker or his men would not find us? Do you not remember the hunger, the fighting?”

“And where do you think Jonker got his guns, and his power?” Vezemba hisses. “And

there is still hunger and fighting. But now we control none of it. It is time we rose, and got our pride back."

"Oh Vezemba," Mary shook her head.

"I would not expect you to understand," he says. "You, who are now their servant, their slave. Married off to that old man they chose for you."

"He is a good man!" Mary is hurt, angry.

"He is not Herero," said Vezemba.

"Well he is my husband!"

They are silent. But Mary can't bear it. "Vezemba," she says softly. "Why don't you come inside, hide here? Just until the trouble is over."

He looks at her, shocked. "I can't leave the others. And also," he adds, "your husband wouldn't be happy."

They stand there in the dark, fumbling with these words that push each other away when all they want to do is get close.

"Do you need food?" she asks. He nods, and she goes to fetch some meat and bread for him and his friends, wraps it up in a cloth and brings it out. "No honey here, but still delicious."

He smiles, she sees his white teeth in the darkness. "Remember the honey I found that time."

"You found honey many times," she says. "But yes, I remember that time you got us into

trouble about it." She sighs. "I remember you hiding then, in the reeds. Till the bees had stopped swarming."

"And till the adults stopped swarming as well," he jokes. "My father was furious. Lots of people were stung that day."

He stretches out his hand to her. "I wish you could come with me, Uatavi-Mary. But you belong to someone else now."

She touches his hand, then pulls back. "Why would I want to ride into fighting?" she says. "You are in danger."

"I don't mean that," he replies. "I just wish it was different, that's all."

It's the closest she has ever heard Vezemba voice doubt, sadness, regret. Her eyes fill with tears. "So do I," she says in a low voice. He comes closer to her, takes her hand. She remembers the night with the reverend. But right now she feels that it has always been Vezemba that she wanted to touch, to stroke, to feel melting into her body.

Just then they hear Daniel calling from the house. "Mary, where are you?"

Vezemba squeezes her hand, drops it. She feels her eyes itchy with unspilled tears. She gulps. "I will pray for you," she whispers.

He snorts. "Why would your white god want to protect me? I have been blessed by the witchdoctor. It is my ancestors who I will trust."

He swings himself up on his horse, looks down at her.

"Stay well, Uatavi-Mary." And then he is off.

“Mary?” Daniel’s voice is muffled.

“I’m coming,” she calls, trying to hide the tremble in her voice. She walks to bed and Daniel lifts up the sheet for her. She turns her back on him. Has she ever felt this alone before?

In bed she prays and prays for his survival. But there is an empty gap where she imagines God should be. Because she is not sure about what the Lord’s attitude will be to Vezemba, as the Lord’s attitude seems mostly to be informed by the Heinings’ opinions. And she knows only too well what they are.

JENNIFER

My style-less hotel room was almost becoming comfortingly familiar. I got in, had a shower to get the day’s heat and dust off. I found myself humming the song, ‘I’m gonna wash that man right out of my hair’ as I lathered my shampoo. I couldn’t explain my better mood, with my research taking a rather unexpected turn, and the devastating news of David’s marriage. But somehow I did feel cleansed, ready to look the new in the eye. I hopped out of the shower, saw myself in the mirror. Sadly the outside hadn’t changed much to match this inner resolution - thinner, yes, but still flabby and wrinkly, a sagging belly tyre that needed a change. And the grey screaming even louder and wider. But today I couldn’t give a fuck. I just averted my eyes, got into a little cotton petticoat that felt soft against my skin.

I phoned Rachel. “Hello Mom.” Her voice was guarded. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine, darling,” I said. “I’m recovering. And you?”

There was a pause.

“Enjoying the fashion course?” I asked.

“Yes, very much,” she answered defiantly.

“I’m glad, darling,” I said.

Another pause.

“Are you sure you’re alright, Mom?”

“I am fine, really.” I paused. “I’m glad you’re enjoying what you’re doing, I truly am, Rachel.”

“That’s a change.” Her voice was still guarded. I was obviously going to have to come out and say it. Apologising isn’t easy for anybody, including me.

“I know, Rachel. I’ve realised that you must do what you want to do.” God, now I was sounding like a self-help book.

“Wow, Mom.” Rachel let out her breath, sounded like a balloon deflating. “What’s happened to you there? I can’t believe you’re saying this after all our fights.”

“Well I’ve said it and I mean it.” I wanted to get this over with. I was not used to apologizing, changing my mind. And now it’s all I seemed to be doing.

“Oh Mom, that’s such fantastic news. Hey, Patrick, it’s my mom on the phone. She’s -“

“Focus on me, darling,” I said. “Talk to Patrick later.” I did not want to hear her victorious crows.

“Sorry. It just feels so good, Mom.”

She was right. Inside of me something had softened, a knot undone. It was strange how it suddenly felt so easy, letting go of my hopes for Rachel. And so finding her again, in a sense. “So are you doing exams? How does it all work?” I asked. “Are you getting results yet?”

“No, I’ll explain when I see you,” she said. “It’s a lot of practical.” She paused. “And you? What happened with that whole new bit of research stuff?”

I didn’t want to tell her everything, make her feel that she was right about it all. “Oh, it’s interesting,” I said. “Getting lots of new angles. I’ve also met someone who’s been very helpful. A woman your age. Or actually a bit older. I mean your generation. Her name’s Ndiriro.”

“Ndiriro?” Rachel repeated. “Is she black?”

“Is that relevant?” I asked. “But yes, she is black.”

“Gee, Mom,” Rachel said. “You must visit Namibia more often.”

“Are you implying that I was a racist?”

She sighed. “No, not at all. But it all sounds like you’re doing great. I’m pleased for you.”

I wanted to tell her not to patronise me. But I didn’t want things to degenerate again.

“Thank you. It has been an interesting time.”

After that I called Sandy.

“The news has got around,” she told me. “Everyone is shocked at David.”

I couldn't help asking. "Have you seen him recently?"

I could hear from the pause what the answer was. "He came over to have a beer with Graham. I didn't know he was coming. I hardly spoke to him, Jen. And he went soon after I came home. I don't think he likes being around me."

I knew I couldn't expect everyone to hate him. But it still hurt badly.

"And his fiancée?"

"He would never bring her!" Sandy's voice was shocked. "And Graham says he didn't mention it."

"I don't think I could bear it if I saw them together right now," I said. "Please don't let that happen when I come back."

"It won't happen, I promise," Sandy said. "And I tell you, even Steve is shocked, Graham told me - and he's like David's best buddy, isn't he?"

I wanted to hear all of this so badly, needed to hear it. "I don't think it will last.".

"Of course it won't," Sandy agreed. "Once he realises she farts and burps and is also human besides being young and gorgeous I'm sure he'll come to his senses."

Sandy can always make me laugh, even now. "And you know what," I said, "if he comes back to me I don't think I'd take him."

"Good for you," said Sandy. I heard a call in the background. "I must go," Sandy said. "We promised to take the boys to the SPUR."

The room felt empty with just me. I felt far away from everyone at home. My little world

of research, and my daily expeditions to the archives, and to see Ndiriro, were the things sustaining me.

As if in response to that thought I got an SMS message from Ndiriro. “I have some letters for you. From your relative in America.”

The letters from America. I had nearly forgotten about them. The letters from Elizabeth to her other sister. This was hugely exciting news. And also nerve-wracking. I did not want any dramatic revelations. A chapter on Mary was enough of an addition. It would be lovely to get extra details about their home life, about Elizabeth’s real thoughts and feelings underneath all the God talk. But not more than that. Please, not more than that.

MARY

She hears the wails from the village. Please, she hopes, please not let it be Vezemba.

But she knows there is little chance, and she is right. She walks slowly to the huts to find out what has happened. The sky is a taut blue canvas stretched against the sky, the sun is blazing.

The children tell her first. “Vezemba, Tjienja, Kejaua, all killed by Jonker’s dogs,” she hears. “Chased, cornered and shot dead.”

“And they didn’t run here,” says a young girl, whose name Mary doesn’t even know. “They saved us by not coming back home when Jonker’s men were after them.”

Mary feels the ground rock under her. Vezemba gone, no longer. And she will never see him, because he is not going to heaven. She wants to wail like his mother, roll on the earth in her grief. But she does not own him, has no claim. It feels like her whole world is dying, and her new one is sour and curdled.

She does not even go to find her aunt and father. She turns back to go and tell Daniel the news. Her body is heavy and thick with her baby now, and she is sweating under her dress. Never can she rip it off to feel the air and sun against her skin, never can she enjoy the feeling of ochre fat being rubbed into her body. For the first time she hates her dress, hates the way it traps her, weighs her down.

Daniel is kind. He tells her to rest, can see that there are unfallen tears in her eyes. And for that afternoon she lies still in the heat. Daniel even sends his younger son to fan her, and his innocent chatter calms her heart. She gets up later to make the evening meal. But when she remembers the world is without Vezemba her heart lurches again, and she wants to be sick.

"When are we leaving?" she asks Daniel. She wants to get away from everything, from the Heinings, from the grieving village where she has no place any more.

"We are going to start getting the seeds ready soon," Daniel replies. "And sort out our supplies. But we will wait for the baby to be born."

The wound in Mary's heart bleeds. For what can she pray for? Vezemba is - was - a heathen. He willfully turned his back on the Lord. The Heinings would say he was going to hell. Can she love a God like that? Could her prayers save him?

Will the ancestors protect him, embrace him? But they are false gods, idols, as Mrs Heining calls them. But who else can she turn to for him?

When she closes her eyes to go to sleep she sees Vezemba's face. Sometimes he is bleeding, smashed, and he is dying. Sometimes he is crying out in pain as hot flames lick his body, and he is trapped to feel them forever. And her heart lurches, and her eyes snap open and stare into the darkness.

There is no-one she can talk to, no-one who can help her wrestle with this despair, this

night terror. She tries to talk to Daniel again one night as they are about to sleep, and she is already dreading the long dark hours alone. “Daniel, what will happen to their heathen souls?”

Daniel looks troubled. “You know, my dear, that they chose to turn their back on the Word. They are the goats, they cannot be taken into the flock.”

“So they are burning in hell?”

“We are just humans, Mary, and besides, we still need the missionaries for our spiritual guidance. I can’t answer your questions. Speak to Reverend Heining.”

But Reverend Heining is the last person she can ever speak to. He has avoided her so obviously she can’t believe that Mrs Heining hasn’t noticed. In prayers and services he never looks at her, and if he is forced to greet her he moves away so quickly it seems like it must be screaming her guilt to the world. But no-one else seems to notice.

So she wrestles alone with her doubt, tossing and turning at night, trying to find a God who will comfort her, a god who will take Vezemba into his arms and heal him with his breath. But there is only the silence, interrupted by Daniel’s gentle snores. Slowly the terrible visions fade, but so does her hope that the white God is out there watching over her. One day she wakes up in the morning without having had a disturbed night’s sleep. And she is relieved, surprising Daniel with a smile and a kiss. It is a miracle that her life continues.

As the days go by she realises her faith has faded, and God has become like a difficult relative that you keep happy by doing the right things, like church, and praying, but whose opinion is no longer significant. He is no longer a presence in her every moment.

Instead the pressing reality of her daily life becomes the baby growing inside her. It is a comfort, for once focusing on her own body, or just pushing through her tiredness to

finish the day without collapsing. Daniel is kind and gentle and tries to be helpful. But he doesn't notice his children's hunger, or that his youngest is crying because she is tired, or that they are running low on water, unless she points it out. And God - or the ancestors - are no help at all. But this is a late night blasphemous thought as she wakes because of a sudden kick in her belly, and finds the dark spaces as empty as the dry cracked riverbed beyond the mission.

It becomes close to her baby's birth. When the pains begin she is helped by the local midwife. She tries not to scream - she doesn't want to frighten Daniel's children who are sleeping in the next room. In between the stabs of agony, she is surprised at how physical an experience it is, like the animals she had watched. Like the furtive sex that led to this. Somehow the missionaries had made her feel that once baptised, married, given absolution in the eyes of God, even birth was different, almost a spiritual process, not like the grunting and panting of earth's ordinary creatures. Later she couldn't believe that Mrs Heining had also given birth with blood and bodily fluids marking the white sheets, making stains no washing could remove.

If Daniel is surprised that her baby is light skinned, nowhere close to the dark skin of Vezemba, he does not say anything.

The Heinings do not ask to see the baby, although he is baptised before they leave by Reverend Klein, who is visiting. And Mary feels, for the first time in a long while, happy. She loves her baby, she loves how the milk flows from her breasts to feed him. It feels natural to be tuned in to his needs and desires. After all, her life has been spent responding to so many other people's demands and requests. And this little person is hers, and hers alone.

A few weeks later there is a flurry, with two extra girls called to do the cleaning and the housework. Mary hears that someone from the overseas mission is coming, from the funding office, for some sort of inspection in order to compile a report.

What she dreads, comes to pass. She was the first convert, after all. She is summoned to the white house for an interview. It feels strange as she knocks on the door, the door that used to be hers to unlock. Penelope opens it. They greet each other with the fewest of words, but Penelope has a triumphant smile. She has always been jealous of Mary. And now Mary has been ousted. She takes Mary to the study.

The man is old and white, in a formal black suit with white frills sticking out from his shirt, worn by older men she saw in Europe. It must be hot, and his bald head is red, dotted with beads of sweat. He has a white moustache that clings to his lips, quivering as he talks.

"You are the first convert," he says. The study has been cleaned and cleared since she worked here, and feels alien, unwelcoming. The roses are spilling their petals again, they are like pools of blood on the table.

"Yes, I was the first convert," she answers. He has not told her his name, or even asked her to sit, and she is standing at his desk, feeling her breasts filling with milk. She hopes it does not spill out and wet her dress.

"You have a baby, I hear. And when did you get married?"

She can see him doing calculations in his head, calculations of guilt and sin. But she answers clearly, looking him in the eyes. "My baby came early."

And it helps that she is fluent in English, with an accent that makes him feel at home. He asks her about the Bible, about her help with translations. They talk about the choices of words, the decisions she and Reverend Heining made.

He takes a hanky out of his pocket and wipes his head. "You are an impressive young woman," he says. "I am surprised that the mission is not using you more. I have not seen you at the classes at all." The moustache is like a furry little mouse on his face, dancing

as he speaks.

“I am tending to my husband’s children, and my baby,” she says demurely.

He stands up - the interview is over. He follows her out, finds Reverend Heining sitting at the table. The reverend stands up when he sees them coming, but his eyes never meet hers.

“You can be proud of Mary,” the visitor says. “I have never met a native who can talk like her.”

“We are,” the reverend mumbles. His whole body relaxes, and for a moment Mary feels like he is going to fall. But the visitor does not seem to notice, as he ushers another convert into the office for the next interview about the mission.

Only now the reverend looks at Mary. But her eyes drop because she cannot bear to see the mixture of shame and gratitude on his face, and she quickly leaves the house to get back to feed her baby. She feels dirtied, complicit, and her heart only slows when her baby is suckling at her breast.

The morning comes when Daniel helps her and the baby into the wagon, where they will lie for the journey. It is early and there is a breeze up. The men are tightening the covers, harnessing the oxen.

“Let us go,” Mary says to Daniel. She wants to get away, away from her village, and from the mission that has carved and cracked her.

“Mrs Heining said they would see us off this morning,” says Daniel.

Mary stays in the wagon with baby Samuel. It is cramped, she can hardly sit up. But she won’t get out. She lies there, strokes Samuel’s cheek.

“Are you not coming out, my wife?” Daniel calls.

“It is nearly time for Samuel’s feed,” she replies.

She can hear the silence of his disapproval. But he doesn’t order her. She hears him walking around the wagons, checking the ties, the oxen. His children are buzzing around excitedly. They have never travelled by wagon before.

She does not need to see that familiar view, the whitewashed mission buildings glowing in the early morning sun, the path winding up to the village huts on the horizon. She has seen it for what feels like all her life as she went about her chores before morning prayers. She wonders what their new place will look like. It is near a big riverbed, she has been told. Fertile for the new cultivation. She wishes she could feel excited. But all she feels is a driving need to be away, away.

Eventually she hears the Heinings’ voices.

“Goodbye, Reverend. Goodbye Mrs Heining. Keep me us your prayers,” says Daniel.

“We will, Daniel, we certainly will.” Reverend Heining’s voice is overly bright and cheerful. “We will be sending the new seeds when they are ready. And Peter will be bringing the supplies you need in a few weeks, once you have settled.”

“I think Mary must have fallen asleep with Samuel. I will call her to say her farewell,” says Daniel. Mary’s body stiffens. She will not be coaxed out of her one tiny rebellion. She has done all she can. She is not coming out now, has no wish to see those eyes that once gazed at her with such desire, and then with such contempt.

“The young mother needs her sleep,” says the reverend quickly. “You should be on your way. It is a long journey.”

“Goodbye, Daniel.” Mary hears Mrs Heining’s voice. It has been a long time since it has ever held such warmth for her. “The Lord guide you and keep you and your family.” She hears the children’s shrill voices thanking her. She must have given them the sweet biscuits only made for very special occasions.

Finally, after what felt like ages, the wagons creak and the wheels start rolling away. Mary twists and cranes her neck to try to see the Heinings, to see if he is looking after her, but they are already walking away. Reverend Heining puts his arm around Mrs Heining and she looks at him, and says something. And then he draws her closer and kisses her on the lips. Mary stops looking.

She never sees them again.

JENNIFER

The letters were addressed to me, care of the archives. “I will obviously give them to the archives,” I told Ndiriro, “along with all her other letters. But I want to take them away now, read them somewhere else.” Although I felt so close to Ndiriro, I didn’t want her to be watching me, seeing my reactions, waiting for the letters herself.

She looked disappointed, but she didn’t say anything. And so I popped the letters into my briefcase, left the archives and went to the library in the same building, that world of books more linked to the every day, where old men were reading the newspapers, old women browsing the big print section, and small children running around with their harassed mothers trying to quieten them and drag them to the queue to take books out.

I found a quiet table in the corner and took out the letters. It was not a big bundle. So strange to see this familiar handwriting, but with words my eyes had not seen.
There was a covering letter from my relative explaining that a bundle had been lost, and that someone had just kept a couple for posterity, more to admire the old-fashioned

handwriting, the ancient history of it all, rather than for the value of the words.
I opened the first one. Even the writing looked different, not nearly as shaped and formal as for her older sister Rosie, and her mother.

Oh Ellen dear, the trials I have had to bear are becoming too heavy for me, I fear. Perhaps I will soon be called to the Lord's table. My dear Willem is my rock and support, and the Lord watches over us all. But we have had a sad event in our household, a test of our faith and strength. I might have told you about our maid Mary, our first convert. She has sometimes helped with translations, and even came to Germany for a few weeks. She had left with Willem when you were ill, before you managed to come to visit, and so you never met her. You might have heard the children talk about her, they do love her so.

We thought she was different. She was intelligent, and her knowledge of the Bible is extensive. When I think that every morning and every evening she was part of our household prayers - but the Lord warns us of disappointment and setback set to test us, and there is great weakness of the flesh amongst our people. For Mary - an unmarried young lady - is expecting. I can hardly write these words, and I beseech you not to let the news of this tragedy get out. We have had other converts since Mary, but we do not think it is necessary to let the Mission House in London hear of this turn of events, as they have taken on a large portion of the funding of our mission, and paid for her passage to Germany and England. She was instrumental in us securing funding for the future of the mission. Say nothing of it to Mama and Rosie, as it will only make them fret.

But the true nature of Mary's people, who satisfy their urges with numerous wives, and even swap them at will, has been awoken in her by Satan, who never sleeps but finds mischief with us all, especially when the he sees how we are succeeding in expanding the mission as we had always dreamed.

The girl refuses to name the father, and Willem will not let me question her too harshly on this matter, as he says she is suffering enough already. He is closer to the Lord's compassionate ways than me - you know my quick temper, Ellen - and he chides me

gently, reminding me of Jesus and Mary Magdalene (and we gave her the name Mary!). So we are not turning her out and away into the wilderness.

Oh Ellen dear, how we are tripped when we have the sin of pride.
So pray for me my dearest sister, as we battle on to win these souls for our Lord God, in whose Holy Name sustains us all.

So that's it. I am stunned. This invisible Mary had an affair with some young man, and fell pregnant. I felt deep pity for this girl. Perhaps that is why she had remained nameless in Willem's biography, because her fall had felt like a betrayal of all they had taught her. This would be a sad end to my chapter, to the story of the first convert. But it was definitely an interesting one. I skimmed through the other letters. There was nothing new, but a more vulnerable tone, giving me quotes I could use to flesh Elizabeth out further. There was only that one bombshell.

I took out my photocopy of the article about Mary, and looked at the photo again. She must have been married off quickly, to have become a respectable matron. But that older one, the one with his hand on her shoulder, the one with the light skin, who was his father, I wondered. Possibly even a visiting explorer, a white man. For why else would his identity remain a mystery.

I walked back to the archives section, and handed the letter to Ndiriro. She read it, and exclaimed. Her hand flew to her mouth. "My friend mentioned something about a pregnancy," she said.

"Your friend?" I asked.

"Karune. The one who wrote that first article. She found even more documents after she wrote it. And said that there was some terrible secret that was hinted at in Mary's papers. I remembered now what she had said."

“So this must be it. The secret. Poor Mary.”

Ndiriro started saying something, then stopped. She looked at me. “I wonder who the father was,” she said.

“I guess there is no way of finding out now,” I said. “That secret must have died with Mary herself.”

Ndiriro looked unconvinced. “Just a pregnancy,” she said. “That’s the whole secret?”

“It was different times then, Ndiriro.” I sat back in the hard archives chair across from her desk. “Sex out of marriage was something unacceptable, even considered a sin.”

“You mean by the missionaries,” she said. “My people were polygamous.”

I sighed. Ndiriro never missed an opportunity to point out how ‘Eurocentric’ I was, as she called it. “Even Herero people did not agree with sex out of marriage,” I replied.

“True,” she answered. “But even still, I find it hard to believe that it would be enough for her to be wiped out of all accounts.”

“Elizabeth hardly mentioned her in the letters,” I pointed out. “They haven’t been ‘wiped’ clean.”

“Elizabeth left her out because she probably hardly noticed her as a proper person,” Ndiriro said. “Like lots of white madams with servants. No, what is interesting is why she doesn’t appear in Heining’s autobiography.”

“Well now we know,” I said.

Ndiriro made a wry face. “Maybe you’re right. Maybe the poor Mary took a boyfriend

and that was that."

"I won't speculate too much in my book about that," I said. "We have no way of knowing."

"So poor Mary is to remain a footnote of your account," Ndiriro said.

I couldn't believe we were still having the same disagreement. I thought we'd moved beyond this by now.

"I will be fair and objective," I replied. "I feel for Mary, you know."

"I'm sure your book will be sensitive, Jennifer," Ndiriro said. "But I think that someone needs to write a book about Mary herself, rather than just giving her the role of supporter, and then poor victim. Why did she do what she did? Why did she make the choices she made?"

"No historian can answer those questions," I said.

"Perhaps not. But we can try guessing," Ndiriro replied. "In fact, it might be something I want to do one day. Maybe what they call 'creative non-fiction'." She smiled to herself. "In fact I've got a couple of ideas."

I left her later feeling a slight distance from her again, hurt that she did not trust my story-telling. But when I received an SMS from her later - have a good night - I warmed towards her. She had been good to me, and perhaps it would be fitting for someone like her to write the book about Mary. I would acknowledge her in my book, and hopefully she would acknowledge me in hers.

MARY

"Mama, you're going to have to tell your stories now," Mary's daughter Johanna says. She has come to fetch Mary, to tell her again about the details of the ceremony at the church for her seventieth birthday. She is so proud of Mary: her mother - who worked with the famous Heinings. The first Herero convert, the one who began the procession to God, they say. But she always wants to know more than Mary wants to tell her.

"Nobody's interested in the stories of an old woman," Mary tells her, and Johanna clicks her tongue impatiently as she bustles around the kitchen to make the tea. "The children will just be hoping that there will be cake. No, I'm not going to talk much."

"Someone even wants to interview you for *The Christian Times*," says Johanna. "He is even bringing a camera!" Mary knows that she will never give voice to her buried thoughts, to her true stories. She will stay Mary, the first Herero Christian, for those who want to find out about her.

Old Reverend Peterson did come once to ask her questions about her life. She got quite a turn seeing a tall white man with a white collar around his throat on her doorstep, holding a piece of paper with her address scrawled on. But he was not Reverend Heining, and she was not a young girl anymore.

He too sat at Mary's kitchen table, and drank her tea. He had paper and a pen, and she could not ignore his questions without being rude.

"But why do you want all these stories of so long ago," she asked him. "It is all gone now. And the Heinings have joined their Maker."

"Our Maker, Mrs Gertze," he corrected her, smiling gently, and she flinched at what her words exposed. But Reverend Peterson is not a wordsmith like she is, and seemed to think nothing of her mistake.

He told her that people would find her stories interesting, people in that far away land of the whites that Mary is thankful she will never set eyes on again. So she gave in – after all, it is what she always did in the past – and answered all his questions carefully, in the way he wanted. He listened to her and wrote down some of what she said.

But the questions lingered on in her head, skittering like spiders that escaped her broom. She could never tell a living soul her real story. But her nights are disturbed now. She even dreams one night of the wagon, but in the dream the reverend turned into Vezemba, who died in her arms after he penetrated her. When she woke her cheeks were wet with tears.

Then she got a letter from Reverend Peterson, a polite letter, but distant. He had gone through Reverend Heining's autobiography, and there was only a very small mention of Mary as the first convert. Surely, said Reverend Peterson, if she had been so important, then Heining would have mentioned her more than once? So he thanked her for the interview, but said that he didn't think he would be using it extensively for his research and biography unless she could supply corroborating evidence. His words showed that he doubted she would be able to do that. And Mary was tremendously relieved.

Now for her birthday there will be a small story in the local paper that her children can cut out and show to others, pin on their walls in pride. But no one else comes, and the spiders stop rustling the cobwebs in her brain. Her past can sink back to its undisturbed state. There has been so much pain and change for all her people since her own hurt those many years ago. There is no point in stirring up the trouble.

JENNIFER

I wanted Ndiriro to come to the airport. I had this idea that we would embrace, and she would wave at me as I went through the departure lounge. But she didn't offer, and I didn't ask directly. But we did have a glass of wine together on my last evening. There

was a hint of cool in the air - autumn was on its way - and we sat at a pavement café. She looked so young, her skin shining, her little strappy dress and, of course, stylish high heels, under the table next to my sensible pumps. I had even ignored my hair, leaving the stripe for all to see. For a moment I felt old, past my sell-by date. But then a little girl in a bright pink dress with tight buds of braids on her head passed by with her mother, skipping to avoid the lines on the pavement, and she gave me a big smile as she caught my eye. Suddenly my hair just didn't matter much any more.

Two well-dressed young blacks passed us. "Hayi!" one said, in that extrovert way of theirs, on seeing Ndiriro. One of them was a young man, with dreadlocks, a hairstyle that has always made me shudder when I think of the vermin that could fester in those dirty dark tubes. But he had a young, open face, and he winked at me when he saw me looking at him. Ndiriro stood up to talk to them. I could see them looking at me, and I wondered what she might be saying. The girl nodded politely when Ndiriro switched to English to introduce us, but the man gave me a charming smile. I was almost sorry to see them go.

Once they had said their goodbyes, the table felt quiet. I felt stiff and silent compared to them.

"Were they wondering what you were doing with an old white lady like me?"

She laughed. "You're not old, Jen."

"Did you tell them who I was?"

"We didn't talk about you, actually," she answered. "They were asking me about a party this weekend for an engagement."

I was slightly disappointed I featured so little in the encounter. And I thought the young man had noticed me particularly. But I also thought that I was on Ndiriro's mind. Obviously not uppermost. "Meeting you has been very important to me," I said.

She gave me one of her warm smiles. “And to me too,” she said. “We must keep in touch.”

I got up the courage to say what I had been worrying about. “Ndiriro,” I said, “I hope you don’t still see me as closed-minded as my ancestors.”

She laughed. “I thought you loved and admired your ancestors. You should be pleased if I said you reminded me of them.”

“I know you well enough to know that it wouldn’t be a compliment, coming from you,” I said. “I do admire them. But I suppose I’ve seen that they are of their time. Not perfect.”

“None of us are perfect,” she said. “They did what they thought they had to do, I guess. Not aware of how they were part of the colonisation process.”

I still couldn’t agree with her completely. “But don’t you think if it wasn’t for them, Mary, for example, would have had a worse life? They opened doors to opportunities.”

“Let’s not debate that now,” she said dryly. “It’ll spoil the evening.” She lifted up her glass, clinked it against mine. “Cheers.”

“You haven’t answered me, though,” I said. “Do you think I am closed-minded?”

“No, Jen.” She took a sip of her wine. “Like us all, you only are limited by your lenses. That’s all. Are you happy now?”

I think she saw my slightly hurt expression. “It’s been great to get to know you too, really,” she said. “In fact, I’ll miss you. What will I do at the archives? Who can I argue with now?”

We laughed.

"Maybe you'll have to come and visit one day," I said. And I meant it. But later, as I packed up my things and home started becoming more real in my head, I tried to picture Ndiriro in my flat, and it felt strange, like we wouldn't have much to talk about there, far away from our ancestors, the stories that bound us together. But maybe I was wrong. Maybe I could fly her out for the book launch, and I could help her with any research on Mary for her story. I did not want our journey to be over. But at least I had discovered all the important secrets. My research was complete.

THE END

AFTERWORD

This is a novel, but the historical story was inspired by real people. My great-great grandparents were two of the first missionaries in Namibia, and many of the extracts of the letters are taken directly or adapted from the letters of Emma Hahn (my great great grandmother) that were compiled and published by my aunt, Dorothy Guedes. The story of the courtship is entirely true (along with the note). However, unlike my Elizabeth, Emma Hahn showed no signs of discontent or doubt, at least in her letters, and was completely committed to her husband and their mission until she died.

My great-great grandfather, Carl Hugo Hahn, did indeed receive a doctorate for his translation work from the University of Leipzig. It seems from his papers and diaries that he was a more formal and stern man than my Reverend Heining.

Their four children were sent away to Europe to be educated. One son returned to work as a missionary in Cape Town, where his parents were living when they retired.

There was a character like Uatavi, called Urieta, later Johanna, who is hardly mentioned in Emma's letters, and is not acknowledged in Hahn's translations. (However she gets a few more mentions than my fictional Uatavi.) Like my Uatavi, she joined the mission as a little girl and dedicated her life to it. The Namibian historian Brigitte Lau, who researched the Hahns, wrote an article about her as the invisible woman who was highly instrumental in the success of the mission. The Hahn's records do show that she did indeed travel to Germany with them and was their first convert. She married an older widower on the mission, Samuel Gertze, who did go to start a new agricultural settlement, under Hahn's guidance, to supply the mission. Uriata-Johanna looked after his eight children and had nine of her own. She became a well-known midwife and pharmacist, and her face even appeared on a Namibian stamp. She was interviewed later in her life, where she described the detailed translation work she did with Hahn, but this was never directly acknowledged by him in any formal way.

I would like to thank Werner Hillebrecht from the Namibian archives, and also Diane Hubbard from the Legal Assistance Centre in Windhoek, both of whom supplied me with information about Urieta when I first embarked on this project.

However, I took such liberties with the truth that this story cannot be seen as non-fiction in any way, and that is also why I changed all the names. These characters belong only to my imagination.

Finally, I would like to thank Etienne van Heerden for his patient, careful and supportive supervision. I learned a great deal from his constructive and encouraging criticism. I would also like to thank Ros Haden, friend and colleague, for reading and commenting on an earlier draft, as well as a friend, Pamela Shaw, who also gave helpful feedback. And of course, thanks to my family - my husband and two sons - for their love and support during this long process.