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UN SOUND MINDS – A SHORT NOVEL

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**A minor dissertation submitted in *partial fulfilment* of the requirements for the
award of the degree of Master of Arts in Creative Writing**

Faculty of the Humanities

University of Cape Town

2005

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.

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ABSTRACT

Unsound Minds is a short novel about a young girl, Clara, who has suffered emotional trauma. She arrived in Hindpark Township from a place that she never discloses. She has been living in the loft of a block of flats for a while, isolated from the community, only coming out at night to scrounge for food in the rubbish bins belonging to a restaurant situated opposite the flats. The community believes her to be mentally disturbed and want nothing to do with her. One night, while looking through her window, she witnesses the murder of the restaurateur, Samson. A young police officer, Wanda, is assigned the duty of protecting her from the murderers before they find out that she is a witness. He places her under the care of Matrida, a formidable spinster, who lives a short distance away from the scene of the crime. It is, however, this precautionary act that actually exposes Clara to the killers as a witness.

As part of the novel's tapestry, the story explores the workings of the township's corrupt and incompetent police force which is headed by an authoritarian bully, Inspector Bedson. Hindpark's social dynamics, beliefs and superstitions, and sense of community, despite some conflict between residents, play an integral role in creating the sort of environment that Clara finds herself in. Wanda, the only policeman with any notable integrity, starts off as her reluctant protector; Matrida assumes the role of a reluctant mother figure; Anabel is the obnoxious neighbour; and Jimbo is the neighbourhood's aggressive hell-raiser. Like Clara, they have each experienced some form of trauma in their lives. They become a more dependable unit of protection to Clara than the entire Hindpark police force.

Without being scientific or philosophical, *Unsound Minds* looks at the question of sanity. It is a story about how no one human being is exempt from some form of madness and how that madness drives each individual differently. The supposedly insane Clara is placed in the care of Matrida whom the community believes is herself not completely sane. But even in her madness, she is instrumental in bringing back some stability into Clara's life. At the other extreme, Bedson's

madness is destructive. Because of his inept leadership skills, he drives the entire police force into disrepute. Given this human dynamic, the story seeks to reveal how everyone uses their madness in the way that suits them best – for good or for bad.

The theme of madness was not planned at the time of beginning this short novel, but developed as the narrative progressed. However, just as writing is subjective, so is reading. I expect each reader to read into *Unsound Minds* what s/he sees in it.

The story is entirely my own, influenced partly by my perceptions of the different environments that I have lived in throughout my life, although it is purely imaginative. Pointers which I received from my supervisor, Professor Geoffrey Haresnape, helped in moulding it into a narrative that will hopefully be a worthwhile read.

Signed by candidate

Unsound Minds

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It was almost time. She could just make out the faint jingle of keys as Samson walked to his beat-up car after locking up his restaurant. In a minute, the revving and sputtering would start. It usually went on for about three minutes before the old wreck came to life and he could drive off. She heard the car door open. Then silence. Puzzled, she made her way across the pitch-black room to the heavily-draped window with an ease that was obviously born of trained navigation. She did not normally draw the curtain until she was certain that the street below was completely deserted for the night. It wasn't that she really needed the illumination from the streetlights. She just liked to look outside sometimes. The light bulb had burned out a long time ago. She could not find another one to replace it. That was not a problem though. She had her radio.

The navy-blue drapes were sticky with filth. She pulled back a slit to see what Samson was doing in the car. Samson lay sprawled in the middle of the road. He seemed to be trying to get up – but a man hit him on the head with something short and thick. Then another man took something out of his pocket and jabbed Samson between the shoulder blades with it. There was a muffled sound. Like a balloon bursting under a pillow. The two men strode with measured, yet seemingly unhurried, steps towards Samson's car and climbed in. The car revved and sputtered for about three minutes then the strangers drove off. Satisfied that there was not another soul in the street, she put on her favourite shoes, closed the curtain, picked up a food container that sat against the wall in the right hand side corner, and left the room. The shoes did not fit comfortably at all. She had found them in a rubbish bin three nights before. They were slip-ons, unusually long and with a low hard heel. But she liked them because they had little flowers on them that reminded her of her mother's flowerbeds. She took one tentative step down the bare cemented stairs. The heel of her shoe followed a second after the ball of her foot had touched the floor. She repeated the procedure with her left foot. The sharp clicking echoed through to the ground floor. It did not bother her. She made her way down the ten flights of stairs with a racket that could have been mistaken for the dance routine of a deranged tap-dancer.

Once outside, she crossed the road calmly, heedless of the body lying just twenty metres to her left. She headed for the alley between the restaurant and Rabson's fish shop that had been blocked by Samson's car just five minutes ago. The smell of raw and fried fish hung thick in the still late-night air. At the far end of the restaurant was the back kitchen door. There were three large trash cans lined beside it filled to the brim with the day's waste. Leftovers flavoured with a generous dose of dregs from the kitchen sinks, dirt swept off the floors of the restaurant as well as discarded undesirable bits of cooking ingredients. She lifted a lid that teetered precariously on the heap in one can and began to sift through the rubbish with a practiced hand. The secret was to look for the more sophisticated foods. By the looks of it, the restaurant staff did not have cultured enough palates to appreciate such delicacies and always threw those leftovers away. She found a half-eaten steak and gingerly lifted it for inspection from its protective cocoon of assorted foodstuffs. Chunky and still warm. After brushing it clean with meticulous care, she placed it in her container. She moved to the next trash can. Nothing interesting there. The ruined or burned foods could usually be found on top because they were always thrown out last. Quite a substantial amount lay sprinkled over the refuse in the third bin. She carefully selected the most conceivably edible scraps and filled the container just full enough so that the lid would not pop off. She held the container before her and contemplated the collection. This would cover breakfast as well. Satisfied with her find, she fitted the lid, turned around and made her way back to the block of flats. The street was still deserted. A palpable sense of peacefulness permeated the night atmosphere. The body lay undisturbed on the tarmac. She did not spare it even the least curious glance. Then without warning, just as she entered the building, she stole a quick sideways peek at the still form.

Once again the eccentric tap dance began as she made her way up to her flat treading with exaggerated cautiousness, apparently so as not to ruin her precious shoes. This in no way reduced the sharp sound made by her heels striking the bare steps. There was only one apartment on the topmost landing – hers. This was a tiny room that had once been a kind of storeroom at the time the building had first been built. These days no one ever came up here except Clara. Once in a while the caretaker took the risk of encountering the unknown and gave the landing a quick sweep when the tenants below complained that

dirt from upstairs floated down to their landings and into their apartments. Looking at the floor now, it was hard to tell when he had last made that courageous trip to the fifth floor.

Clara opened the door to her little flat. The strong whiff that came rushing out could have knocked any weak and unsuspecting victim out. Oblivious to the offensive smell, she went in and sat on the narrow cot that stood against the wall across from the window. She removed the lid from her container and placed it on the rough blanket of indiscernible colour. Then she remembered she had no spoon and got up to fetch one from the same corner where she the container had been. It occurred to her too while she was still standing to switch the radio on. She sat down and began to eat the steak very neatly with her hands, the faint sounds of gentle music in the background serenading her. She looked around the room and decided that she was not going to close the door just yet. She could not open the curtains today. *Maybe I ought to find a new lightbulb. Or a candle. No, candles are dangerous. There were never any lightbulbs in the bins. Perhaps I could ask Samson for one. Oh, Samson is lying out there.* She willed her mind to stop the whirlwind of thoughts and concentrate on her supper.

After dinner she rinsed the container and spoon in the sink set in the tiny kitchen area in the corner to the left of the window. Then she changed into pyjamas so grimy they felt limp against her skin, locked the door and crawled into her rough blankets. Sleep came easily in the rough cosiness, with the faint lullaby of music in the background emanating from the radio.

TWO

Every morning, the familiar sound of Samson's diseased engine signalled the dawn of day for the inhabitants of Hindpark township. But today the sound was different. Sirens. The time felt different too. Working men and women, school children, housemaids, housewives all roused themselves in curious degrees of wakefulness from their varied sleeping arrangements – comfortable beds, uncomfortable mats, three to a single bed, seven to a mat. Matrida squinted her stinging eyes and battled to manoeuvre her bare feet through the clutter of her one-roomed dwelling. A pot skidded across the polished mud-packed floor through the dividing curtain that set the living area apart from the sleeping

area. She fumbled with the curtain as if trying to clear a thick mesh of cobwebs away from her face. Unsure of her footing, she stumbled to the 50cm x 50cm wooden window and flung it open. She banged it shut irritably after realising that her neck could not extend far enough for her to see past Anabel's grey-painted house, which Matrída thought of as a monstrosity that did not deserve to be called a house, into the direction of the sirens. She felt along the wall for the door handle. The hinges protested with a tired creak against her push. She pulled up her half-petticoat whose tattered lace was at least ten centimeters below the hem of her thick but equally ragged brown nightdress. She gathered the nightdress closer to her body before stepping into the chilly night. To the east, she saw that the star-strewn, midnight-blue sky met the dark earth in the horizon undiluted by the grey of dawn. She leaned forward to see the road better.

All along the street figures not yet steady on their feet, most visibly disconcerted even in their silhouettes where the floodlight that lit up Samson's restaurant did not reach, were emerging from their houses. Belated as usual, Anabel emerged wide-eyed from her grey abode and, spotting Matrída, immediately switched into the character of her melodramatic alter ego.

"Matrída, I've always said the end of the world would find you unrepentant and with your lucky rabbit's foot still under your pillow. Let's see if it's going to get you swept up to the heavenlies along with the saints," she slurred at Matrída in a loud voice loud enough to render any half-sleeping onlooker fully conscious. A number of concurring uhhums emanated from unidentifiable neighbours. Matrída sucked her teeth and stepped forward to see up the street better. A crease formed between her eyebrows.

"It looks like policemen up there."

"My dear Matrída, nowhere does it say that the good Lord shall descend on a cloud with a band of policemen to assist with The Rapture."

Guffaws.

"You. Anabel. Anabel!" Matrída threatened, her voice an octave above its naturally high pitch.

"Sshh."

Matrída bunched up the skirt of her nightdress and falling petticoat and made a run for Anabel. In spite of their annoyance at the early wake-up call, the gathering crowd cackled

at Anabel's wobbling attempt at outrunning Matrida whose intended sprint resembled a frogfish high-kneed jog over hot coals. Matrida faltered short of Anabel's ever tiny but always thriving cactus potted in a rusting yellow powdered milk tin. She never ventured past it because she was convinced the reason it survived even the hottest weather was because it was bound by some sinister magic. If she crossed that boundary, she believed, there was no telling what drastic change of fate her life would undergo. But the cheering crowd didn't notice her hesitancy because just at that moment Anabel fell to her knees beside her three front door steps vomiting. The mere motion of lurching a few paces to her door had agitated her constitution enough for her to dispense with half the *kachasu* she had imbibed earlier. Everyone looked away in disgust and turned their attention back to the scene further up the road. No one made any move to proceed to the spot and investigate the cause of police presence.

"Could someone go and find out for us what's happened?" someone in the crowd inquired.

A buzz of resistance resounded through the gathering. Some even turned to go back to their houses. None of them wanted any involvement with police matters. Each one of them knew at least one person who was at that moment sitting in prison for having volunteered to be a witness. Matrida sucked her teeth again and used her jutting elbows to clear a path through the group, her lips extended in a defiant pout. Unnoticed by her, the waistband of her petticoat now hung below her raised hem, having succumbed to gravity while she chased Anabel. She made a show of walking briskly and fearlessly towards the circle of policemen. Behind her, some implored her to come back, some tittered at the spectacle she was, but most affirmed among one another their suspicions of her unstable mind. One police officer broke away from the cluster and came forward to meet her.

"Are you the one who phoned the police, ma'am?"

"No, I'm just coming to see what's going on."

"In that case, please step back. We're busy here."

"You wake us all up with your screaming sirens in the dead of night yet you expect us not to be curious about what's going on?"

"Ma'am, once again, unless you know something about this incident, please step back."

“Little boy, by the time you were born I’d already lost count of my grey hairs. And, let me tell you, we don’t get grey hairs easy. So don’t tell me what to do.”

With a swish of her obscene hems, she pushed him aside, charged forward and broke through the circle. The sight that met her flew into her face with a mighty force that sent her reeling back. She threw her arms up in the air and let out a piercing shriek that rent through the still night air even more harrowingly than the sirens had. Her petticoat fell completely to the ground as she began to jump around, hands alternately waving in the air and clutching her head. One officer made a grab at her to restrain her but instead found himself almost head-to-head with Samson on the ground. It took three officers to pin her arms to her sides and subdue her wild bouncing. Gradually her shrieks became a persistent wail though she still tried to thrash about. By now her neighbours could not hold back their curiosity any longer. Matrida was not known for inconsequential displays of grief. They came rushing to see the cause of her wailing.

“Stand back. Stand back,” the young officer cautioned.

The warning was unnecessary for none dared come too close lest they be identified. Instead, they craned their necks to see above the barrier of policemen shielding the scene from their view. Some bent down and tried to spot any clues through the identically clad legs.

“Samson, my mother’s child, Samson!”

Anabel, who had just caught up with the others and hearing Matrida’s lament, laughed raucously.

“Hey, Matrida, Samson is young enough to be *your* child.”

A few people attempted to laugh.

“What’s happened to Samson?”

Whispers ran through the gathered onlookers who still had no inkling of what might have transpired. Questions only met questions for answers. Matrida had now stopped throwing herself about. She stood in front of the young officer leaning into him with her head thrown backwards over his right shoulder like a rag doll whose seams had come undone at the neck. The officer had both his hands gripping each of her arms and her tattered undergarment dangling from the cinch of his left hand. A more mature officer stepped forward to address the inquiring crowd.

“Does any one of you know what happened to Samson?”

“What happened to Samson?” shot back Easy, the shoe repair man.

“*I am asking you* what’s happened to Samson.”

“Where is Samson?”

“This is not a game, Mr Shoeman. We have a very serious case on our hands.”

“Inspector Bedson, I gathered as much judging by the state the normally unmovable Matrida is in.”

Easy’s neighbours marvelled at his legendary audacity to stand up to the authorities. The self-professed most educated man in town. The shoe repair man, for whom whatever state of disrepair one’s shoe, it was never complicated to mend. He lived up to his name. Easy Shoeman. No one questioned which had come first: his name or his profession. The furrows on the Inspector’s ash-grey forehead deepened and his eyes narrowed until one could not tell whether they were still open or not. Sensing the imminent course of events the young officer felt obliged to intervene. His mouth froze into a soundless “O”, arrested by the Inspector’s raised palm warning him not to utter a word. Officer Wanda had yet to cipher Inspector Bedson’s ESP-like gift.

“You know of course that I can have you charged with obstructing police investigation.”

“Under which act?”

The Inspector motioned to the officers behind him, their work brought to a standstill by the invasion of the residents.

“Book him.”

Two officers stepped forward to follow their superior’s orders. A gasp shot through the crowd bringing the officers to an abrupt halt. This was followed by a few screams with women trying to hide behind their husbands who were themselves stepping back in horror.

Inspector Bedson frowned.

“Everyone go back to your homes. I want a statement from each one of you tomorrow.” He watched their retreating backs for a moment then turned towards the block of flats. “Including you.”

The contingent cowering along the wall in their silk, fake or otherwise, nightgowns and bedroom slippers withdrew into the building as silently as they had come out.

“Constable Wanda, where is the ambulance?”

Wanda cleared his throat and struggled to maintain eye contact.

“I think they said the engine has been stolen and they haven’t repl—.”

“Well, organize something else then! And, for goodness sake, let go of that woman.”

Matrida stumbled backwards when Wanda stepped away from her so suddenly. He made as if to catch her but the feel of Inspector Bedson’s searing gaze stopped him in mid-action. To avoid meeting the gaze, he watched Matrida regain her balance and bend to pick up her pitiful petticoat which had fallen to the ground when he let go of her. As she straightened up, her eye caught something above her. Wanda followed her gaze and was just in time to see a curtain draw to hide Clara’s silhouette. Matrida stuffed her slip into her nightdress, eyes shifty and unable to meet Wanda’s. Home seemed too far as she walked away, head bowed, and with a faltering step. A self-proclaimed model citizen, exposed for all to see.

THREE

Early morning. A slit of sunshine coloured the bare cement floor of Clara’s loft a weak yellow. Not enough to disperse the dimness. She stared at it transfixed; her eyes so wide it seemed they were taped open. She could hear voices climbing up, knocking on doors. The voices were too muffled. But she knew to whom they belonged and what they were asking for. Then it was her turn. The voices stopped at her door arguing about whether there could actually be someone living in this room.

“Whew, whatever’s in there must be dead,” said Constable Wizman.

“Wanda.”

“Sir.”

“Open the door.”

He knocked.

“Just open the door.”

His hand turned around the doorknob but not twisting it. He brought it quickly to his chest and, hoping Inspector Bedson would not notice, wiped off some of the sweat. He tried again but now his hand was shaking. His nose felt so stuffed with the smell filtering through to the landing that his eyes began to water.

“Look, he’s crying,” said Wizman.

Burst of laughter. Constables Wizman, Victor – Vickie for short – and Clever all leaned forward to inspect his eyes. Wanda couldn’t breathe. A drop of sweat trickled down his right temple and settled on his eyelashes. Inspector Bedson grabbed his damp collar from behind and yanked him away from the door. Vickie steadied him before he could topple over the half wall bordering the landing. The Inspector stepped to the door and stood at attention. His juniors would not have been surprised if he had saluted. The door flung open. Inspector Bedson staggered backwards like a man hit by a blast from a pressured gas pipe that had suddenly been unplugged. Wanda, who was directly behind him, would have caught him but his hands were guarding his nose and mouth. Wizman had, it seemed, zapped to the next landing with supernatural speed. He was now leaning far over the railing to get a better view of what was going on upstairs. Inspector Bedson swayed on his feet, still trying to recover from his fall. He kept adjusting his jacket and smoothing it on the right hand side, to straighten it and to relieve the pain in his hip. He turned to the girl in the doorway to speak but could not bring himself to open his downturned mouth. His Adam’s apple bobbed up and down in spasms. He signalled to Wanda to handle the situation then took the stairs down two at a time. Vickie ran after him still breathing in his hat. And Clever sprang from where he had been crouched in a corner with his head buried in his lap and followed.

Clara stared at Wanda, her eyes wide and terrified. He couldn’t tell whether she was terrified of the police or if her eyes just permanently held knowledge of terror. Her unwavering stare suddenly made him self-conscious. He straightened up from his almost cowering posture. His hands stayed over his face. She made no attempt to cover her pitiful pyjamas. She just stood there motionless, unblinking. Waiting. Faint music filtered to him through the thick shroud of bad odour. Beautiful. East African. Or North African. Or maybe Oriental. It came from her room. One hand fell from his face, then the other.

“You shouldn’t be living here.”

She did not react. He did not trust himself to open his mouth again so he gave her a short wave and climbed down the steps at what he hoped was a normal pace.

Outside, the three junior officers stood around the scene of the murder surveying the surroundings and making busy notes. The Inspector had his hands in his pocket and eyes on the topmost window of the building as if waiting for it to open and let out a shower of clues on him.

“Did you talk to her?”

“Yes sir.”

“What did she say?”

“Nothing.”

He swivelled his eyes to Wanda without bringing his head down.

“My instructions were to talk to her.”

“You gave me no instructions sir.”

The Inspector about-turned and marched at Wanda like a wild animal advancing on its prey. He did not stop when he reached Wanda but walked right past him to the peeling black police jeep parked on the corner of the building.

“Officers!”

“Sir,” Wizman, Clever and Vickie answered in unison and hurried to the car, relieved that they could stop pretending.

Inspector Bedson got into the driver’s seat and slammed the door shut. He glared at Wanda.

“You know what to do.”

He drove off in a cloud of exhaust fumes. Wanda watched it for a while with a languid expression, squinting at the sun in his face. Working with Bedson always did this to him. Left him enervated. His physical and mental vigour depleted.

The setup of Hindpark township was more defined in the brightness of day. Wanda couldn’t help noticing that the divide between the well-to-do and poorer sections was as superficial as the difference between their income brackets. He observed how the road

was more dust than tar from Matrida's humble corner through the would-be more affluent parts. What marked the division was what must once have been an upmarket abode but was now a hulk of peeling pink paint with no functional electricity and a water pump in the front yard where those with no running water could get some for a price. The next house, unplastered but with neat rows of flowers, well-tended lawn and trimmed hedge, marked the beginning of the downmarket residential area. Normally the shine on Wanda's shoes just about blinded everyone, but now a reddish-brown film covered them as he negotiated his way around potholes. He was thankful for his shoes since he knew only too well what that red dust could do to bare feet. It had taken him almost a year after he had joined the police force before he could keep a decent pair of socks. The cracks on the soles of his feet shredded them so badly he dared not take his shoes off in public. Even his toes had been hard and cracked. It was bad enough getting used to wearing shoes without making it too obvious that he'd never worn any before.

He'd been hoping to spot Matrida without having to ask anyone, but half way through the settlement he still saw no sign of her. Just ahead was a makeshift tuck-shop leaning so dangerously to one side it seemed to Wanda a miracle that it was still standing. The structure was made of thatching grass. This baffled the young officer since procuring this type of grass was more expensive than using local and more durable wood. The roof was made of a mixture of banana leaves in different stages of dryness. And in case it should rain, it was reinforced with black plastic sheets, torn in places. Rough wooden shelves lined the three walls arrayed with a scattering of few of the popular items of purchase. Home-cut red bars of soap, homemade fudge, cigarettes, matches, candles and tiny sachets of salt. A few refilled cooking oil bottles lined the counter, some full, some half-full. Wanda leaned on the wide plank counter in front and knocked over a half-full one-litre bottle of cooking oil. The loosely fastened cap snapped off and a large amount of oil spilled out. The boy keeping the shop jumped up from where he had been lounging, his tilted chair denting the already skew wall.

"You have to pay for that," he yelled.

"I'm sorry," said Wanda setting the bottle upright.

"Sorry? Sorry? Buy it!"

Just an inch of oil remained in the bottle. Wanda fumbled in his pockets and held out a coin to the boy.

“It’s ten bucks my friend. You want to rip me off just because you’re a cop?” His manner was so unsympathetic it bordered on threatening. Wanda could tell the youth was more streetwise than he’d ever been. He could sense that the boy had had a longer relationship with the police than him. He decided not to argue with him and handed over the money he had been saving to treat himself to a bit of boerewors for supper. The boy snatched the note from his hand and clicked his tongue when Wanda took too long to state his business.

“Yes?”

“I’m looking for Mrs Matrida.”

The boy let out a wheezing laugh so asthmatic one would think he’d been a chain smoker for much longer than his fifteen years.

“I knew she’d get busted one day.”

“She hasn’t done anything.”

“Oh.” The boy was clearly disappointed.

“Can you show me where she lives?”

The boy’s eyes lit up once more. “Is she your mother? Everybody says she threw her baby away somewhere.”

“No. It’s police business. I need to speak to her urgently.”

“Three houses back where you came from. Unpainted except for blue skirting.”

He flopped back into his chair and picked up an old newspaper from the ground. The dismissal in his tone and body language was very clear. Wanda wasn’t sure that he was expected to say thank you. He thanked him anyway and began retracing his steps.

“Hey, don’t forget your cooking oil.”

Wanda stopped, started to protest but decided against it. Although he wouldn’t admit it, the boy frightened him a little. He went back for the bottle and said thank you again. The feel of the grimy bottle encircled in his hand sickened him. Only a year ago he used to buy this kind of oil. He had never questioned where it came from and saw nothing detestable about it or its filthy containers. Now that he’d been shopping at the

supermarket for a while, for the first time ever, it struck him just how unwholesome this was.

The tough leather of his shoes was now beginning to graze the backs of his ankles. He made up his mind to ask Matrida for a couple of rags to pad them. The only sign that she was home were the bundles of withering pumpkin leaves and tomatoes in heaps of three, laid out on a blue plastic sack about a metre from her doorstep. Close by was a halved car oil bottle filled with water, presumably for sprinkling on the vegetables to keep them fresh. A shimmer rose above the bottle like the distant mirage on a scorching tarred road. Wanda skirted the spread and went round to the back of the house, walking between the sun-faded wall and a flowering hedge about thirty centimetres high which separated Matrida's property from her neighbour's. A sudden long drawn-out shriek halted him in mid-stride. He'd taken a few steps backwards before he recognized the sound as a revised version of the "Amazing Grace". It came from behind two narrow brick structures just two metres away from Matrida's back door. He put the bottle of cooking oil next to the door and followed the source. Matrida sat on a wooden crate wearing a sleeveless coffee-brown, heavy cotton tunic. Wanda guessed that she probably wore it around the house often. His mother had one similar. It was durable enough to withstand years of heavy-duty chores. Next to her was an aluminium tub filled with clothes that were barely visible beneath a layer of greyish water. She was rubbing a blue floral cotton dress in rhythm with the beat of the hymn. Wanda took off his cap and pinned it in his armpit.

"Good morning," he said.

Her voice rose an octave. On reflex, his hands went to his ears causing him to drop the cap in the process. The movement of him bending down to pick it up caught her peripheral vision. Her song ended in an abrupt inhalation of air. She tried to stand up but was seized by a sudden coughing fit. She gave long-drawn unfinished coughs which left her clutching the air and bending over her washing as if she would retch. Wanda hurried over and was about to give her a few well-intentioned smacks on her back when she suddenly stood up and pushed him away.

"What are you doing here?" she wheezed, wiping the tears from her eyes with the neckline of her tunic. When she pulled the neck, its oversized armpit holes drew

dangerously to the middle of her chest, exposing far too much of her drooping breasts than Wanda cared to see. He averted his eyes and concentrated on a stone just in front of his left foot.

“I just wanted to ask you a favour.”

“Didn’t I tell you I know nothing about the murder?”

Her breathing had normalised but her voice rose with each syllable.

“It’s not about that, ma’am.”

“What then?” she spat.

Wanda had not counted on her being this angry. It dawned on him that he had not thought through how he would broach the subject or convince her at all. Matrida’s eyes widened for one flickering second. Without a word, she bent over the tub and began rinsing her dress in the murky water.

“It’s about the—.”

“Young man, go and find real work to do.”

He didn’t move, just watched her wring the dress. She shook it loose then flapped it hard a few times sending a misty shower over Wanda.

“I just thought she could stay with you for a while.”

Matrida threw the dress over a sagging wire clothesline and clicked her tongue when it sagged even lower. He searched her face, willing her to meet his eyes so he could convey his plea and maybe read her thoughts. She bent over her tub again and dredged out a dark green pleated skirt.

“The killers might get to her first.”

His voice barely rose above the rush of wrung-out water falling back into the tub. He waited while she threw the skirt sideways over the wire, pulled a peg from the folds of her dress and stuck it in the middle of the skirt. She brought out another peg and pegged the dress. Without consciously realising it, Wanda leaned forward to see from where she conjured the pegs.

“Hey! Hey!”

Like a small boy caught holding a mirror under a girl’s dress at assembly, he pulled up straight and fixed his eyes on a spot just to the right of her eyes.

“Are you still here?”

“I was say—”

“The killers should get me too?”

“If we get her out now, they won’t know she was there that night.”

She didn’t respond.

“Besides, from what I hear, they wouldn’t dare do anything to you Mrs—.”

“Miss Moses,” she snapped. “What do you mean?”

“Just that you’re the best protection around.”

“People will think I have her problem.”

“Or they might think you have her spirit.”

Matrida straightened up so quickly the garment she pulled out of the tub threw a huge splash of water onto Wanda’s dusty shoes.

“I do not have demons,” she hissed.

“No, ma’am, no.” He bowed so low he could have knelt.

“What’s the police’s job anyway?”

“You know Inspector Bedson, ma’am. We may as well leave her to the killers.”

She ignored him for a while, hanging up the rest of her washing.

“Watch out,” she warned as she tipped the tub out on the overgrown grass. She picked the crate up and with the tub dangling from her other hand squelched through the wet patch and past him to the back door of her house. She leant the tub against the wall to dry and wiped her bare feet on the brown raffia sack that was her doormat. If she noticed the cooking oil, she gave no indication. Then standing in the doorway, she wagged a warning finger at him.

“I’m agreeing to do this only as the most reliable person in this neighbourhood.”

“Thank you. Thank you, ma’am.” He bowed several times while retreating as quickly as he could before she changed her mind. He hurried up the road and was not going to look back except the shrill of her soprano startled him. She was tending the laid out vegetables, freshening them up with a few sprinkles from the steaming half-bottle.

Wanda lowered his frame on to the shaded stoep at the entrance of the block of flats. He took off his cap and wiped his brow and neck with a handkerchief then leaned back,

spreading his hot palms on the cool cement floor. He decided not to take his shoes off thinking they would only hurt even more when he put them back on. Asking Matrida for a little padding for his blistered ankles had been out of the question. He suspected she would not have appreciated that.

The street wasn't so busy. He checked his watch. It was just after eleven. School wasn't out yet and most of the working people were just getting into their routines. Those who stayed at home were busy with house chores and some were probably still sleeping. Directly opposite him was Samson's restaurant. The unlit neon sign above the door proclaimed simply "Samson's". From where he sat, Wanda sensed stillness radiating from the restaurant and the area immediately in front of its closed doors. None of the people walking by stepped into that zone. There seemed to be an invisible semicircle around the front of the building which, by some tacit agreement, no one was allowed to invade. Even Rabson's fish shop was closed today in honour of his neighbour's passing. Its cream-yellow door reflected a murky light which added to the eerie aura.

Feeling cooler and less sweaty, Wanda took a deep breath to steady his nerves and walked into the cool, dim building. A few steps in, he turned back when it occurred to him that perhaps he ought to breathe in a little more fresh air to sustain him through the odour he was about to venture into. He held it in for a couple of flights of stairs but had to let it go by the third when he began to feel light-headed.

Clara had been working on the crossword puzzle for a week now. Five across, eight-letter word for an unpleasant older woman. She knew the word, had it on the edge of her memory, but for the past five days just couldn't retrieve it. Her fourth finger hurt from the pressure of holding the pencil stub poised over the newspaper for so long. She had her brow creased in concentration when someone knocked on her door for the second time that day. The crease turned into a frown. No one ever knocked on her door. She cocked her head to one side to hear better. Nothing. But before she could turn her attention back to the grid, another knock came, this time a little louder. The police had frightened her earlier. She didn't want to talk to them. The knocking persisted. She sat motionless, watching the door and hoping whoever it was would go away. A small sound escaped her

when she saw the door begin to open inch by inch. After this morning's episode, she had been sure that she had locked the door. She sat rigid, a million images of what might be standing behind the door racing through her mind. When the young policeman's head came round the door a part of her felt relieved. She remembered how nervous he'd been earlier. It was the others, especially the loud one, she was afraid of. The door was wide open now and there was no sign of the others. The officer stood in the doorway blinking as though he had specks in both his eyes. Clara got up, her movements slow as if the mechanism responsible for her reflexes was shutting down. She studied him, wondering if he had an eye condition.

When his eyes had adjusted to the dim light, Wanda went straight for the windows. He threw back the curtain, tearing half of its dirt-weakened material down. He forced the time-sealed windows open and almost threw half his body out. When he pulled back into the room he found the girl cowering in a corner, her face partly covered by a hand holding a crumpled newspaper.

For a few moments Wanda didn't know what to do about the situation. But he did not have much time to think. He felt that he couldn't survive in that air for too long. He tried to think of something to say, but the smell seemed to be clouding his mind. All he wanted to do was to get out of there. What happened in the next few seconds was like an out of body experience. It felt as though a force came over him and took control of his actions. He saw himself lunge at Clara, grab her still-raised forearm and in a flash they were halfway down to the ground floor. Only then did he stop and transport his mind back into the moment. He turned to look at Clara and found her still crouched, her arm stiff under his tight grip. His mouth formed a circle around an apology that his eyes said he was too ashamed to put into words. It only occurred to him to snatch his hand away when her left hand began to reach for her trapped arm. A light brown irregular ring remained where his hand had been. He wished he could steal a look at his palm but her wary eyes followed his every action. So instead he ran his thumb over his fingers. The feel of greasy dirt was unmistakable. He couldn't dwell on it for too long. The situation at hand demanded his attention more.

The girl curled up on the step above him, her long toenails peeping through the hem of her butterfly print dress. Wanda realised he didn't even know her name. He sat down

beside her and leaned closer to speak to her but pulled back at once. She needed a wash badly. With her arms now wrapped around her knees, she exposed the dried half-moons in the armpits of her dress. They were large and had turned a greenish yellow colour from he couldn't tell how many weeks of collected sweat. A fresh deposit was now breaking through the material and the blending of new and old gave off an odour that was anything but fresh.

"I'm Wanda. What's your name?"

Her body stiffened at the sound of his voice. Wanda waited for a response. None came. He wondered what her voice would sound like. Hoarse, he imagined, from not having spoken to anyone for so long. He couldn't remember her making even a small sound while he dragged her down the stairs. He couldn't remember dragging her down the stairs. The thought that she may have been screaming all the way down while he functioned in his subconscious horrified him. His only comfort was that no one was in sight. It made him feel less guilty knowing that if there'd been a noise someone would have come out. He looked at her again, her eyes staring and frightened but, apart from that, unreadable. The skin on her face was even-toned and well taken care of – her hair clean and shiny and braided in little fish-plaits. Wanda's appraising eye stopped at her neck. Her skin tone suddenly changed from a clean brown to a blackish unnatural colour. Wanda hoped she'd been using a skin lightening cream on her face. He could handle that better than having to accept that she was that dirty. *The colour of the ears always gives away a person's real skin tone*, he thought. Hers were the same as her face. She was just dirty.

"You have to move away from here before they come looking for you," he tried again. He may as well have been talking to himself. He stretched one leg out and began to inspect his shoe. It was very dusty but you could see where Matrida's water had landed. The water had created a flowery design, like an abstract painting of the sun.

"How will they know I know anything?"

Wanda sprang to his feet, took his cap off and began to stammer. His reaction frightened Clara even more. She retreated three steps up. Wanda stopped, put his cap back on, and sat down again. He hadn't expected her voice to be that strong and confident. Her body language had shown none of those qualities.

“You are the most vulnerable person in the building.” His voice suddenly lacked conviction.

“Why?”

“You live alone and they could do anything to you.”

She was silent.

“I’ve found you somewhere to stay.”

“Where?”

“With Miss Moses.”

She began to unravel the paper in her hand.

“She’s crazy.”

“You know her?”

“I saw her the other night.”

“But how did you know that was Miss Moses?”

“I saw you with her.”

It was Wanda’s turn to be silent. He now even more didn’t know what to make of the girl at all. As he watched her fold the paper into a neat little square, doubt over whether he would be able to persuade her to move crept into his mind. When she stood and started climbing back up, his mind immediately began to select the right words to use to explain his failure to Inspector Bedson. She suddenly stopped as if she’d forgotten something and turned to him.

“I’m going to fetch my shoes.”

When his nerves had settled a little, Wanda decided the best thing for him to do was not to think at all. Trying to follow her unpredictable behaviour was like being moved back and forth on a giant swing.

He heard the shoes before she came into sight. A sharp tap-tap that repeatedly cut through his head with each step. When she appeared, Wanda concentrated on his painful blisters and clenched his jaw to suppress the urge to convulse into hysterical laughter. In addition to the slip-ons with little flowers, Clara had also changed into a floral dress which was not much cleaner than the one she had had on before. On her head was a straw hat adorned with a small bouquet of flowers. She was carrying a small leather handbag and a transparent bag printed with colourful different-sized umbrellas. Inside were some

clothes, another pair of shoes, a few books and, on top of it all, her wireless. By the time she got to Wanda, his jaw hurt and the spasms of laughter inside of him threatened to break through his face.

“I’ll get the rest tomorrow,” she announced.

He nodded robotically and held out his hand for the bigger bag but she sailed past him pretending to be unaware of his offer. The climb down was slow and noisy. Wanda expected someone to come out at any second and tell them to stop the racket at once. Only one person came out on the first floor carrying a small bundle wrapped in what looked like worn bath towels. *A domestic worker on her way to fetch the children from school*, he thought. She hurried past them without a word and was out through the front entrance before they even got to the last flight. Wanda chuckled, grateful for something to talk about.

“Scared madam will have a fit if she’s late picking her brats up from school.”

“That’s Tyson’s wife. He beats her up if she doesn’t bring him his lunch at work on time.”

Wanda didn’t bother to ask how she had come by this information.

Navigating around the potholes wasn’t easy for Clara. She had only ever walked on this road once. The first time she had arrived in Hindpark. It had been dark and she had had her canvas shoes on. She’d walked on the sloping edges of the road, which she couldn’t do now in these shoes. Going across to Samson’s was easy. There were no potholes there. He had fixed the road in front of his restaurant. She didn’t like where Wanda was taking her. *All these potholes*, she thought. She couldn’t imagine living like this. She stopped.

“Why are you stopping?”

“I think I’ll go back now.”

She turned around and started walking back. Wanda’s heart sank. He wanted his plan to work and avoid being victimised by Inspector Bedson. Tired, hungry and with frayed nerves, his patience was wearing out fast.

“No you’re coming with me,” he said grabbing her arm and dragging her forward.

Dèja vu, or time travel, his mind was coming undone. This time she resisted and he heard her make a noise. He let go of her arm and knit his brows.

“Do you know what happened to one woman who lived across from the school?”

“They cut her up and buried her in her backyard.”

“Well, that could happen to you.” He was almost shouting.

“I don’t have a backyard.” It wasn’t a retort. She was just stating a fact. She’d just taken a few steps towards her old home when she came face to face with the tuck-shop boy.

“Madam, where are you going?” he laughed. “All dressed up to the nines.”

She side-stepped him and continued on her way. The boy followed.

“An afternoon on the town, madam?”

She fixed her attention on her feet, careful not to step into any potholes or burst the seams of her pretty shoes.

“It’s a good idea to take a bath first before you step out, madam.”

The school bell rang in the distance. That snapped Wanda out of his temper and sent him running after her. He knew that once the primary school boys caught sight of her they would quickly turn her into a circus freak. That sort of thing had been one of his favourite hobbies when he was a little boy. It was a test of manhood. You had to hurl the worst possible insults at anyone unfortunate enough to be even slightly odd-looking. It didn’t matter how odd-looking you yourself were. It was a show of courage and solidarity amongst friends. None of them ever dared do this when alone but reckoned that if they took part in a group-slurring, no one would ever find out how cowardly they were. The tuck-shop boy was not a threat. He was a one-man show. The children would bring the whole neighbourhood out and turn the girl’s misfortune into an event.

The buzz of excited small voices grew louder with each passing second. Wanda found his hand once more gripping Clara’s arm.

“Hey, I was here first,” said the boy in mock annoyance.

Wanda ignored him. “If you don’t come with me the entire police squad will come and haul you out of that flat.”

“Thank you, but I will find somewhere else to go myself.”

Wanda couldn’t believe she was reasoning with him.

“There’s no time.”

“When the police come I’ll be gone already.”

“I’m the police and I’m already here.”

She paused to think about what he’d just said and turned back towards where they’d been headed in the first place. Wanda didn’t let go of her arm this time. He couldn’t risk her changing her mind again.

“Hey, what did you say to her?” asked the tuck-shop boy as they passed him. “Why did you have to mess up my move?” he guffawed.

Wanda knocked on Matrida’s front door.

“Go round to the back,” a muffled voice answered from within.

They went around the house and she ushered them quickly inside and closed the door. It was dim in there with the only light coming from under the two doors and the cracks that separated the planks of wood that made up the doors and the small window. A lingering smell of paraffin and candle wax hung in the air.

“What’s that smell?” Matrida asked.

Clara looked at Wanda. He said nothing.

“It must be the paraffin,” offered Clara.

“Not that smell,” scoffed Matrida.

“I smell paraffin.”

“I know how paraffin smells. I use it all the time.”

“If you’re exposed to paraffin fumes all the time for a long time it can cause kidney damage.”

“And if you don’t wash all the time for a long time you smell.”

Clara adjusted her hat and inspected the room around her.

Wanda said, “This is Miss Moses. You’re going to stay with her for a while.”

Clara took in Matrida’s brown tunic and the loose flesh of her naked biceps. Her expression betrayed none of her thoughts. She stretched out her hand to Matrida.

“I’m Clara.”

“Oh,” said Wanda then uttered a few “ums” when the women looked at him, expecting some comment. He’d supposed her first name would be Perpetua or something similar to the local girls’ names.

Matrida relaxed her scowl and shook Clara’s hand.

“Clara who?”

Clara handed her big bag to Wanda and fished out lip balm from her handbag. She applied a coat, dropped the stick in her handbag and took back the other bag from Wanda. Matrida waited a few moments longer then turned to Wanda.

“What’s her last name?”

“I don’t know,” he confessed, eyes downcast.

“Put your bags down and go fetch water in that bucket.”

For the first time since she’d entered the house, Clara’s face registered some emotion. Horror.

“I don’t fetch water.”

“I can see that. Now take that bucket and go fetch water outside.”

The woman’s voice sounded harsh so Clara found a clear space on the floor and parked her bags against the wall. She picked up an aluminium bucket just inside the back door and went outside.

“Just how long do you want me to keep this mad girl?”

“Until investigations are complete, ma’am.”

Matrida opened the back door wider to let some light and air in.

“Don’t just stand there, girl,” she shouted.

“I can’t find the tap.”

“In there, child,” Matrida said pointing at one of the brick structures. “Where were you raised?” She spoke at top of her voice. Wanda couldn’t understand why she had insisted on closing her window and doors at first. A few minutes later, Clara came back and set the bucket at Matrida’s feet. Her hat sat askew on her head. The front hem of her dress was soggy and her feet wet. The bucket was less than ten centimetres full. Matrida snatched the bucket up and stormed out of the house. She came back in less than two minutes with the bucket almost brimful. She lit a paraffin stove and placed the bucket on top.

“I think we can all sit down now.”

“I should get back to the station and give my report.”

Wanda hadn't seen the panicked look that came over Clara's face since he'd gone to get her earlier. He was just beginning to believe nothing scared her.

“It'll be my duty to check in on you daily,” he added quickly before she could gather her bags and insist on going with him.

They sat on the floor facing each other, studying each other, each not quite trusting the other. Matrida had her back against the wall and her legs stretched out. Clara sat Indian style with her dress spread out to dry the hem. She had adjusted her hat to a sassy angle and her shoes were drying next to her bags. The sound of heating water provided a moody soundtrack to their silent drama.

“Get out of those clothes.”

Clara went rigid.

“Did you bring any clean clothes?”

“Yes.” Her voice was hoarse and barely audible.

“Let's see.”

Clara stretched behind her and pulled her bag to her. From it, she extracted what must once have been a beautiful African print dress. Although a dark colour, the hem showed a rim of dirt right around it. The back of its neckline looked like it had been dipped in fat. A musty odour emanated from it.

“That's not clean.”

“It is.”

“Come with me.”

Matrida turned down the paraffin stove and picked up the bucket. Clara followed her into one of the narrow brick structures where she'd fetched water earlier.

“Get out of those clothes and stay here.”

Matrida went out and came back in a couple of minutes with the aluminium tub. Inside it were a bar of the local red soap, an unused loofah and a dry rough-looking facecloth.

“Why are you still dressed?”

Clara backed into the wall.

“Quick, I haven’t got all day.”

She tipped half the steaming water into the tub and filled it with cold water from the tap. When she saw Clara still standing against the wall hugging herself, she pulled her away from it and unzipped her dress in one movement. Clara allowed herself a squeal but mostly just struggled to get out of the older woman’s grip and the little nook that served as a bathroom. Matrida’s frame was large enough to block the doorway and she was physically too strong for Clara to wrestle out of the way.

“We ought to burn these things,” Matrida said throwing Clara’s clothes out onto the grass. Clara tried to hold on to her hat but Matrida yanked it from her and stopped short of throwing it onto the grass as well. After looking around, she hung it on a top corner on the roofless bathroom. She lifted the girl up and deposited her in the tub where she curled up like a little child and began to howl.

“Oh, hush yourself and mind the soap. Close your eyes. Close your mouth!”

The feel of the unbroken loofah on her skin was hard and abrasive. And the rough woman did not spare her face. Clara thought that Matrida rubbed her skin as though she were made of elephant hide. Then she remembered that she had read somewhere that elephants had very sensitive skin. Tears rolled down her cheeks hot and fast.

“Get out of the water and stand over there.”

Clara lost no time jumping out and sparing herself from Matrida’s merciless hands. Matrida picked the tub up in one swoop and took it outside. Clara wished she could run away but her clothes were outside. The sound of water being thrown reached her as Matrida threw her bathwater out over the blackjack shrubs about five metres away. The older woman was back in a flash and went into a rant about how dirty Clara was while she rinsed out the tub. She tipped the rest of the hot into it and added more cold water.

“Get in.”

Clara hesitated for only a second. She climbed into the tub and closed her eyes tightly, resigned to another skin peeling session under the rough hands of Miss Moses. Her mind went back to her early childhood to block the pain of the steelwire-like loofah. Bath-time had always been fun. Her mum had always told her stories while she washed her. Her favourite was the one about the frog that fell into a bucket of milk. He tried and tried to

climb out but couldn't. Yet, he wouldn't give up. The other frogs leaping around the bucket laughed at him and told him to give up since he was going to drown anyway. But he ignored them and carried on jumping up and trying to get out while the others jeered. As he jumped and jumped and jumped the milk began to curdle until it turned into cheese. With a solid base to spring from, the frog leaped out of the bucket to safety. Clara heard the sound of her mother's soothing voice and intermittent fussing over why she always chewed her nails. The voice was distinct and real. She smiled and opened her eyes. Matrida was clucking over her like a mother hen and complaining about the state of her nails.

"That's a sign of a lazy woman."

Clara's memory faded. This was her reality now. This was going to be her memory some day.

"Out, out."

Matrida threw a soapy face cloth into the tub and went out. As Clara got out she knew why she had not felt the pain of being scrubbed, why she had been able to dream. The coarse face cloth had softened in the water and shielded her skin from the corrosive force of Matrida's hands. The older woman came back with a towel, her dark green pleated skirt, a large faded black T-shirt, and bottle of petroleum jelly.

"See what you can do with these. I don't have anything else that can fit you."

She wrung out the facecloth and scooped the tub up once more.

"Come inside when you're done."

FOUR

The bright flowers that bordered a square patch of lawn in front of the police station afforded Wanda a welcome she could not embrace. Several people waited outside the police station. Four men sat on a narrow wooden bench, its hardwood weathered to a greying brown from years of exposure to the elements. An old man closest to the door, his skin almost the same colour as the bench, leant over his walking stick. A faded brown hat perched on the peppered hair on his bony head channelling memories of bygone times when girls cast him sidelong glances and smiled shyly when he caught their gazes. But

now the weary expression on his face and the way his hollowed cheek rested over the hand that formed a fist around the top of his walking stick reminded Wanda of Poppy. Poppy had been his dog when he was little. When there were no scraps to throw to him, Poppy always sat under the Jacaranda tree in front of the house with that same expression on his face. Next to the old man was a young man about Wanda's age. He was slouched against the wall with his knees spread apart, taking up more than his fair share of space on the bench. He had his arms folded on his chest, his eyes drooping and lips pursed as if daring anybody to provoke him. Beside him, on his left, was an older man whom Wanda took to be the younger man's father. He had the same defiant look and had his hands on his knees, making him appear as though he was about to pounce. On the other end of the bench, away from the door, was a calm-faced, respectable looking man. Wanda recognised him. He was a deacon at his church. There had been rumours a while back that his fifteen-year-old daughter Agnes had fallen pregnant. Wanda thought the girl sitting on the flower-bordered lawn looked like Agnes. She had her back to the men but Wanda noticed that the baby propping itself up against her shoulder had a haughty look that gave it away as the misbegotten child of the young man on the bench. The girl's mother sat next to her, absent-mindedly picking her teeth with a matchstick.

Wanda's eyes fell on a woman sitting at the far corner of the grass patch. Her imploring eyes dug into his and her lower lip quivered while her hands wrung and unwrung the straps of her handbag. MaBoy. Wanda knew her. Everyone did. Her five-year-old son, Boy, had been missing for a week. Wanda averted his eyes and disappeared into the station's charge office. It was empty. He went behind the counter and peered into the room behind it. That was empty too. He went through to the veranda beyond and found a noisy game of draughts in progress. The bottle tops that substituted for the draughts' pieces scraped the surface of the rough board and clanged on the floor.

"Wanda," Clever shouted in greeting.

"There are people waiting outside."

"Relax, Wanda, it's lunch time. Here, have some bread."

He held out a half loaf of bread gouged out in the middle. Wanda ignored him.

"MaBoy is outside."

"Again?" moaned Vickie looking up from his game.

“Hey, move, move,” prodded Wizman, impatient for Vickie to concentrate on the game.

“That woman is working on my nerves now,” Vickie continued. “Who does she think we are, the CIA?”

“Yeah. You’d think she’s the first person to ever lose a child,” Wizman agreed.

“I once got stolen when I was little,” Clever chimed in.

The other two whooped and doubled up with laughter.

“It wasn’t funny.”

They laughed even harder.

“This woman just picked me up at the market and tied me on her back. She took me to her house, made me eat peas and pinched me.”

“How did your parents find you?” Vickie hooted.

“They didn’t. I was on my way to buy salt for my new mother when I ran into my uncle. He didn’t even know I was missing. He thought I was going to his house so I went with him, had lunch and he drove me home later. I was so excited. I’d never been in a car before.”

Wanda retreated into the building and went through to the front. MaBoy was now picking at the flowers. Dandelion petals littered her lap and the tips of her fingers had turned pollen-yellow. Wanda went straight to her and asked her to follow him inside.

“We were here first.”

It was a statement that did not expect opposition. Wanda turned to find the young man’s father standing up with his hands on his hips. Agnes’s father half stood up.

“In-law-,” he began.

“I-am-not-your-in-law,” the man interrupted, enunciating each syllable.

“Sir, this woman’s child is missing,” explained Wanda.

“We all know that. Unless you know where to find the child please observe some order.”

MaBoy began to sob. Clever came through the door.

“I’ll attend to her,” he said.

Wanda cast him a surprised but grateful look and turned to the old man.

“In that case, sir, would you come with me?” he said helping the old man up. The irate man was about to protest when Wanda added, “I’m just observing the order.”

The old man declined Wanda’s offer to use his arm as a crutch and strode in, his walking stick barely steadying his shaky limbs. The remaining complainants trailed behind them and settled on the benches lining the walls of the charge office.

“What’s the problem, Grandpa?” Wanda asked sitting next to him.

“I lost my ID book and can’t get my pension money,” the old man said in a voice that was only a whisper.

“Have you reported this to Home Affairs?”

“I was there the whole day yesterday standing in a queue. They want an affidavit.”

“I’ll give you forms to write up your story.”

“I don’t know how to write, my son.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll do it for you.”

“That won’t get me a new ID book immediately. I haven’t eaten in days.”

“I’ll include a special request for them to speed things up for you.”

“Wanda.”

He didn’t have to turn around to see who had addressed him.

“Yes, sir.”

“Did you speak to the girl?”

“Yes sir.”

“What did she say?”

Wanda floundered. He couldn’t think of one specific thing Clara had said to him that might be of interest to Inspector Bedson.

“Did you or did you not speak to her?”

“I’ve put her up with someone to look after her.”

“Who?”

“Miss Matruda Moses.”

“That deranged woman?”

Wanda flinched. It seemed for a moment that the Inspector was going to take a swipe at him.

“I couldn’t think of anyone else, sir.”

The Inspector glowered at him.

“I don’t know anyone else in that area, sir,” he added.

The Inspector’s face relaxed.

“Well, I guess Matrída is the only one crazy enough to agree to that,” he relented, then lapsed into a contemplative, almost reminiscing silence. He nodded at his silent thoughts then said, “She always made me feel untouchable. One thing for sure, she could never be chosen as the beautiful girl to be buried with a deceased prince, but any king would want her guarding his grave.”

Wanda frowned at the Inspector’s cryptic praise of Matrída but opted not to ask any questions. Just when he thought it safe to pull an affidavit form from the tray on the counter, Inspector Bedson resumed his interrogation.

“Did she tell you anything about what she saw?”

“I had to move her first, sir.”

“Are you still moving her?”

“No, sir.”

“I want a report on my desk by the end of the day.”

With that the Inspector turned his attention to the waiting group which was fast becoming bigger. Wanda knew this was his cue to leave but one look at the old man rooted him to the spot.

“Wellington, how can I help you?” Inspector Bedson addressed the angry father.

“I just need a court order against these people who are hounding my son for maintenance for a child he has nothing to do with.”

“Come into my office.”

“Sir, this old man needs some help,” Wanda spoke up quickly to break the force of the Inspector’s reaction when he wheeled around to find him still standing there.

“Officer, you will observe your duties and do as you are told.”

Wanda swung on his heel and left the building careful not to meet the pleading eye of the old man. Once outside, he began to formulate in his mind the questions he would ask Clara. He could only summon enough energy to think of one: *How did you get like this?* He felt deflated, as if his centre had been scooped out, like Clever’s half-loaf of bread.

When he got to the junction that branched to the left towards Matrida's nook of Hindpark, he turned right. He was going home.

Clara didn't like the feel of Matrida's clothes on her. She'd had to wrap the skirt three times around her to stop it from dropping around her ankles. She couldn't tell exactly what kind of material it was made of except to say that it made her feel hot. Her grandmother had a dress made of the same material. Once it had caught fire while they were braaing and it smelled of burning tyres. And the T-shirt might as well have been an off-the-shoulder poncho. Clara shifted position on the mat which was now digging into her bottom. They had just finished their supper of pap and pumpkin leaves. It didn't go down well for her. Matrida made it all wrong – too oily and the onions not well sautéed. Not like her grandmother made it, with ground peanuts and no oil. Matrida seemed to be in no hurry to get up. She sat next to her dozing while the plates between them dried, forming a crusty coating.

“I need to go and get the rest of my stuff.”

“What did you say?”

“The rest of my clothes. I need to go and get them.”

“You mean you have more of those filthy rags?”

“They are not rags.”

“Yes, well, as dirty as they are I've to admit they are quite well kept.”

Clara got up and adjusted her skirt.

“I'm taking a candle and a box of matches. There are no lights in there,” she notified Matrida who had closed her eyes again to settle back into her doze.

Clara put on her canvas shoes not trusting what the gravelly road might do to her pretty slip-ons in the dark. She took a candle and box of matches from the windowsill and opened the front door.

“Where do you think you're going?” asked Matrida scrambling to her feet so quickly she knocked over her cup of water. Clara looked at her genuinely surprised. “I said I was going to fetch my things.”

“Now? At this hour? In the dark?”

Clara shrugged.

“Yes,” she said and walked out, gently closing the door behind her. By the time Matrida caught up with her she had already turned into the street and was moving fast towards her former residence.

“Come back right now, you ungrateful imbecile,” Matrida hissed, trapping Clara’s arm in a painful grip. Clara lost her footing and tumbled into the dust, taking her guardian with her. Matrida let out her famous screech which brought several neighbours, armed with axe and hoe handles, running into the street.

“It’s just Matrida,” mumbled someone when he saw her dusting herself off.

“It looks like she’d fallen down.”

“What’s she doing in the dark?”

“Stay down there,” Matrida whispered to Clara. She wasn’t ready for anyone to see her with the girl yet. So far she’d managed to hide her from prying eyes. Clara, half-lying in a pothole, was having difficulty getting up anyway. Matrida had landed on top of her like a ninety-kilogram bag of cement. She suspected her spine might have snapped.

“Who’s that on the ground?”

“Go back to bed. You’re sleepwalking,” said Matrida with a wave of the hand.

Clara raised her head.

“Hey, it’s the girl who’s come to live with her.”

“Oh, the one the police brought to her this afternoon?”

“Yes, I hear she has a bit of a head problem.”

“Just a chew on a bit of bark from the watchamacallit tree once a day for five days and it’s gone.”

“Not a headache you fool.”

“Oh. Well, I know something for that too.”

Matrida grabbed Clara’s hand and hauled her up. As she did so, Clara’s right elbow scraped the rim of the pothole leaving a bloody graze.

“Just walk,” said Matrida. Her hand in Clara’s back, propelling her forward. The discussion about Clara’s mental state soon grew faint behind them. They were at the block of flats in a third of the time it had taken Wanda and Clara to walk to Matrida’s

house. Clara led the way up and let them into the room. The window was still open and the floodlight shone brightly into the room.

“That candle won’t add anything to this light.”

Clara did not respond. She’d lost both candle and matches when she’d fallen.

“It’s very neat in here.”

Clara pulled a travelling bag from under the bed and shook it. A cloud of dust and fur balls escaped into the air. Matrida went into a fit of coughing.

“But you need to clean as well,” she added between coughs.

Clara began methodically packing her belongings into the bag.

“What’s that smell?”

By now the room had been quite well ventilated. But the smell was stuck to every surface in the room and couldn’t be expelled by just an infusion of fresh air. Clara took her pyjamas from under the pillow and placed them neatly into the bag. Next she pulled the two blankets from the bed sending out a musty odour.

“We’re not taking those into my house.”

Clara folded them neatly and put them on the bed. Then she started taking things out of the bag and putting them back where she’d taken them.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m staying here.”

“You drag me here-”

“You followed me.”

Matrida threw her hands to her hips and said, “Oh-ho.” Then she made a hand dusting gesture at Clara and walked out of the room. She was descending the last flight of stairs when the familiar revving and sputtering of Samson’s car tore through her mental cursing. She spun around and began to haul her heavy frame two steps at a time up the stairs. By the next landing her run had slowed to a crawl. She decided taking the steps two at a time was pointless and switched to a hop that had her almost falling over backwards. When she got to Clara’s landing, her heaving chest burned and her calves felt as if they had toughened into little golf balls. She burst into the room gasping for breath.

“Let’s go right now, quickly,” she breathed supporting herself on the doorframe.

Clara made no move to get up from the bed. Her eyes shone and darted between the window and Matrida. Even in the dim light, Matrida could see the shaking in her stiff shoulders. She'd put everything back into the bag. Matrida dragged herself over to her and pulled her up.

“Get your bag.”

Clara picked the bag up and followed Matrida out. She let out a tiny sound and dropped the bag just when they were about to begin their descent.

“What now?” Matrida wailed but Clara had already disappeared into the flat. She came back a second later carrying her food container. Matrida snatched it from her and began to climb down the stairs as quickly as she could. It wasn't quick enough. Clara, with her heavy bag, soon overtook her. When she got to the bottom of the stairs, Clara was nowhere in sight.

“This way.”

The voice came from behind the stairs. Matrida followed it and went through the door which Clara held open for her. They were in the caretaker's storeroom. Brooms, mops, buckets, detergents and all sorts of cleaning implements littered the floor. The haphazard state that the room was in gave no indication that it belonged to someone entrusted with keeping the building neat.

“If you know a back way to your house we can go through there,” Clara said pointing to a door that was barely visible behind the clutter of new mops and brooms.

“Yes, yes – let's go,” said Matrida pushing forward, impatient to put a distance between them and whoever had taken over Samson's car.

“It's locked,” said Clara. She reached on to a top shelf and slid a key from underneath a can of insect repellent. Matrida looked at her, astonished.

“How did you know where to find that?”

“I use the insect-killer sometimes. This building is tick-infested.”

She unlocked the door and slipped the key back into its hiding place. They exited the building, closed the door and threaded their way through the pervasive blackjack before they came onto a road that ran behind Matrida's block of houses. It wasn't simple in the dark even for Matrida to tell exactly where her house was. The darkness was thicker on this side.

floor again. Clara thanked her and not certain what to do next, she stood swaying from side to side, looking around the room for something to occupy her.

“Sit down, girl.”

She pulled her radio from her bag and sat down on the mat opposite Matrida. She switched on the radio and the sound of a lilting melody filled the room.

“Where did you get that radio?”

“Home.”

“Where’s home?”

Clara ran her hands over her skirt and began to pick the blackjack off.

“Who’s your father?”

“My mother said the day that I was born she put a crown of flowers on my head.”

“She’s the one who messed your head up. You only put flowers on dead people.”

“Daffodils. She said they mean ‘the sun is always shining when I’m with you’.”

“Where is she now?”

Clara resumed picking the blackjack from her skirt with a new enthusiasm.

“You don’t want to talk so I’m going to sleep,” said Matrida, hoisting herself up from the floor. She disappeared behind the curtain and came back with two blankets, rough as Clara’s, but cleaner.

“Make your bed quickly. The paraffin in the lamp is running out.”

When Clara was settled in the blankets Matrida blew out the lamp and went behind the curtain. Clara could hear the rustle of cloth as Matrida prepared to go to sleep. Then silence.

“My father threw my crown to the ground and stamped all over it.”

“Child, don’t give me nightmares.”

FIVE

Just after ten o’clock in the morning, an impressive motorcade of police cars ground to a noisy halt in front of Samson’s restaurant. Gun-toting officers leapt out and surrounded the restaurant. They crouched beneath the windows, now stripped of their burglar bars, and signalled to each other like soldiers on a battlefield. The front door was slightly ajar.

Two raid leaders on each side of it conferred with broad gestures and intense eyeballing. The discussion went on for so long that any criminal hiding inside the restaurant could have taken that as a window period to make his escape. This was cut short by a piercing whistle that came from Inspector Bedson. From the safety of his car, he motioned to the officers to proceed into the building. They sprang up in unison and, with synchronised precision, kicked the door down. The door hit the floor with a loud crack, missing Rabson's sandaled feet by a fraction of an inch. The bewildered fish man raised his arms at the sight of eight guns pointed at him.

"On the floor."

Rabson sank to the ground and lay on his stomach, face propped up by the chin so he could watch his captors.

"Face on the floor and hands on your head."

The smell of floor polish rushed up his nostrils and, before he could control it, an explosive sneeze escaped him causing his forehead to bang on the hardwood floor in one jerking reflex. This time a spurt of blood escaped his nose.

"Who do we have here?"

He recognised Inspector Bedson's voice.

"He was just about to duck out, sir."

"Have you IDed him?"

"Bedson, it's me," Rabson spoke up, but his voice came out as a husky muffle.

"Search him."

A pair of rough hands fumbled through his pockets and pulled out his wallet.

"Bedson, it's Rabson," said a genuinely appalled voice. "Get these dimwits away from me."

"Rabson, the fish man Rabson?"

"Yes, it was him all along," Wizman declared.

Rabson lifted his head and gaped at them, too dumbstruck to protest.

"Cuff him. The rest of you search the building for any accomplices," commanded Bedson as he exited.

The rate at which Rabson's brain transmitted impulses to the rest of his body seemed to have slowed down to a sluggish crawl. Before he could take his hands off his head and

press himself off the floor, a pair of handcuffs had already been slapped on to his wrists. The rough hands were now pushing his arms down his back. Rabson screamed in agony.

“If you don’t shut up we’re going to charge you with resisting arrest as well as robbery,” warned a gruff voice whose hands carried on forcing his arms down. Rabson attempted to twist away but he was locked in such an awkward position that trying to raise himself off the ground only made the pain worse.

“What do you think I am, a contortionist?” he cried out.

“Right now that seems obvious. If you co-operate, you’ll get a chance to absolve yourself in court.”

“You stupid fool. Do you even know what a contortionist is? Are you trying to break my arms?”

“Well, that’s another charge to the list.”

“Wizman, his arms can’t go down his back. They have to come down his front.”

“Shut up, Clever. What kind of person can’t hold his arms behind his back?”

“Why don’t you try holding your hands on your head then stretching them down your back?”

“Simple,” said Wizman letting go of Rabson and taking up Clever’s dare. It didn’t take him a second to realise he couldn’t do it. Too proud to acknowledge defeat, he gave Clever a hard push that sent him reeling backwards. Clever regained his balance and sniggered at Wizman.

“So you’re clever, Clever,” said Wizman while pulling Rabson to his feet.

Now that the shock had worn off and he was in a more normal position, Rabson felt emboldened to speak up.

“I’m the one who reported the robbery to the police. Why am I being arrested?”

“You can give your statement at the station.”

“No, I’m not going anywhere until you take these cuffs off me.”

“You were caught red-handed. There’s no way you can talk yourself out of this.”

“Where’s Bedson?” said Rabson beginning to radiate aggression. His eyes darted around the room and scanned the group of policemen outside. He appeared not to blink as his eyes roamed for the Inspector. The veins on his temples protruded and rose and fell in

rhythm with his accelerated heartbeat. Blood dripped down his nose into his mouth, staining his teeth a sickly red.

“That won’t do you any good, Rabson. You’re our number one suspect.”

Rabson pushed Wizman away and sat down on the nearest chair. “Clever, get the Inspector,” he ordered.

The stubborn look on the older man’s face left no room for Clever to protest. He went outside and knocked at the window of the Inspector’s car.

“What?”

“Resistance of arrest, sir.”

“Handle it.”

“He wants to see you, sir.”

Bedson threw his papers on the passenger seat and flung the door open into Clever. He didn’t apologise or wait to see what damage he might have caused. Inside, Wizman was giving Rabson a lecture on prisoner etiquette.

“You can never argue yourself out of the obvious. If you’ve been caught in the act only the judge can decide your fate, not the police.”

Rabson looked through him.

“What’s going on here?”

“I want to know what’s going on here, Bedson.”

“We got a call that there’d been a robbery and we found *you* here. That’s what’s going on.”

“I made the call!”

“The question is, what were you doing in here?” said Bedson raising himself on the balls of his feet for emphasis.

“It took you three hours to get here. I came in to investigate. I can’t possibly be shoddier than you lot.” Rabson would have flung his hand out but the handcuffs reduced the gesture to a flick.

“How did you get in?” Bedson continued, choosing to let the insult pass. He moved closer to Rabson and stared down at him with the best authoritative expression he could muster. “There’s no sign of forced entry.”

“Samson gave me a key for emergencies. The only sign of forced entry was made by your men who thought it wise to force open an open door.”

“So how did the robbers get in?” challenged Wizman, offended by the attack on his work ethic.

“They obviously stole Samson’s keys the night they killed him.”

“How do you know it’s the same people?”

“The whole neighbourhood heard his car last night!”

Bedson sniffed and said something to Wizman. The officer leaned closer to him.

“What?”

Bedson stuck his face an inch from Wizman’s and snarled, “I said uncuff him.”

Wizman unlocked the handcuffs and stood aside in what could only be described as a sulk.

“What now?”

“Look for clues,” said the Inspector waving him away. He turned to Rabson. “We still need you to come and give your statement at the station.”

Rabson clicked his tongue at him, snatched his wallet from Clever and strode out.

The voice came from another realm. It came in and out of her consciousness like the motion of a ship on gentle waves. And then it stayed with her, forcing her to pay attention. It moved her until the motion became less gentle.

“Clara, wake up.”

She opened her eyes and saw before her a round face with blown out cheeks, like the old paintings in the chapel of her old primary school. She studied it with interest. She’d never seen a black cherub before. Her hand was just about to touch its cheek when its hand grabbed her wrist in a pinching squeeze. She let out a restrained scream.

“Get a hold on yourself and get up this minute.”

Clara sat up and looked around her. Bit by bit the images began to make sense until her eyes finally came to rest on Matrída.

“Good morning,” she said.

Matrída looked at her with suspicion.

“Did you sleep well?”

She couldn't remember when last she'd slept that well.

“What time is it?”

“The sun is just this side of noon. Too late to still be sleeping.”

Clara's gaze landed on the light coming through the open back door. She could now feel the heat that it had spread over the mud-packed floor that had been buffed to a cement-smooth shine. As she made a move to get up, she fell back, having trapped her T-shirt, which had twisted to one side, with her hand. And her skirt wound around her legs like cling-wrap, making it impossible for her to move her legs. Matrída laughed.

“That's what happens when you sleep with your day clothes on.”

“You said not to open my bag.”

“That bag of yours nearly got us bundled into Samson's car together with his burglar bars.”

“Burglar bars?”

“Yes, they took all of them. Rabson made the discovery this morning when he went to open his shop.”

Clara scratched her head.

“You would have been next.”

Clara stared her, her expression blank.

“What about the neon sign?”

“What about it?”

“At dawn, when the floodlight goes off, the neon sign glows in the dark.”

“Get up and wash your face,” said Matrída, ripping the blankets off her. “You're not talking sense.”

Clara came back to find her sleeping area cleared and a plate of sweet potatoes and a plastic mug of steaming milky tea waiting for her. It wasn't her idea of breakfast but she was hungry. She sat down beside the meal and glanced at Matrída for permission to eat.

“Go ahead.”

She raised the mug to her lips and set it down again without taking a sip. The searing touch of the mug on her lips taunted her thirst for the drink.

“There's cold milk in that pot in the corner.”

A bottle of milk stood in a clay pot that was half filled with cold water. Next to that was another clay pot that was covered.

“That one contains drinking water,” Matrída explained and left the room.

The bottle was almost icy cold to the touch. She poured a generous quantity into the mug and resumed her breakfast. Outside, Matrída carried on a lively conversation with a neighbour. She gathered that no one had the exact details of the robbery although many had much to say about it.

A knock on the front door startled her. She waited for Matrída to respond, but her guardian seemed to be in no hurry to terminate her chatter. There was a second knock. Clara put her sweet potato down and crawled to the door. She peered through the keyhole. The person knocking was standing too close to the door for her to see him or her. She laid her head on the floor and looked under the door but still could not see anything. When she squinted through the keyhole again, nothing blocked her view this time. Just as she was about to turn, the back door creaked. She turned around expecting to come face to face with her would-be killers. Wanda stood in the doorway holding the door back and blocking the light. He was blinking again, the way he had done when he had come to get her from the flat.

“Why do you do that?”

“What?”

“Blink like that?”

“I’m just adjusting to the dim light.”

He came in and sat on Matrída’s wooden crate. Clara held out her plate of sweet potatoes to him.

“No thank you.”

She continued to hold the plate to him until he took a piece. He pulled a notebook and pen out of his breast pocket and balanced them on his knee. But he couldn’t eat and write, so he decided to take care of the sweet potato first. This gave him a chance to study her without speaking. He thought she looked even stranger today. Her hair had flattened on one side, giving her head an odd deflated shape. The imprints on her face on that side of

her head showed that she hadn't been up long. And he thought the clothes she wore made her look like one of those girls at his grandmother's homestead who spent their days fetching firewood, carrying buckets of water on their heads, and sometimes even herding the goats. He broke out of his reverie to find Clara staring back at him, watching his thoughts criss-cross his face while she chewed on her sweet potato and drank her milk-white tea.

"Uh," he said taking a pen out of his pocket and scribbling on the notebook. He wondered whether she had read his thoughts.

"Is that a diary?"

"What?"

"Are you writing down what you were thinking just now?"

"No, just the date."

She took a sip from her mug, her eyes never once leaving his face. He tapped his heel on the floor and the pen on the notebook. *She was like a five-year-old sometimes*, he thought. *A five-year-old who knew too much.*

"I have to ask you some questions about Samson's murder."

She dropped her gaze.

"What did you see?"

"If I tell you anything, they'll come and get me."

"No, you're safe here."

"Anyone can just walk in. Like you did."

"That's different. I'm a policeman. People trust me."

"No they don't. You never show up on time."

Wanda frowned, not comprehending.

"You're safe here."

"There was a robbery just up the road last night. I'm not safe."

"Matrida is the best protection you can get right now."

She giggled. The sound was so unfamiliar that Wanda couldn't be certain that it had come from her.

"I was in a witness protection programme once. It wasn't like this."

Wanda's lips moved like a fish's under water and, like a fish, no sound came out.

“I saw the men again last night.”

His head snapped up.

“Where?”

“At Samson’s restaurant.”

Wanda leapt up, bewildered.

“What were you doing there?”

“I went to get my things.”

“You’re not supposed to go there; especially alone.”

“Don’t worry. Matrida was there to protect me.”

There was not a hint of sarcasm in her tone but he couldn’t be sure that it wasn’t a backhanded reassurance. He sat down.

“Where is she?”

Clara shrugged.

“You’ll have to give a statement to the police.”

“I fear for my safety if I do.”

It was Wanda’s turn to drop his gaze. After examining the edge of the mat for a while, he doodled on the notebook, then, eyes not rising to meet hers, asked, “When were you in witness protection?”

“Oh, a while back,” she said as nonchalant as if referring to a forgettable vacation with boring cousins.

“What for?”

“A murder.”

Wanda looked up.

“Whose?”

“My mother’s.”

Wanda did his fish act again, cleared his throat then got up. He stored the pen and notebook in his pocket and ran his hands over the legs of his uniform. When he’d gathered enough courage to meet her gaze, she was sitting Indian-style, intent on picking blackjack off her skirt which she had spread out around her. He affected a cough.

“Someone should invent a magnet for attracting blackjack,” she said.

He felt that he needed to say something about her mother, but could see that he didn't have to. She'd already moved on. He couldn't get used to the way she switched realities so quickly.

"Maybe we can do the interview another time," he said as he walked to the door.

"Did they take Samson's neon lights?"

Wanda paused, his face registering confusion.

"No. Why?"

"They glow when it's still dark early in the morning. Sometimes you can see the shadows. Long bodies with elongated heads like at four in the afternoon."

Wanda gave a half nod and stepped into the blazing, languor-inducing heat. The air was so saturated with humidity that he felt as though he'd been sucked into a viscous fluid. He found Matrída leaning over a rickety reed fence, a few houses from her own. From his vantage point, she appeared to be deep in conversation with the nanny of the house. An unhooded infant fidgeted on the nanny's back in the fierce sunshine.

"Good morning," Wanda greeted as he drew close.

"Just the man we want to see," said Matrída, her voice louder than necessary.

"Yes," her friend chimed in. "Aren't they done with Samson's post mortem yet? We have to start organising the funeral."

"I think his family is already busy with that."

"We're his family too. We have to be involved."

"I meant his immediate family."

"We are too. He served our community."

Wanda nearly laughed out loud. He was sure the nanny had never set foot in Samson's restaurant and she would have been too intimidated to approach such a revered man as the restaurateur just to say 'hallo'. He turned to Matrída.

"I was hoping to have a word with you in private, Miss Moses."

"What's the matter?"

"Just a few questions," he said leading her to a safe distance from the nanny.

"What's so private that I don't need to hear?" the nanny called after them, bristling with envy and suspicion.

"You need to go inside with that baby. It's gasping like a newly hatched chick."

She glared at him, clapped her hands and vanished into the house.

“Clara tells me you saw something last night.”

“I didn’t *see* anything. I *heard* something. What’s that child lying for?”

“She says she saw something.”

“Maybe she did. I only heard something.”

“What?”

“Samson’s car.”

“How can you be sure if you didn’t see it?”

She looked at him as though he were an idiot.

“Everyone knows what Samson’s car sounds like,” she shouted.

“I have to ask you to keep it down, ma’am. What did you do?”

“We ran through the back streets and shrubbery. I don’t know why you brought this curse into my life. Now it seems that I am doomed to die of snake-bite.”

“Just take good care of her and don’t leave her alone like this.”

“She’s a big girl.”

“She’s scared.”

“Of what?”

Wanda paused, then, “I’m not sure.”

“She’s just a strange little thing, if you ask me.”

He nodded in spite of himself.

“Did she tell you her mother was murdered?”

Matrida threw her hands over her mouth and made a wailing sound. Wanda shook her.

“Ma’am, you’ll attract attention you don’t need right now.”

“I knew it,” she whispered. “I knew there was some cursed spirit messing up that child’s mind.”

“Just go home, Miss Moses, and keep an eye on her.”

As he watched her wiggle her way home, he couldn’t help wondering what cursed spirit had messed up *her* mind.

Matrida woke Clara up at the crack of dawn.

“We have to be the first to arrive at Samson’s house,” she said while wrapping a small basin of maize flour in a doek. News of Samson’s wake had come to them via Anabel the night before. It wasn’t clear who her sources were and she hadn’t exactly delivered it in a way that encouraged any questions. She gloated at having been the first to know about it before anyone else in the township. Matrida would not admit to it, but it irked her that Anabel had been the first to know. It was unthinkable to her that Anabel should also be the first to get to Samson’s house.

“It might be a good idea if we get there when everybody is up.”

“Hey! Move your butt to the bathroom. It’s a wake. Everybody *is* up.”

Ciara got up and began folding her blankets as quickly as she could, throwing her guardian nervous sidelong glances. They were ready to go before the first crackle of fire to boil bathwater had been lit by the neighbourhood’s earliest risers. The ground was hard and cold and the damp seeped through their canvas shoes. They moved at a near trot, shushing any dogs that attempted to bark at them. When they arrived at the bus terminal, about half a kilometre away, the buses were only just beginning to warm up. The vehicles were parked haphazardly on a lot where a scattering of black tarmac patches was the only evidence that it had once been completely paved. Interspersed between the buses were minibus taxis vying for the same passengers. The woman and girl wove through the vehicles in search of the bus that would take them to Samson’s suburb. A boy suddenly appeared from behind a bus and snatched the doek-wrapped basin from where it had been perched on Matrida’s head and ran around the bus. Matrida took off in pursuit, screaming what she intended to do to him once she had caught him. The boy stopped next to a taxi and shoved the basin under a seat. When she caught up with him he grabbed her by the arm and started shoving her inside before she could catch her breath.

“Get in, Mama.”

She jerked her arm away and began to pummel him on the head with her handbag. He yelped as the Bible inside made contact with his cheekbone.

“Mama, I’m just trying to help you. It’s quicker by taxi.”

“How do you know where I’m going?”

“Experience, Mama. I can just tell.”

Matrida gave him another whack before pulling her bundle out of the taxi and stalking off. She found Clara peering around the corner of a bus with that tinge of terror that now and then stained her features.

“Have you found the right bus?” demanded Matrida, still fuming from the episode she’d just had.

“I don’t know where we’re going.”

Matrida pushed past her, knocking her shoulder out of the way. Clara slammed into the bus but only let out a small whimper of pain. She hurried after her minder, avoiding eye contact with the commuters who were now beginning to fill the terminal. She had promised herself never to come to this place ever again. It brought back memories of her first experience of Hindpark. The jostling bodies made her feel claustrophobic and the screaming taxi boys frightened her. When she had first arrived here, they had packed one of her bags into a minibus taxi just like that boy had done with Matrida’s bundle. She had never got hers back because it had not been just one boy and she had not been able hold all her other bags and fight with all of them. She had not been keen on anybody getting too good a look at her either.

“Get in, get in,” said Matrida pushing her onto a bus that seemed about to leave. They found a seat for two and settled in for the ride. The bus moved forward and reversed; moved forward and reversed again. This went on for more than an hour and a half before the bus finally drove out of the terminal. They had driven for about twenty minutes when the driver called to them to get out.

“This is your stop.”

Matrida smiled graciously at him and thanked him profusely. They waited on the pavement and Matrida waved the bus driver good-bye as he drove away. She sighed and turned to Clara.

“Let’s find the house.”

Clara had a time-capsule moment. She felt like she’d been caught in a time-warp and found herself right where she’d started. The leafy suburbs.

“Look for No. 41.”

They walked to the end of the street.

“Do you see it?” There was a hint of excitement in Matrida’s question.

“No, the houses stop at No. 35.”

“Then it must be up there where we came from.”

“You can’t count like that.”

“You watch your mouth. I’ve been counting since before you were born.”

“Backwards?”

The older woman couldn’t tell whether this was a genuine question or whether the girl was mocking her, so she ignored it and said, “Well, the house is on Falcon Street.”

“This is Albatross Road.”

“The driver–.”

“Lied to you.”

Matrida pursed her lips. “Let’s find Falcon Street.”

They walked through the streets for another hour until they came to a small shopping complex. The older woman led the way into a copy shop where she intended to ask for directions. The three shop assistants took the pair’s appearance in and turned their backs on them.

“Excuse me,” Matrida called to the girls.

“Yes,” said one of the girls, her attention on the photocopying machine.

“We’re looking for a house where there’s a funeral.”

The girls tittered and spoke in what seemed to Matrida an unintelligible language before collapsing into giggles. An older man emerged from a door behind the machines and swept an admonishing look over the girls.

“May I help you, ma’am?”

“Falcon Street, please,” jumped in Clara before Matrida could repeat her question.

“That’s in Morningville. I’m afraid you’re lost. This is Morningside.”

“Can we walk there?”

“No, it’s too far. It’ll take you at least an hour.”

“That’s not long,” said Matrida, rejoining the conversation.

“No, no, ma’am,” the man protested coming around the counter. “I’ll give you a lift.”

As he ushered them out, Clara stole a look at the girls. They hid their giggles behind their manicured fingers. She knew girls like that. She'd gone to school with some of their kind.

The drive to Morningville was filled mainly by Matrída's complaints about how young people these days don't have strong legs. Her monologue was interspersed by their driver's polite concurring grunts, even when she said cars were for lazy people. By the time they reached No. 41 Falcon Street, there was no parking space left on it.

"This is exactly what I was talking about. This sort of problem wouldn't exist if people used their natural God-given means of transportation."

"Yes, ma'am. It's a curse disguised as a blessing," the driver agreed.

"Thank you Mr-?"

"Please, everybody calls me Wannabe."

Clara laughed. Matrída gave her a warning nudge.

"How much-?"

"Forget about it. It was my pleasure."

Matrída forced a tightly folded note into his hand anyway and tugged on Clara's sleeve, motioning her to follow. Clara raised a hand at the driver. They walked into the driveway, which was full of cars, and came to the front of the house where mourners spilled onto the veranda. Some people moved to make space for them to sit.

"Matrída, why are you late?"

She turned to find several of her neighbours among the group.

"There was a hired combi," one informed her. "Didn't Anabel tell you?"

"Where is she?" demanded an incensed Matrída.

"At the back."

Clara followed close behind not wanting to lose the shield that her guardian's familiarity provided. They found Anabel bending over a pot in the makeshift kitchen that had been constructed in the backyard to cater for the large number of people. When she saw them she burst into her wheezy laugh that brought on her hacking cough. One of the

women helping with the cooking pulled her away from the pot and put a lid on it. Anabel shot Clara a red eye.

“It’s that cursed girl she brought with her,” she rasped.

“Lemon, honey and ginger,” said Clara.

“What?”

“For your cough.”

“I think we should put Clara under proper witness protection.”

“Wanda, you can’t get any better protection than that woman.”

“Sir, the girl doesn’t feel safe.”

“Trust me, Matrida is danger-proof. A lot of people have tried to kill her before.”

“She’s hysterical and irresponsible.”

“She owns the girl now. Anyone who wants to get to her will have to pay.”

“I found her all alone yesterday.”

“Makes no difference. Ask my wife, she’s got the iron print to prove it.”

Wanda looked baffled.

“She got burned with an iron.”

“Er...um...what does Miss Moses have to do with it?... Sir?”

“She did it. She burned my wife with an iron.”

“Why?”

“She was trying to get to me.”

“Who?”

“My wife.” When he saw the confusion on Wanda’s face he explained, “Matrida was holding me hostage.”

Wanda straightened his notebook on the table and lined the pencil neatly beside it.

“What did you find out about the girl?”

“She saw shadows around Samson’s restaurant sometimes.”

The chair scratched the floor with a tooth-scraping squeak as Inspector Bedson rose from his chair. He planted his hands on the table and bent over the young officer.

“Wanda,” he whispered, “get me useful information.”

“She saw shadows of people, sir. Creeping around the restaurant in the dark.”

“Whose shadows?”

“She didn’t say.”

“That’s what I want to know,” said the Inspector, smacking the table.

Wanda left the Inspector’s office unsure of what he was going to do next. Some officers were in another office discussing the previous day’s raid. Clever’s voice could be heard through the corridors.

“Wizman got the wrong guy. Cuffed the victim’s best friend.” From the eruption of whoops that rang out, Wanda gathered that they all found this very amusing.

“What was Rabson doing in Samson’s restaurant?” Wanda interrupted their laughter.

“Checking to see what was missing, wise guy.”

“That’s not allowed.”

“Listen to this idiot. We were late!” This confession received a euphoric response.

“But you caught no one and you got no clues.”

“We know; we were there.”

“And you let your only suspect go.”

“He’s not a suspect, he made the call.”

“Why are you even paying any attention to this babysitter? Go play with your little friend.”

The office roared. Wanda decided that trying to have a sensible conversation with these officers was not a good excuse for procrastination and left.

In the deserted front office, a grey-looking MaBoy sat alone on a bench twisting and untwisting the straps of her handbag. A few bits of the thin leather fell onto the floor as the friction peeled it off its rough base. She looked as though she hadn’t eaten in days. Her lips were an ash grey and her normally young face onionskin-dry and lined with creases uncharacteristic of a woman her age. Wanda walked over to where she was and sat down next to her. Her bloodshot eyes flitted everywhere, focusing on nothing. Wanda couldn’t bear to look at the anguish on her face so he fixed his eyes on her hands. They were like borrowed hands, smooth and soft and in direct contrast to her face. The only indication that they belonged to the same body as her face was the abrasions caused by the straps cutting her skin as she wrapped them tightly around her hands.

“MaBoy, weren’t you helped last time?”

“They said they were going to deploy a search party.”

Her voice was so low that Wanda had to look at her face to hear what she was saying. He tried to speak but his tongue clung to his palate. He knew he couldn’t separate or redeem himself from any action taken by the police. It wouldn’t make any difference to her. To her, he *was* the police.

“The Inspector says I should come back tomorrow.”

Wanda could feel the prickle of sweat as it formed around his hairline. He swallowed hard and tried to think of something appropriate to say.

“I’ll organise a search party for you.” The words spilt out unsummoned.

“Thank you,” she said before he could take them back. She rose and left the office, leaving him with his words hanging over his head like an executioner’s axe. He stepped outside but could not bring himself to run after her and retrieve his promise. For once he was thankful for Inspector Bedson’s orders. He had something to do that could distract him from the burden that he had just laid on himself.

He took the shortest route to Matrida’s house, hoping Clara’s riddles would push MaBoy out of his mind. A game of rounders was in progress in the middle of the street. Wanda skirted its borders, puzzled at why the normally football-field-bound children were now allowed to play in the street. Matrida’s house looked deserted. Her usual vegetable wares had not been laid out. He went round to the back but there was not even one item of brown cloth on the clothesline to show any sign of life on the premises. Back on the street, he found the boy from the tuck-shop sitting in the dirt on the side of the road watching the game and hurling insults at the children for amusement.

“It’s the arm of the law,” he quipped when he saw Wanda amble towards him.

“Any idea where I can find Miss Moses?”

The boy grinned wider, got up and began to dust the seat of his grey shorts.

“Why?”

“Police business.”

“Strange how you always conduct it here and not at the police station.”

“Where are they?”

“Where everybody is. Samson’s wake.”

Wanda took his cap off and wiped his brow. It now made sense why the children were playing in the street.

“Just to warn you. It’s bad luck to carry out police business at a person’s wake.” The boy broke into a snorting laugh.

Wanda’s eyes glazed over and wandered to where the boys were playing. The glaze immediately faded and he straightened up. He looked over at the boy.

“You know Boy?”

“Do I know what?”

“Boy, the missing kid?”

“That snot-nosed brat? Serves him right.”

“His mother’s looking for him.”

“She’s gonna be looking for a long time.”

“What do you know about it?”

“Nothing.”

“Then how do you know how long his mother is going to be looking for him?”

“I don’t.”

“If you know something about it, you better say it now.”

“Or what?”

Wanda could see that antagonising the boy wouldn’t get him anywhere.

“What’s your name?”

“Who wants to know?”

“Wanda,” he said holding out his hand.

“Jimbo,” said the boy, flexing his biceps and posing like a body builder in a contest.

Wanda let his unshaken hand drop.

“I need you to help me find the boy.”

Jimbo whooped and kicked some dust. A spray landed on Wanda’s left shoe and trouser hem. Wanda pretended not to see it.

“Jimbo works for nobody,” the boy announced to the world around him.

“You get to be the leader of the search party.”

That arrested the boy in mid-hop.

“I get to lead police officers?”

Wanda gulped.

“In a way, yes. But the search party will consist of children from the township.”

“Anybody in this entire neighbourhood, I could tell them to bark and they would.”

For the second time that day, Wanda began to regret his decision.

“Matter of fact, if you want to know how your woman here stays safe, it’s because of me.”

Wanda wondered exactly what that meant. But he knew there was no taking back words with Jimbo. He was like a rabid dog; ready to attack without any apparent provocation.

“Well, I’ll be counting on your strong leadership.”

As he walked away, his head heavy on his shoulders, he heard Jimbo call out to the children, “Hey, attention, Captain Jimbo speaking.” He picked up speed, not wanting to find out what terror he may have unleashed on those children.

Clara huddled on one end of the small veranda at the back of the house. The mood was less sombre here. Everyone was preoccupied with cooking or pretending to do so, while the wailing inside the house rose and fell at intervals. Anabel sat on the opposite end, now and then glaring at Clara and mumbling to herself. She’d been banned from approaching any pots or other cooking utensils. And, since she’d been at the wake since the night before, she could not go and join the mourners as she’d used up all her tears. As far as everybody knew, she cared for no one, dead or alive.

Clara wanted to block everything out and not remember. She didn’t want to remember how the women liked to cook and gossip. How most of them didn’t really care much about the person who had died. How some of them hadn’t had meat in a long time. How this was a feast for them. She reached into the depths of her pocket and fished out a tightly folded piece of paper and pencil stub. She smoothed out the paper over her leg and concentrated on it.

“What are you doing?” Anabel wheezed.

“Crossword puzzle.”

“Is that how you work out your magic?”

“It’s not magic, it’s a puzzle.”

“What does it tell you?”

“Words.”

“What for?”

“Just to learn.”

“Where do you come from?”

“Where do *you* come from?”

“I’m asking you, you arrogant elf. You’ve no family here.”

“Neither do you.”

Anabel sucked her teeth and looked away. Clara bent over her paper and stared at it for about five minutes.

“Harridan!”

“What?”

“The word I’ve been looking for. Eight down.”

Anabel glared. Clara smiled.

“Done.”

She re-folded the paper and put it back in her pocket. Anabel’s coughing started again.

“Lemon–,” Clara began but stopped, not so much because Anabel turned and wagged a finger at her, but more because the old woman’s uncovered mouth spewed invisible germs at her. She turned her back to the woman and watched the dogs lying under a lemon tree to which they were tied. She’d once had a cocker spaniel. Brown, droopy ears, lazy as a sloth, but warm and cuddly. Her father had said that the dog drained his pockets. He had died mysteriously. The dog. She turned to Anabel.

“So where do you come from, Miss Anabel?”

“It’s a secret. Just like your home. Maybe we come from the same place.”

Clara got up and went over to Matrida.

“I want to go home.”

“We go when everybody else goes.”

Clara strolled around the corner, past the mourners on the front yard, past the cars in the driveway and into the street.

Wanda spent the whole morning dodging the Inspector. He couldn't tell him again that he had not been able to extract any information from the girl. Contrary to what Jimbo had said, the Inspector would expect him to conduct police business at someone's wake. He was sitting in the junior officers' common room, where the Inspector rarely set his superior foot, when he saw, through the window, Jimbo making his way to the police station. No one at the office had knowledge of the arrangement he had made with Jimbo. He had to intercept him before he could speak to any of the officers. The windows had heavy wire meshes to keep out burglars who were not uncommon at this police station. He did not want to shout for Jimbo's attention, but he couldn't stick out his hand and wave either. He sprinted to the front office and peered in. The Inspector was on the phone loudly discussing what he wanted for lunch with his wife. Wanda didn't just want the Inspector not to see him; he did not want the Inspector to see him talking to Jimbo. Inspector Bedson was known to throw people like Jimbo in jail for reasons apparent only to himself. He sauntered into the office, nonchalantly removed a form from a clipboard and went out through the front door.

"Wanda."

The young officer willed himself not to freeze and turned around to face his superior.

"Yes, sir?"

"Get me a meat pie while you're out there. Can you believe my wife is making okra for lunch?"

"Yes, sir. I mean, no, sir."

"What?"

"I'll get one from Chester's. He makes very good meat pies."

He met Jimbo just as the boy turned into the path leading to the front door and signalled for him to turn around and follow him. They turned quickly around the hedge and into the nearest street leading away from the police station.

"Do I have to sign a form?"

“No.”

Wanda folded the form and put it in his breast pocket.

“Where are we going?” Jimbo wanted to know.

“Here.”

They stopped underneath a shady gum tree.

“What did you find out?”

“The boy is at Rabson’s house.”

Wanda caught his breath.

“How did you find out?”

“Kenzo says Rabson invited him to his house for fish and chips last night and he saw Boy in the spare room.”

“Jimbo, I want real facts, not some story one greedy little twit made up in his dreams.”

“I went and took a look this morning when he and his wife had left for the shop.”

“Did you see him?”

“No, but I called and he answered.”

Dizziness threatened to topple Wanda over. He could feel his shirt sticking to his back.

“Don’t tell anyone.”

“Ha-a-a Wanda, people need to know.”

“This is a police case. If anyone finds out before we do a proper investigation, you will be the number one suspect.”

“No one would dare accuse me of anything.”

“How many people like you?”

“Everybody.”

Wanda held Jimbo’s gaze until he felt he had communicated the severity of the case to him.

“Just keep it to yourself.”

“You can’t even do your job,” was Jimbo’s parting shot as he swaggered away. “None of you hotshots can hold anything against me.”

But Wanda knew he had driven his point home.

It was past noon when Matrída stumbled into her house; her lips parched a dusty grey from a morning spent on an empty stomach scouring last night's sooty pots, accompanying the funeral procession to Samson's final resting place, and worrying about Clara's whereabouts. She found Clara sprawled on a mat with just half a leg covered by the blanket that she had thrown off in her sleep.

"I swear on my own grave!"

Clara gave a small whimper, kicked the rest of the blanket off and flipped onto her back.

"The whole night. The whole morning. Worrying and fearing for your safety, and here you are."

Clara stretched like a lazy cat basking in the sun and curled into a foetal position, oblivious to her guardian's heavy presence bearing down on her. Matrída tossed the dish she'd used to carry her maize flour contribution to Samson's wake into a wicker basket where it landed with a loud clang on top of her collection of mismatched cutlery. Clara unfurled like a millipede in reverse reflex and sat up, arms flailing about, brushing aside long gone darkness. Catching sight of Matrída, she jumped up and began to fold her blanket.

"What's the meaning of this?"

Clara kept her focus on the blanket and relied on her peripheral vision to gauge Matrída's potential to strike.

"The only reason you are here is because I am the only person in this entire township who found it in her heart to show you any kindness."

Clara grabbed one end of the mat, rolled it a few times then, with one shove, sent it rolling itself up to its other end.

"You're abusing the only person in this whole town who cares what happens to you."

"I had to leave."

"What important business did you have to attend to?"

"I didn't like it there."

"You're not supposed to like it when someone dies."

“Yes.”

Matrida waited.

“Yes what?”

“Yes you’re not supposed to like it when someone dies.”

“That’s what I said.”

“Then why did we have to go?”

“Everyone goes.”

“Only Samson’s folk should’ve been there. At least some of them genuinely cared about him.”

Just when Clara thought she had blunted Matrida’s urge to hit her, her guardian grabbed her by the ear and twisted. The sudden shot of pain sent Clara staggering backwards into the wall.

“We are Africans – that’s what we do,” Matrida admonished.

“Pinch?” inquired Clara, cupping her ear protectively and to ease the pain.

“Go to funerals, you incurable rash,” shouted the older woman, throwing a backhanded slap which barely missed her ducking ward. Then she recoiled with a shriek, her face a mask of fright. Clara feared a piece of her ear had come off. She brought her hand down expecting to see blood, but only saw traces of soot from her attempt to cook on a wood fire the night before, when she couldn’t find Matrida’s paraffin store.

“What’s wrong with you modern children?”

Clara raised her puzzled gaze to find Matrida addressing the doorway.

“You can’t sneak up on people.”

“I’m sorry ma’am. I didn’t mean to frighten you,” said Wanda, retreating to a safer distance.

“Then you should’ve announced your presence long before you got to the door. That’s the African way.”

Wanda gave her a baffled look.

“What?”

“I just need to ask Clara a few questions.”

“Hasn’t she told you enough already?”

“Investigations are not complete, ma’am.”

“Work avoidance behaviour. That’s all you lot are good at.”

Wanda moved further back as Matrida stepped out and headed for the bathroom. He waited for her to round the corner of the brick structure then stepped forward and peered into the house. Clara sat on the floor just inside the door, her knees drawn up to her chin. The way she looked at him gave away no sign of recognition. He half lifted a hand to her in greeting. She looked away and trained her eyes on a large black ant that was pushing a grain of sugar towards the front door. The closer to the door it got, the more she leaned forward. He felt an odd sense of surprise when the ant exited under the door without any further reaction from her. He’d half expected her to get up and open the door for it. Instead, she turned away and settled her cheek on her knees and wrapped her arms tightly around her legs.

“Um, can I ask you a few questions?” he addressed the back of her head. She didn’t turn to face him or react to the sound of his voice. He tried again, “There’ve been some developments. I want you to tell me more about the creeping shadows.”

“The third time they came they weren’t creeping.” Her voice came from somewhere hollow and distant.

“How many times did they come?”

“Just three.”

“How many were they?”

“I saw two shadows.”

“What happened the third time?”

“There was a scream – like a hen. When you slit the neck.”

“A scream?” his question conveyed confusion.

“Yes. And that was the end of it.”

“Who screamed?”

“My mother.” Her head came up suddenly and she looked at him, eyes wide with a wild excitement. “Have you ever killed a hen?”

Wanda felt numb. He tried to speak but managed only an unintelligible stammer. A loud bang just to his right forced a yelp from him as if to help him recover his speech. Matrida had just dropped her metal bathtub against the wall to dry.

“Young man, who raised you? Standing in the doorway like a thief.” She pushed him aside and stepped into the house. Her hand flew to her mouth in genuine horror. “And you. You haven’t moved! Sort those blankets immediately and, for goodness sake, take a bath.” She vanished behind the curtain and began to sing “Lord, make me an instrument of your peace”.

When Clara emerged from the house, Wanda was still standing outside, a distance away from the door where Matrida wouldn’t see him.

“The Inspector wants to know who you saw creeping around the restaurant,” he pleaded in a stage whisper.

Clara stopped and squinted at him as though only just registering his presence. She raised a hand to shield her eyes from the sun that seemed to be relentlessly holding on to its midday position. She took a while to respond, the perplexed look on her face giving the impression of someone struggling to make sense of her reality.

“What?” she said finally, just when Wanda was beginning to think that she might still be in that secret world that she so often lapsed into without any warning.

“Um,” he began, “maybe I can come and talk to you later, you know, after your bath?” He gestured towards the bathtub.

“About what?”

Wanda quickly reversed his jaw-drop.

“Samson’s murder.”

“Oh. Samson.” Her eyes dropped and a genuine forlornness washed over her features. After a moment of silence she raised brimming eyes from the ground and said, “Yes, I think we should talk about him,” then picked up the tub and vanished into the bathroom. Wanda was caught between waiting for her and going back to the station. Whichever he chose, he would have to come up with a good explanation for being there. He decided to stay, but there was nowhere to sit, unless he asked Matrida for her crate. That wasn’t an option. An idea a while away the time occurred to him. He wondered whether Boy had been rescued following his report on the child’s kidnapping and decided to go and find out from Jimbo who seemed clued up on the township’s goings on. As he walked down the walkway to the road, he heard Matrida hit the high note on “Oh, divine master” and

involuntarily recoiled at the thought of how that energy could have been exercised on him had he chosen to interrupt her to ask if he could borrow her crate.

Jimbo didn't appear to be in his tuck-shop. Wanda thought he would walk over anyway and stick his head under the ramshackle roof just to get out of the sun for a few minutes. But, when he leaned on the counter, there was Jimbo, bent so low in his chair his chest rested on his lap. He was in the process of cutting up raw cassava with a rusty and uneven homemade knife into a water-filled, once-transparent pink plastic basin.

"Hey," Wanda greeted, his voice faint, weakened by the draining heat.

Jimbo jerked and fell over sideways, toppling the basin and hitting the shack so hard it leaned over a few degrees lower. The boy was on his feet and over the counter in a flash wielding the crooked but clearly sharp knife. He lunged at Wanda, grabbed him by the collar, eyes bulging and mouth snarling into the young officer's panic-stricken but apologetic face.

"I'm-I'm-sorry," stammered Wanda, trying to prise Jimbo's damp and grubby hands off his neat uniform collar.

"Sorry?" Jimbo yelled in his face releasing him. "From day one, you have been looking for an excuse to destroy my business," he added, jabbing the air immediately in front of Wanda's face. Wanda took a step back with each jab until they were standing in the middle of the road. A car came careering towards them at a speed unfit for either the state of the road or the car. They jumped out of the way, just avoiding its impact, but not the dust that mushroomed in its wake. Momentarily forgetting about Wanda, Jimbo sprinted after the car, screaming curses at the devil-may-care driver. He came to a halt about twenty metres on, half the distance the car was from him, shaking his knife at it, his voice lost in the fading din of the car's rev.

Wanda ignored the boy's antics and inspected the damage to the tuck-shop instead.

"What are you still doing here?"

Wanda turned to Jimbo who was marching towards him, a storm still raging on his face.

"I could bring you a few poles on Saturday and we could fix this thing easy."

“I can’t wait till Saturday,” Jimbo shot back, but his features were already relaxing.

His look turned to suspicion. “What do you want?”

“Have the police been around to get Boy from Rabson?”

Jimbo clicked his tongue and looked Wanda up and down a couple of times before swinging over the counter into his shop.

“Who is the police officer here, me or you?”

“I just thought being here, you might have seen or heard something.”

“Well, if you know nothing, neither do I.”

Wanda wanted to study Jimbo’s face, hoping to read what he meant, but the boy was busy picking up the cassava pieces and putting them back in the pink basin.

“Why did you cut those like that?”

“I’m starting a chips business.”

“With cassava?”

“Who’s gonna know the difference?” Jimbo replied, then looking pointedly at Wanda added, “Who’s gonna tell?”

“Why did you bring it out here to cut? Where are you going to make the chips?”

Jimbo nodded in the direction of the corner. Wanda saw for the first time a contraption like a hollowed tray on stands. Underneath the tray was a space presumably for burning wood or coal to fry the chips. Wanda contemplated the frying pan, the cooking oil in the filthy bottles lining the counter then the cassava chips Jimbo was now rinsing in none-too-clean water, and willed himself not to imagine the end product.

“Isn’t that dangerous? Won’t you burn the shack?”

“Don’t you have work to do?” Jimbo responded, not looking up.

Wanda let his arm slide off the counter, put his cap on and headed for Rabson’s house.

“And it’s not a shack,” Jimbo called after him.

He waved the boy’s comments away and concentrated on dodging the potholes, wishing someone would plant a tree along the road to offer some respite from the scorching blaze. A gum tree on a corner further down the road egged him on, pulling him towards its shade. But when he got to it, he found its canopy too sparse and the shade straight down the narrow tree under the overhead sun. He stopped and leaned against the stem, the low dry grey leaves making a scraping sound against the rim of his cap. The

heat only felt more concentrated now that he was standing still, so he abandoned that plan and moved on. He turned left into Rabson's street and began scanning the house numbers. They made no sense. The first house was 13/1807. *Must be one of those complicated zoning systems the municipality is always devising to show off their lack of common sense*, he thought, annoyed. Rabson's was 13/1815, across the road from the side he was walking on. He pushed through the low wire gate but before he could go any further, Matrida's bossy voice intruded into his thoughts and he stopped.

"Hello," he called out. A woman with a doek riding low over her eyes and only halfway down the back of her head peered through a window from the next house.

"No, I'm looking for people in this house," he apologised.

The woman made a disapproving face. "So why don't you knock? The whole neighbourhood doesn't need to know you're here."

She had retreated into her house before he could think of a sensible explanation. He walked over to the front door and knocked. No sound came from inside. He went around the house, past the concrete blocks that captured the internal drainage system.

"Hello," he called again.

"Hi," a tiny voice answered.

He quickened his step, calling out and following the direction of the small responding voice. It was a big house by Hindpark's standards, long because it could not be extended sideways without invading the neighbours' yards. He rounded the corner to the back and the little voice said "Hi" almost in his ear. He turned to find Boy peering at him through a window, running his tongue along the bottom frame.

"Are you a policeman?"

"Yes, I've come to take you to your mother," said Wanda, thrusting his head through the window and inspecting the room.

"I've got my own TV," boasted the four-year-old, jumping off the bed and running to the large screen TV on which he placed a possessive hand.

"Where's Mr Rabson?"

"Work." The child studied Wanda as he mulled over the situation. "He says the police are useless."

"Your mother is worried about you."

The little boy's eyes brightened. "Have you seen her? Is she coming to see me?"

"You're not supposed to be here."

"Mr Rabson said tomorrow we're going to see elephants at the zoo."

"Did you tell your mother you were coming to visit Mr Rabson?"

"No. He said mummy wanted me to have fish and chips."

"Didn't your mummy tell you anything about not taking off with strangers?"

Boy's little mouth twisted into an indignant pout. "Mr Rabson is not a stranger," he said defensively.

"Well, he's not allowed to keep you here without your mother's permission."

Boy put on a sulky face and lowered his tongue to the window frame.

"Don't lick that."

The little boy stuck his tongue out further and took a great big lick across the frame, which left a paint-speckled dusty smudge on his pink tongue.

"Can you come out?"

"The door is locked," said the boy, sucking on the dust on his tongue.

"Then I have to pull you out through the window."

"No!" the boy resisted, moving away from the window.

Surprised by the boy's reaction, Wanda held back.

"Don't you want to see your mother?"

"Mr Rabson said she'll come and see me here," he replied in a stubborn whine.

"If you come with me now I'll take you to your mother right away."

"What about the zoo? I want to see elephants." The little boy's voice was defiant, almost accusatory.

"I'm sure when you tell your mother about it she'll take you there."

"She says she doesn't have money to take me."

Wanda had no training in dealing with stubborn children. He wanted to tell the child that he'd been stolen and that Rabson was not going to take him to the zoo, but would put him in a sack, take him to the bushes, cut him up into tiny little pieces and sell his blood as red wine. The way his mother used to frighten him when he was little. Exasperated, he settled for a lie of his own.

"I'll give you the money."

The child's face lit up once more and he climbed back on the bed and stretched his arms out to Wanda to lift him out.

"Will you come too?" he asked his newfound friend with a show of sincerity that was as instant as his temper.

"Yes," Wanda managed weakly as he carried the little boy out of the yard as quickly as he could without looking suspicious. As he passed the next house, the woman with the doek was in her front yard beating dust out of a doormat on a patch of lawn. She straightened up and took in the pair with a baffled expression.

"Whose child is that?"

Wanda shifted the weight of the child in his arms, tipped his cap and bade the woman a good afternoon.

A spectacle of seven police cars and a small army of police officers armed to the hilt greeted Wanda and Boy when they emerged from the cluster of houses closest to the police station. A terror-stricken Boy tightened his tiny arms around Wanda's neck. In their bustle of activity, no one noticed Wanda until he was in the office.

"What's going on?" he asked the officer on duty in the charge office.

"Search party for the missing boy."

"All these people?"

"It's a big case."

Just then, Inspector Bedson strode into the office, business-like and ready for the mission at hand.

"Wanda, why aren't you ready like everybody else?"

"Sir-."

"Put that child down and find a car to squeeze your incompetent self into," the Inspector cut him off. Then, as an afterthought he added, "And I have said time and time again, that this is a place of work, not a crèche – no babysitting is allowed here."

"Sir," Wanda hurried after Bedson. "Inspector, this is Boy."

"Boy, girl, he's still a child and no children should be brought to work."

"The missing boy sir."

The Inspector swivelled around and began wagging an authoritarian finger at him.

“Wanda,” he barked and then his next words seemed to catch in his throat.

A sense of foreboding descended upon Wanda.

“Sir, we’re ready to move,” Wizman called from the leading car.

Inspector Bedson did not turn to acknowledge him – just raised a hand to halt any action.

“What do you mean ‘the missing boy’?”

Wanda estimated the distance between him and the Inspector before answering.

“MaBoy’s son, sir.” When he got no response except for a glower, he added, faltering, almost questioning, “Boy, sir?”

“Where did you find him?”

“Rabson’s house.”

The Inspector gave him the thousand yard stare, as if he was speaking a strange language, gibberish possibly.

“I went to inspect if anything had been done about the kidnapping and when I found Boy still there, all alone, I decided to take him with me,” Wanda continued.

“Uh-huh. *You* went to inspect?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And that’s *your* job?”

Wanda fumbled for words.

“Is this staged? Did you make up this kidnapping story so you could become some sort of township hero?”

“But sir, you know Boy has been missing for days.”

Bedson turned to the waiting contingent. “Put the cars away and get back to normal duty.” He pushed Wanda, who was already out of his way, aside and marched inside. Boy began to wail, a sound that cut through the heavy weight of disappointment that had fallen over the policemen at hearing about the cancellation of this rare and exciting part of their job.

“It’s wet blanket wonderboy. Trust him to screw up an entire operation,” someone grumbled.

“What have you done now?” asked an annoyed Victor who was striding over to where Wanda still stood hushing the crying child.

“The operation doesn’t have to stop entirely, you know,” said a defensive Wanda. “You can still go and gather evidence.”

“It’s your show now Mr One-Man-Act,” said another officer, slapping him on the back and vanishing into the building.

“What was I supposed to do? Just leave the child there?” Wanda called to no one in particular. He followed the others into the office. Chances were slim that he would be allowed a car to drive Boy to his mother. He summoned as much courage as he could and knocked on the Inspector’s open door.

“Sir, if you’re worried that we may not be able to pin anything on Rabson, I have witnesses.”

“Of course you have. You always do. A girl teetering on the brink of insanity and a boy whose idea of social responsibility is feeding pestkill to the neighbour’s dog.”

“We can still go and gather evidence.”

“Which you planted.”

“No sir!”

“Wanda, you entered private property without a search warrant. No one is going to believe you.”

“The child can testify.”

“Who’s going to take a four-year-old seriously?”

“I had fish and chips and TV,” Boy piped up out of the blue.

A moment of distracted silence followed.

“None of this will stand up in court. It all sounds suspicious. Start again.”

Wanda suppressed a sigh of exasperation.

“I need a car to take the child home, sir.”

The Inspector perched thick-rimmed glasses on his nose and shuffled some papers on his desk. “As long we have no evidence that he’d been kidnapped, he is not in our hands and we can’t do anything for him,” he said without looking up.

Wanda backed out of the office not bothering with his usual obligatory, “Thank you, sir.” Once outside, he suddenly felt the weight of the little boy begin to weigh him down.

He lowered the child to the ground. "We have to walk, buddy. Can you show me where you live?"

"Have you forgotten already?" asked an incredulous Boy.

"No, show me where *your mother* lives."

Boy nodded and took Wanda's hand.

"Is my mummy going to give me fish and chips?"

"Yes."

EIGHT

They found Boy's father lying on the ground in the shade of a tree. He wore a white mesh vest and brown shiny trousers with red suspenders. Brown leather sandals lay next to his feet which glistened with liberally applied oil. His face was hidden under the mask of a large straw hat. Boy made no move to approach his father. Instead, he tightened his grip on Wanda's hand and moved a little behind him.

"Hallo there," Wanda said in greeting.

The man propped his body up on one elbow and removed the hat from his face in one motion. He squinted at the pair, then opened his eyes wider to stare long and hard at his son. He lay back on the ground and resumed his former position.

"Clara, your son is back," he bellowed through the hat.

Wanda's head jerked up and swivelled towards the blindingly varnished rich brown door of the pretty brick house. The door was yanked open from inside and MaBoy bolted through it as if she had fire on her tail. Almost slipping on the shiny floor of the veranda, she skipped over her plastic shoes on the doormat and sprang barefoot at Boy whom she scooped up and cradled so tightly to her chest that he began to struggle to turn his head for some air. She made little jogging movements, rocked him and whimpered, although no tears came to her emotionally spent eyes. Wanda removed his cap and shifted it from hand to hand, now and then making a gesture to say something, but MaBoy was clearly oblivious to anything or anyone around her.

"Hey, you found your Boy?" said a neighbour walking over, exhibiting obvious relief for MaBoy.

Boy's father got up all of a sudden. Holding his straw hat to his chest, he scowled at the small congregation before him. Were it not for his furrowed forehead, he could have been a servile peasant deferring to his landlord.

"Woman, why are you all over that child like it's the first time you're seeing him?"

MaBoy gasped and the neighbour drew back her arm which had been stretched to embrace Boy.

"Well, now you're staring at me like you've never seen *me* before."

The neighbour straightened her blouse, parted her lips to say something but seemed to decide against it and went back to her house.

"Put that child down. I've been waiting two hours for my lunch."

MaBoy stood her ground and pulled her son closer to her chest.

"I say, Clara, put that child down!"

Wanda found his head snapping up again at the mention of her name. She made her way to the house, the child still cradled in her arms. She stepped on to the polished veranda leaving a distinct dusty trail of her footprints as she walked into the house.

"How many times do I have to tell you to wipe your feet before you go into the house?" Boy's father shouted after her.

As Wanda shuffled from one foot to the other, unsure of how to excuse himself, MaBoy re-emerged still cradling Boy close to her chest.

"Can we invite you to lunch with us?"

There was a hint of a plea in her voice. Her husband swivelled towards Wanda. The threatening look in his eye dared Wanda to accept. But before he could decline, MaBoy said, a little too quickly, "There's enough for all of us."

Wanda considered her husband's silent but pointed warning. His conscience told him that if he declined it would somehow be a betrayal of MaBoy, an abandonment. Then there was his curiosity – that thing which often gave people a false sense of bravery. Something about this family did not feel right to him.

"Yes, I'm actually very hungry, thank you."

Avoiding eye contact with the menacing eyes following him, he took care to remove his shoes before stepping onto the veranda and followed MaBoy into the house.

"I'll have my lunch out here," a clearly annoyed voice called after them.

The house was spotlessly clean. Wanda could see his reflection on almost every surface. He looked to MaBoy to see if she'd noticed the damp prints his feet were leaving behind on the gleaming floor. The front room was the combined living and dining room and, although the furniture looked a little cramped in the small space, everything was neatly arranged and clean. They went through a door on the right and into the kitchen. Wanda guessed that the door on the left led into the only bedroom. He thought that the kitchen was too well equipped for the average kitchen in this township. A washing machine, still considered an item of vanity and a symbol of idleness in these parts, took up so much space that a cupboard now blocked about a third of the doorway leading to the backyard. A kitchen table that would have looked pretty in a more spacious kitchen left very little room to manoeuvre though edged almost against the washing machine and refrigerator.

"Sit," said MaBoy to Wanda, nodding to a chair and for the first time releasing Boy and setting him on another chair. Wanda sank into the chair with care, not touching it with his hands. Everything looked to him as though it wasn't meant to be touched. MaBoy squeezed between his chair and the sink. She opened the fridge door and pulled it back until it touched the table and took out a bottle of milk. She filled a tumbler and gave it to Boy who promptly raised it to his lips, coming up for air only when he had drained it. Wanda watched MaBoy pop a plate heaped with already steaming food into a microwave and wondered where a man who was at home on a Thursday afternoon lounging under a tree got the money to afford all these luxuries. MaBoy took the scalding meal out to her husband. She was gone for longer than it should have taken just to deliver a plate. When she came back, Wanda noticed that she repeatedly stopped dishing out the meal to rub her wrist.

"Will you say grace?" she asked Wanda when they were all sitting at the table each with a plate of food and a glass of orange juice in front of them. He balked at the request. The only prayers he knew were the Lord's Prayer and the Apostles' Creed which he'd learnt at Sunday School a long time back. He started to protest but MaBoy and her son were already in an attitude of prayer, their eyes closed and fingers interlaced.

"Er...um...Lord," he paused then rapidly added, "bless our food. Amen."

Boy started to giggle but his mother shushed him.

“Thank you, officer.”

“I’m Wanda.”

“This is my mummy,” Boy said proudly, pointing a stubby finger at his mother.

“Thank you for bringing him home.”

“It’s my job, ma’am.”

“I thought I’d lost him.”

Wanda couldn’t hold back his curiosity any longer.

“Your husband, is he as happy?”

MaBoy kept her eyes on her plate.

“Given? Of course. It’s his son.”

“Given what?”

“Given. That’s his name.”

“Oh.” Wanda fished around his brain for something to say to dispel his embarrassment.

“I noticed that he called you Clara. I have a...a...uh...friend with the same name.”

“Yes. That Clara. I know her.”

“You do?”

“Well, I’ve heard of her.”

Wanda thought this could be his chance to get some enlightenment on the girl who seemed to baffle him more every time he spoke to her.

“What have you heard?”

MaBoy shook her head. “Nothing of consequence,” she said and shovelled a spoonful into her mouth as if that would prevent Wanda from asking any more questions. He got the point and did not pursue that subject any further. Still, she kept on shoving food into her mouth until her plate was empty. She turned to her son.

“Time for a bath. Go wait for me in the bathroom.”

Boy took one last sip of his juice and exited through the back door onto the veranda and through a door on the right.

“Look,” said MaBoy as soon as he was out of earshot. “There’s something I have to tell you.”

Wanda reached for his notebook and pen.

“No, no, no. I’m not giving you an official statement.”

“If it’s a matter that will concern the police then I have to write it down.”

“Please don’t. Given will kill me if he finds out that I’ve been telling you anything.”

“Is that why you keep rubbing your wrist? A warning?”

She nodded then began to talk hastily in a lowered voice.

“I think – no, I know that my husband was involved in the murder of Samson. He always said he had a score to settle with him. The two of them had planned to open a restaurant together but Given couldn’t come up with his half of the capital so Samson went ahead with the project on his own. Given felt betrayed and believed that Samson owed him a share for having contributed to the idea. Samson wouldn’t budge so Given decided that if he couldn’t gain from the restaurant, then neither could Samson. So, I think he made a deal with Rabson to help him get rid of Samson and promised him Boy as his payment.”

Wanda stared at MaBoy, unable to think of the right response. He could think of nothing else to say except, “Why would he trade his own child?”

“Rabson and his wife are childless: and my husband is a sick man.”

“What’s Rabson’s excuse?”

“Greed, jealousy because Samson’s business was pulling a bigger profit than his–”

A shuffle in the front room interrupted her. She quickly got up and gathered their plates.

“Take care of that Clara girl,” she managed to whisper as she edged around him to put the dishes in the sink just as Given entered the kitchen. Wanda’s eyes moved from MaBoy’s face to her husband’s and he knew immediately that Given was aware of the charade. He may not have heard anything, but it was clear he could sense there had been some communication.

“Where’s my boy?” he asked with an exaggerated cheerfulness.

MaBoy dropped the dishes in the sink and turned too quickly, banging her hip on a corner of the backrest of the chair Wanda was sitting in.

“I’m giving him a bath.” She dashed past Given and into the bathroom outside. They heard the door bang and a key turn. Given planted himself in the middle of the small area of the kitchen that wasn’t covered, arms akimbo, leaving the young officer almost no

space to escape. Had he spoken out loud, he couldn't have made it clearer to Wanda that he was an intruder on his territory. Wanda got up hoping to feel less hemmed in. He picked up his cap from the table and gestured to the man of the house to let him pass.

"I have to get back to work."

"What's the rush? I thought you and my wife were just getting cosy?"

"My job here is done, sir."

Given did not respond but the look on his face plainly said, *Don't cross me*. After a pause that felt to Wanda as though it would stretch forever, Given stepped aside and Wanda edged through the small space into the living room. Just before he let himself out, Given shot one final remark at him.

"An eye for an eye. I take the laws of the Good Book very seriously."

Wanda hesitated but then decided that a show of weakness would be the greater evil.

"Well, personally, I find its contradictions a bit...thought-provoking sometimes."

Given glared. Wanda thought it best not to wait for a comeback and closed the door behind him.

NINE

Somebody called Miriam was getting married. That was about all Clara knew about this wedding. Matrída had come home late last night fuming because she had been passed over for the role of lady-in-waiting and vowed she would boycott the wedding. That was the first Clara had heard of it. She was sitting in a pew near the back of the church where she could watch everybody and, she hoped, no one would notice her. Matrída had insisted that they come early and then vanished as soon they got there. The church was slow in filling up. Coming early had meant getting there right on time, when the bride should have been arriving. But the groom was not even there yet. Clara flipped open the cover of the Bible on her lap and saw there on the plain first page was a surprisingly intelligent scrawl: *Matrída Moses. I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Psalm 139:14*. Her peripheral vision caught a movement coming towards her. She looked up. A man holding a straw hat was coming to her with a smile that crinkled the corners of his eyes but did not reach them.

“The wedding party is late, eh?” he said sitting down beside her.

“I think men are supposed to sit on that side of the aisle,” Clara whispered, pointing.

He forced a laugh that made her cringe because it reverberated through the church.

“I think they should show us the written rule that says men and women should sit separately because I’ve never seen it. Don’t you think?”

Clara didn’t know what to think. A woman walked in with a small boy and sat in the pew in front of them, right next to the aisle. She threw a quick glance at them over her shoulder and Clara thought she looked panicked.

“Do you know that my wife’s name is also Clara?”

Clara blinked. The child was staring at them, his lips not quite over the top of the backrest. His tongue began to creep out slowly but his mother turned him around before he could lick the wood. An usher tapped the man on the shoulder. He jerked away as though a burning ember had been dropped on his shoulder, causing him to slide uncomfortably closer to Clara. She caught his ashy odour and thought he smelled like he’d slept in one of those kitchens her grandmother had. Mud hut, grass-thatched, wood fire. She’d slept in one once. Her father had said she had to sleep where all the other girls slept. She hadn’t been able to sleep. It had been too dark and the smell of smoke, soot and ash had clogged her lungs. The heat had nearly melted her while her mother lay in the living room of the brick main house. Freezing. Surrounded by staring vacant eyes. Waiting to be consigned to the depths of the earth.

“Bring the pastor here and let him explain to me why I can’t sit where I want to,” the man was saying.

“Sir, those are church rules and everyone understands them,” the usher said.

“I don’t.”

“Clara!” The voice echoed in the almost empty church. Clara looked up, startled, while the woman in the next pew jumped up, just as startled.

“Come out here this minute,” Matrida ordered.

The young mother straightened her skirt and sat down. Clara slid past the man, avoiding any contact, even with her dress, and followed Matrida outside.

“What do you think you’re doing?”

“Waiting for the ceremony to start,” Clara retorted.

Matrida shrunk back. She'd never heard Clara use that tone of voice before.

"Well," she said after studying Clara's face, "just don't do anything to embarrass me – especially with strange men in church."

When the wedding procession finally arrived, the ceremony took two and a half hours. Clara fidgeted on the hard bench in the now packed church. Miriam was marrying Moses. That did not sound right to Clara and she spent the entire church ceremony trying to figure out why, if not to get rid of the nagging thought, to while away time. Escaping was out of the question. When Matrida had finally let her go back into the church, her original seat had been occupied and the only available spaces had been in the front pews. An usher had propelled her into a pew just behind the bridal party and two pews away from the altar. After what felt like an eternity, the pastor ceased his droning, took the couple through their vows and then they all sang the last hymn. The merry celebration suited for a wedding started when the wedding party began to file out and ululations erupted through the church. These were, however, soon silenced by some oversensitive and rule-bound deacons who insisted that ululation was inappropriate in the house of the Lord. Grumbles rumbled through the congregation and people began to shove and jostle to get the wedding party outside quickly to save the celebratory mood from dying out entirely. Once outside, Clara sought Matrida, wanting to tell her that she would not be moving on to the reception. But her guardian was by now irrevocably caught up in the festivities. Whether or not she was genuinely thrilled for the newlyweds was beside the point. She was not going to be outdone. She headed a troop of women dancing and singing around the just-married couple and throwing rice they couldn't afford at them. They had to be broken up by the bride's irate and suddenly time-conscious father for them to give way to the couple and let them climb in the car that would take them to the park where they were to have their wedding pictures taken.

Clara sighed and turned around to leave – only to bump into the boy who'd once derided her in the street. She apologised and walked around him, but he followed her.

"Where's your hat today, madam?" he laughed.

She tried to walk faster but the crowds impeded her speed.

“Where are you going? The reception is that way.”

“I am not going,” she said curtly.

“You scared of people?”

He spoke very loudly and people turned to look at them. Clara did not want people looking at her.

“Come on, I’ll be your bodyguard,” he taunted, grabbing her above the elbow with his left hand and flexing his right bicep.

Clara tried to wrestle it free but he kept grabbing it back, highly amused by her reluctance. She was contemplating letting him have it in the chops with the Bible when her eye caught Rabson’s. He appeared to be milling with the crowd, going in no particular direction, watching her. But she soon realised that he was not walking with the crowd: He was walking with her – at a distance. He turned and looked at someone and she followed his eyes. They landed on the man with the straw hat, the one who knew her name. He was shaking someone’s hand and laughing heartily but his eyes were shiny rocks that met Rabson’s then swung to hers. She resolved to hold back the wrath of God from the boy and instead gave him a hesitant smile. But he wasn’t smiling and the mockery was gone from his eyes.

“Will you really sit with me at the reception?”

She saw him hesitate for a fraction of a second, almost imperceptibly.

“Ok, let’s go.”

And they turned around in the direction of the Great Hall.

“I’m Clara.”

“Jimbo.”

She was glad he hadn’t let go of her arm.

The Great Hall was not much bigger than the church. There was a band inside warming up for the reception. Just a few people sat inside to watch. The acoustics in the building were not suited for a live band and the fact that the hall was not full enough to cushion the sound meant the noise was ear popping. Most chose to pass the time outside, walk around the streets or just go and wait for the reception at home. Jimbo appeared

unaffected by the blaring sound and wanted to sit inside whereas Clara, accustomed to the gentle sounds of her taste in music, declined and went to sit on a bench in the shade of the small office built a few metres away from the hall. He stood at the door of the hall where he could watch the band and still have her in his sight. Clara wasn't sure whether she felt safe with him. His uncouth appearance and overtly aggressive nature, and his perception of her as the perfect butt of his jokes did not make him the best candidate she would choose to be with in times of danger. For once, she wished Matrída were there with her. She and Jimbo had not turned around to see whether Rabson and his friend had followed them and, looking around now, she could not see them anywhere. But the crawling sensation on her skin left little doubt in her mind that she was being watched. The band began to play a cover version of a popular catchy tune that was currently a must-play at any wedding. Jimbo hollered, began to hop around and disappeared into the hall followed by some of the people who had been waiting outside.

“Are we going to keep meeting on benches like this?”

Clara jumped. The man with the straw hat was walking to the bench from her left. He stuck out his chest, placed his hands on his hips and grinned broadly under the broad brim of his hat. Clara's eyes darted to the hall for any sign of Jimbo, needing his protection. The man sat down next to her and commenced chit chat that fell on her ears like a torrent of gibberish. She could not focus on anything he was saying and concentrated on mentally willing Jimbo to come out of the hall.

“Come with me.”

Clara raised her shoulder to her ear. The man was now on his feet again and bending close to her ear. He straightened up when she pulled away from him and his lips split into his now familiar grin.

“Get up. Let's go.”

“What?”

The smile began to fade.

“Do I have to pull you up?”

Clara remained glued to the bench.

“Stop wasting time.”

Clara looked sideways, searching for Jimbo. Someone walked by and the man broke into a laugh that subsided as quickly as it had erupted. She felt his calloused hand on her bare forearm and pulled her arm behind her back. He did not let go but used the bent position of her arm as leverage to pull her up and grab a handful of her dress. She found herself being guided towards the other end of the hall while the man repeatedly took his hat off in greeting to anyone who registered any suspicion on their face. Clara tried to break free but the hold the man had on her still-bent arm and dress restricted any resistance. She couldn't keep up with his pace and was forced to break into a half-trot. They rounded a corner of the building and branched into a path between rows of small tightly spaced houses. They wove through the houses until they came to a road separating this block of houses from the next. Clara inhaled sharply when her eyes fell on Samson's old car. The pinch of her kidnapper's fingers on her bare arm assured her that she was not experiencing a flashback. In the driver's seat was an agitated-looking Rabson whose fingers tapped a nervous rhythm on the steering wheel. He threw the passenger door open, impatient for Clara and her captor to climb in. She had just one leg in when the car started moving. The man with the straw hat shoved the rest of her body into the car, causing her to topple into Rabson's lap. Rabson grabbed her by her hair and shoved her back so that she fell against her escort who was now taking up most of the passenger seat.

"Put her in the back seat, Given," said an annoyed Rabson, unsuccessfully pushing her legs away to get to the gear lever.

Given grabbed one of her legs and the neckline of her dress from behind and threw her into the back seat. She saved her forehead from hitting the back window by stretching out her arms against it. In her dazed state, she thought she saw a figure running after the car but could not be sure because the car made a right turn just at that moment. She righted her body into a sitting position and looked straight ahead, through the windscreen. The men were talking but nothing they said made any sense to her. She thought that perhaps being shoved to and fro had dislocated the part of her brain responsible for processing speech. The man called Given turned around and said something to her. She took her eyes off the road and saw that he wasn't smiling anymore. When she did not respond, he snarled and said something emphatic. The only thing that reached her was the spray of his spit. She slid away from him and behind the driver's seat and pressed her cheek against

the window. A figure leapt into the open from the maze of houses. She turned her face on the glass, feeling the greasy smudge her skin was creating, and fixed her attention on the figure that was sprinting after the car. Vague recognition tugged at the corners of her memory as the boy narrowed the distance between himself and the car. He bent forward and snatched a long piece of wire from a group of small boys modelling wire vehicles on the side of the road. A scratching sound against the side of the car made their teeth itch and put an abrupt end to Given's snarling monologue. Rabson reached through his window to push the boy away but only managed to swat at nothing and make the car swerve.

"Forget about him and step on it!" Given shouted.

The boy now had his hand on the handle on Clara's door but couldn't open it. She reached for the inside handle but saw that it was broken. The car picked up speed, sending the boy lurching forward and onto the ground. Clara rose from her seat and pressed her face against the window but could not see him. A sudden change in the car's balance threw her down and off the edge of the seat.

Rabson yelled, his voice on the verge of hysteria, "He's punctured a tyre!"

"Go, go, go!"

"I don't think we can go far with this car."

"Just go."

Jimbo dusted off his now ruined Sunday best. A graze ran from the wrist to the elbow of his left forearm. It was not bleeding much but he scooped up a handful of dust anyway and patted it on the graze to stem the blood flow. He turned around and saw a small crowd coming towards him. He took deeper breaths to steady his heartbeat and breathing so that he could explain to them what had just happened and perhaps get help from them. A man, whose hair was peppered with grey, approached him first. Jimbo had just stretched his arm in the direction the car had vanished and was about to speak when unimaginable pain exploded on his lips. He staggered backwards and brought his hands to his face, the wire still in his left hand poking him just above the inside corner of his left eye.

“We’ve had it with hooligans like you in this town,” the man chided as he dealt Jimbo another blow on the head followed by a kick in the calves.

“No—” Jimbo started.

“Shut up. You have nothing to say to civilised society,” a sharp female voice scolded and he felt a stinging slap on his arm.

Jimbo soon realised that everyone was keen on administering a little punishment on him. Punches, jabs and slaps rained on him from sources he could not identify among the circle of irate residents. The crowd was growing bigger and everyone seemed to be talking all at once.

“Let’s take him to the police.”

“They won’t do a thing.”

“We’ll sort him out.”

“If that car had overturned, how many people were going to die?”

“Give us back our wire.”

“How many people have you killed before, huh?”

“Maybe *he* needs to find out what it feels like to die.”

Blood ran from the corner of Jimbo’s mouth and the graze on his arm was beginning to bleed more. He couldn’t get them to stop and listen to him and his head began to pound with rage.

He screamed, “I wasn’t trying to kill anybody!”

That only served to agitate the crowd more. Something hard and rough bashed him on the back of his head. He cried out in pain and reflexively turned around to hit back at whoever had swung the object. He came face to face with a defiant-looking woman holding a block of chopped firewood, ready to swing it again. Jimbo jabbed the wire at her and speared her beret off her head.

“Now he’s attacking women.”

Someone grabbed his collar from behind. He struggled to break free while continuing to jab the wire at the crowd to keep them away from him. The sound of his shirt tearing cut through the commotion. The back of his shirt and the collar came completely off so that the person who had been tugging at it keeled over and fell at the loss of resistance. Some people gasped, some laughed. Jimbo took advantage of the distraction and broke

through the fence of people. He tore down the road and the crowd followed in hot pursuit. Stones hailed all around him, a few connecting with his bare back. Some children began to chant, "Thief! Thief!" He darted between the houses to confuse the crowd, but soon arced back to the road when he realised that he was only gathering more pursuers. He came to JJ's maize field which separated this side of Hindpark township from the side he lived in. He dived into the lush greenness, ran a few metres then stopped. The shouting slowly subsided. He got on his hands and knees and quietly crawled back to within a metre of the edge of the field and peered through the stalks. The crowd stood a distance away and some were already turning back. A youth with long yellowish teeth and taut greyish skin pointed in Jimbo's direction.

"There he is."

Jimbo grinned, exposing his own bloodied teeth. He stayed in that position – on his hands and knees, with his ghastly smile, like one of those contrived characters from an old Western film about African savages – until they had all left. Only then did he sit back, revelling in the coolness of the field, and laugh. He had known that they would not have dared follow him into JJ's maize field. The field covered an area that the municipality had earmarked for land development. They had encouraged anyone with an idea and finances for a project that would benefit the whole community to come forward and develop the land for that purpose. JJ had not come forward. It was said that the community had just woken up one morning to a ploughed land. The municipality could not force JJ off the land or convince him that this was not a farming area because he had gotten his best lawyers to prove that he was engaging in land development. So, for the past three years, he had been growing maize of which not a kernel went to the community but supported his life of luxury in the suburbs. It was rumoured that a wheelchair-bound man known as Machance had defiantly resolved to benefit from JJ's project by helping himself to a bag of JJ's maize. But, allegedly, when he stepped into the field, immediately his legs buckled under him and he had not been able to use them since.

Jimbo thought Machance's mother ought to be put on public display and shamed in front of the townspeople for not having had her son vaccinated against polio when he was a baby.

When he had caught his breath and cooled down, Jimbo peeled off the remainder of his shirt and wrapped it around his grazed arm. He got up and walked through the itchy stalks to the other side. People stopped to stare in horror when he emerged from the cursed field shirtless, bloody and with a slightly deranged look in his eyes and a wire in his hand.

“You have to learn to stand up for yourself.”

“I always do, mother,” Wanda said.

“That’s not what I’ve heard.”

“You pay too much attention to rumours.”

“Tell that Bedson that I did not bring a son into this world to be bullied by the likes of him.”

“Mother, honestly.”

“Maybe you enjoy being victimised.”

“I have my own way of handling situations.”

“Yes, lying down for everyone to walk all over you.”

Wanda let that remark pass and broke another pod of peas. His mother attempted a scowl that could not mask the maternal concern on her face.

“It’s a Saturday afternoon, and here you are shelling peas with your mother when you should be out there having tough manly fun.”

“I went everywhere during the week. Today I don’t want to go anywhere.”

“Who’s that?”

Wanda looked up to find a bloodied Jimbo approaching his mother’s house. He stood up, alarmed.

“What happened to you? Where’s your shirt?”

Jimbo raised his left arm.

“I got beat up.”

“By whom?”

“Fools.”

“Why?”

“Clara has been kidnapped and they all think I was trying to kill her.”

“Clara ... what are you talking about?”

“I was with her at the wedding. They took her and drove off in Samson’s car.”

“Samson’s car? Who’s they?”

“Rabson and some guy with a stupid straw hat.”

“Given?”

Jimbo threw up his arms in exasperation.

“How should I know?”

“It’s Boy’s father. Come on, let’s go.”

“What would Boy’s father be doing with Rabson?”

“Shall I keep supper for you?”

“Which way did they go?”

“In the direction of the market.”

“Who’s Clara? Wanda, you never told me about Clara,” Wanda’s mother inquired but her words fell on their retreating backs.

“You live with your mother?” Jimbo asked, some of his usual mockery returning to his voice.

“No. How did you find me, anyway?”

“You’re famous.”

Wanda chose not to respond to that. He couldn’t risk provoking Jimbo’s already inflamed temper.

“We will start with the market.”

“I’m not going back that way – I’m a wanted man.”

“Why would anyone attack you when you’re with a policeman?”

“You have no idea what vigilantes are capable of, have you?”

“Don’t worry. I’ll protect you.”

“You’re not even wearing your uniform. You’re not that famous, you know.”

Wanda detoured to the left and took a path through the houses.

“Where are we going now?”

“To get my uniform.”

“You live that way,” said Jimbo, pointing towards the general area where he had found Wanda.

“No, my mother lives that way.”

Jimbo eyed him suspiciously then poked him in the ribs with his wire.

“You should have told your mother about Clara,” he laughed.

Wanda swiped the wire from Jimbo’s hand and threw it into a shrub. He wished he could also see the funny side of the situation.

Rabson had both his hands on Clara’s arms, guiding her around the small room as if she was blind, looking for a place to deposit her. Given yanked her from him.

“Just put her on the bed,” he said shoving her down. “We have to take back the car, now.”

They went out to the landing. Rabson looked on both sides of the door.

“The key. Where’s the key?”

“You, where’s the key?” Given asked Clara.

She shrugged. The last time she’d been here, the key had been in the door. Rabson looked anxious.

“We can’t just leave her in an unlocked room.”

“She’s not going anywhere. Look at her. She’s frightened.”

“I don’t think this is a good idea.”

“Trust me. I’ve done this sort of thing before. They never leave.”

Rabson gave her one final threatening but uncertain look and shut the door. She sat there staring at the door until she lost track of time, until the shaking stopped.

The room was exactly the way she had left it. The curtain dragged on the floor where Wanda had torn it. What was left of daylight illuminated the bare room with its stripped bed. Clara sat on the bed with her hands folded in her lap staring through the window into the distance. A burnt-orange strip coloured the horizon and grew less intense as it diffused upwards. It was one of those lazy liquid warm evenings when all the mind wanted to do was to drift into daydreams where everything was just the way one wanted it. Clara felt an odd sense of nostalgia, a longing for her once self-imposed imprisonment.

She wished she had her radio here to listen to those once distant voices that had now become a real part of her everyday life. That made Clara think of Matrida – how she would be worried about her in her reluctant way. She rose and walked to the window. There were still a few people on the street hurrying home from work or the market before it got too dark. She drew the curtains, lifted the torn bit and tucked it into the railing making sure that it would not slip out. She looked around and under the bed one last time, checking that she had not left anything behind. Then she went to the door and opened it. She walked out, closed the door behind her and calmly made her way down the stairs. Halfway down, a woman coming up stopped and pressed her back against the wall until Clara had passed. In the caretaker's storeroom, she tried the door that would lead her to the back street. It had been locked again since her last pilgrimage from here to Matrida's house. She retrieved the key from underneath the insect repellent and unlocked it. She put it back in its hiding place and stepped out into the twilight. Retracing her steps to Matrida's house was a lot easier when she could see where she was going, she mused. She pretended not to notice the people who stared at her in the street and shrugged at the one who asked her how the wedding ceremony had been. That got her wondering how she would explain to Matrida that she had lost her Bible. *It could still be on the bench outside the Great Hall*, she hoped. The blackjack scratched her even above the waist but she was too amazed at how quickly she had made it home to notice. Home. It occurred to her that that was the first time she had ever thought of Matrida's home as her own.

The voice coming from the house sounded like wailing. Clara raised a hand in greeting to Anabel who was sitting outside on an upended bucket bathed in the electrical light spilling out through her open door, shelling cooked groundnuts. Anabel stopped chewing, coughed to clear the phlegm in her throat and held out the small silver pot of nuts to Clara. Clara shook her head and stopped just outside Matrida's back door and began picking the blackjack from her dress. The wailing stopped. Wanda and Jimbo appeared in the doorway. They stumbled outside, tripping over the single step, as Matrida pushed them out of the way.

"What are you doing?" she demanded of Clara, her voice about three octaves deeper and hoarser than normal. "Come inside this minute."

Clara slapped at a mosquito feeding on her neck and followed Matrída into the house. She checked her hand and wiped the squashed mosquito and smudge of blood on her dress. Matrída stood glowering at Clara with red-rimmed eyes in the bright light of a new gas lamp that Clara had not seen in the house before. Clara suspected that Matrída wanted to shake just her head but the rest of her body shook too. When Matrída kept on shaking without saying a word, Clara turned to their visitors hoping for an explanation of her guardian's unusual behaviour. She gaped at Jimbo whose upper lip was so swollen on the right that it hung over his lower lip like a cruel feat of nature. Clara felt the tickle of a giggle in her belly but then remembered how she had wanted to hit him just about there with Matrída's Bible. She turned to Matrída and stepped closer to her.

"I lost your Bible," she apologised.

"Where have you been?"

Clara stepped back, startled at the vehemence in Matrída's voice.

"At the flat."

"But why? We've been looking for you everywhere." It seemed Matrída would start wailing again. "You ruined the wedding."

Clara was stunned.

"They stopped the wedding because of me?"

"No, you nitwit," growled Matrída. "I was the knife-bearer and I missed the cake ceremony!"

Wanda intervened, "Which flat?"

"My flat."

"Is that where they took you?" Wanda was incredulous.

"Yes."

"What happened?"

"Nothing."

"Are you sure?"

"Well, they said they'd come back for me."

"Why did they let you go?"

"They didn't. I left."

"Where are they?"

“Rabson and the man from church. They left hours ago.”

Wanda could not speak for a moment. He shook his head to help him understand what he was hearing.

“I don’t understand why no one called the police,” he reasoned. “Somebody must have recognised Samson’s car.”

“We didn’t take Samson’s car.”

“But Jimb--”

“The tyre burst.”

Jimbo grinned and beat his bare chest, which was lined with the cuts the maize leaves had made on his skin, like someone who had just performed an heroic act.

“Stop it. The car could’ve rolled over and killed everybody,” Wanda scolded, then added when Jimbo still showed no remorse, “Including you.”

“Why does everyone think I’m on a mission to kill people?”

“Whose car did you switch to?”

Clara shrugged.

“It was green. And small.”

Wanda shook his head again.

“I still think someone would have recognised both you and Rabson at the flat.”

“I didn’t see anyone around. Except when I was leaving.”

“Of course you didn’t see anyone,” Jimbo scoffed. “Everybody went to see if Miriam was *really* finally getting married.”

Matrida came alive.

“Young man, don’t make fun of people.”

Jimbo was unrepentant.

“All I’m saying is, what was her problem, anyway? Why did it take her so long?”

“You are very ignorant,” flared Matrida, her hackles now firmly raised.

Jimbo continued, as though she had not spoken, “Everyone had given up on her.”

“Let me tell you something--”

“I think we should focus on finding out exactly what happened to Clara today,” Wanda interrupted.

Matrida turned her attention to Clara and said, wagging an accusatory finger at her, “I warned her this morning when I found her sitting with that man in church.”

“I was not sitting with him.”

Wanda stepped between them to circumvent any further exchange.

“Clara, did you hear them say where they were going to?”

“To return the car, I guess.” She sounded tired all of a sudden.

“Whereabouts exactly did they get the car?”

“A front yard,” she said and resumed picking blackjack off her dress.

“Stop shedding blackjack all over my floor.”

“Whereabouts? Whose front yard?”

“Someone’s.” She folded her arms and stared into space, her eyes suddenly wistful. “Jimmy, who lived opposite the pharmacy, had a car just like that. My mother used to say that it looked like it had not been allowed to grow. Sort of like a geisha’s feet.” She looked at the three of them as though they ought to understand. “But then he had to give it up when they repossessed his house.”

Wanda knew then that he had lost her. For now.

“We’ll just be outside,” he told Matrida.

“Doing what?”

“Just in case they come for her.”

“I’m quite capable of guarding my own home.”

“Just in case, ma’am.”

He ushered Jimbo outside and closed the door. Jimbo walked off, the bump on the back of his head visibly protruding.

“Hey, where are you going?” Wanda asked, going after him.

Jimbo stuck his hands in his pocket and looked over his shoulder.

“It’s *your* job, my friend.”

Wanda let him go. He had not been able to locate Inspector Bedson – whom his family had said had gone to the wedding – to organise a proper search party for Clara. Wanda and Jimbo had returned to the Great Hall three times but no one had seen the Inspector either there or at the church ceremony. They had even tried the police station where they had found a grumpy Wizman who had informed him that he was in charge there for the

weekend. They had then gone and dragged Clever from a house party that he clearly had been thoroughly enjoying despite not having a clue whose party it was. But even he had given them the slip somewhere between the market and the bus station. And now that the girl was back, it was too late for Wanda to organise security for her. Jimbo, his reluctant partner, had finally deserted him and he had no choice but to stake out on his own. Something he had never done before. He lowered his worn body on to the doorstep to begin the long vigil.

“Don’t let the snakes bite.”

Wanda curled his feet off the raffia doormat immediately. Someone laughed. A sound not dissimilar to a car engine that won’t start. He turned to see the woman next door disappear into the electrical glow of her grey house. Hunger began to gnaw at his stomach.

On the other side of the door behind his back, Matrida and Clara partook of a supper of cold samp, made slightly tolerable by the mugs of scalding tea.

“There was no time to cook today,” Matrida pointed out as if she felt she owed Clara an apology. Clara nodded. “But, if I’d stayed at the wedding longer I’d have brought us something nice to eat.”

“I don’t think so.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Mass-cooked food is never nice to eat.”

“When last did you eat chicken?”

“I don’t remember.”

“There you go. It would have been nice to eat.”

They finished their meal in silence. Later, Clara laid out her mat and crawled into the comforting familiarity of her rough blankets. Matrida blew out the gas lamp and shuffled behind the curtain.

Clara said, “That’s a nice lamp.”

“Yes, it’s brighter.”

“Where did you buy it?”

“Street vendor – when we were walking all over the place like stray dogs looking for you.”

Clara was silent and Matrida sunk deeper into her bed, the languor of sleep quickly overpowering her.

“You know, I can’t see in the dark anymore.”

“You’re not supposed to. Go to sleep,” Matrida snapped, annoyed at having been jolted from sleep’s oblivion.

“Working in the dark forces you to develop night vision – like cats.”

“Good luck to Wanda.”

“Those men had a lot of practice.”

“Good night.”

“Floodlights are not the same as daylight. You still need night vision.”

“Right now we don’t need it. Good night.”

TEN

Finally, thought Wanda when Matrida emerged from the house. He had somehow imagined her to be the sort of woman who arose at the crack of dawn every day, without fail. But the rooftops were already tinted with the warm yellow of the rising sun and there was a buzz of activity from the neighbouring houses as people went about their Sunday morning rituals. Although the evening had been warm, a chill had set in in the early hours of the morning. The outer walls of Matrida’s house provided not a single nook in which Wanda could shield himself from the cold. His only options had been either the bathroom or the toilet. Both were out of the question given the purpose of his presence there. To his dismay, that meant that he could not hide from the neighbours’ prying eyes as one by one they came out of their houses and cast suspicious glances at him.

“Morning, ma’am.”

“You’re still here?”

“I have to keep an eye on the girl.”

Matrida chuckled.

“Believe me; you wouldn’t want your eye on her right now.”

Wanda made his way to the front yard as Matrida entered the outhouse. Regretting his decision, he immediately turned back to rather wait at the side wall, but Anabel had already seen him.

“Care for a puff?”

The pungent smell of smoke from her black cigarette filled the air.

“No, thank you, I don’t smoke.”

“Just one puff,” she insisted. “It will take the chill out of your bones.”

“I appreciate your offer, but I’m fine.”

She shrugged and took a long drag from the cigarette. Watching her sitting on the front steps of her house with a black crocheted shawl wrapped carelessly over her stooped shoulders and a cigarette dangling from her wrinkled hand while whorls of black smoke swirled around her head, Wanda experienced a bizarre sense of fascination.

“What are you gawking at?”

“Er ... I was ... uh,” Wanda stammered in reply.

She held out the cigarette to him. He waved a hand in protest.

“It won’t kill you,” she laughed.

He shook his head, rounded the corner and leaned against the wall, wondering against his better judgement whether he should have taken a puff, yet wincing at her painful-sounding coughing.

“I thought you’d left,” Matrida said in a tone of voice that let him know that he had overstayed his welcome.

“No, I just thought I should stand over here and give you and Clara a chance to get ready. Ma’am.”

“Do we need a bodyguard in church as well?”

“I think you should rather come with me to the police station.”

“Take the girl – I’m not in any danger.”

“Not as long as they know that you’re looking after her.”

“Then they should’ve come for me a long time ago.”

Wanda began to lose patience and hunger pangs made him edgy.

“Ma’am, we don’t know what their plans are. You’ll be safer at the station.”

Matrida clicked her tongue.

“I’ll be safe anywhere. No one wants to kill me,” she scoffed and started to walk away.

“I’m sure Samson thought the same.”

She halted in mid-stride, opened her mouth to say something but changed her mind. Feeling that he had successfully conveyed the seriousness of their predicament to her, he attempted to hasten their departure.

“If we could leave now—”

“We’ll leave when we are ready.”

“I have to report to my superiors—”

“Who are still sleeping,” she finished for him and retreated to the back.

He pressed his cap hard against his stomach where he felt like his intestines were gorging on themselves.

It was another two hours before Matrída and her ward announced their readiness to leave. Wanda surveyed them from where he was resting on his haunches. The older woman carried a small olive green overnight bag and the girl had the familiar transparent plastic bag into which had been stuffed what appeared to him to be a blanket.

“Well, we don’t know how long we may have to stay there,” Matrída answered the unspoken question written on his face.

He rose and shook his legs to get the cramp out of them and, without uttering a single word, led the way.

The police station was deserted except for a sleepy Wizman at the front desk. He jerked awake when Wanda tapped him on the shoulder.

“Any sign of Inspector Bedson?”

“That you would have to ask his wife,” snapped Wizman, bitter at having been roused from his snooze. He sized Matrída and Clara up. “Who are they?”

“You remember Miss Moses? And this is the girl who was kidnapped yesterday.”

“And you found her,” Wizman smirked. “They ought to award you a medal of honour, wonder boy.”

“What for?” a gruff voice inquired from the entrance.

The dishevelled figure of Inspector Bedson stood there blocking the doorway, unshaven, bleary eyed. A distinct smell of beer mixed with grilled fish hung about him. Wanda approached him, his body language communicating urgency.

“Inspector Bedson, there’s been an incident.”

“It all happens around you, doesn’t it,” the Inspector replied with heavy sarcasm, and almost dismissively as he swayed into the room.

Wanda toned down his enthusiasm and said, “The girl who witnessed Samson’s murder was kidnapped yesterday.”

Bedson looked at Clara, then at Wanda and again at Clara.

“So, is this a figment of my imagination that I’m looking at now?”

“She escaped, sir.”

“Why am I only being told now?”

“I couldn’t get hold of you yesterday.”

“You didn’t look hard enough,” bellowed Bedson. “Have I taught you nothing?”

Wanda backed away, surprised by how incensed the Inspector appeared.

“Where do you think you’re going?” demanded the Inspector.

“Nowhere, I—”

“Not you.”

Wanda wheeled around to see whose turn it was to bear the brunt of Bedson’s ire. Already outside the door, Wizman clutched at his backpack and gestured to the Inspector as if to say that his behaviour was clearly not reprehensible.

“I just supposed that I might as well leave,” he grinned.

“The weekend is not over yet.”

Wizman saluted in appreciation.

“Yes, sir. I can still make the most of what’s left of it.”

“You’re going to make the most of it right here, you imbecile.”

Wizman dragged himself back behind the desk, threw his backpack into a corner and drilled a blaming glare into Wanda. The Inspector hooked his forefinger at Wanda.

“In my office – and bring your people with you.”

Bedson pulled his frame up to attention, as if he were about to return Wizman’s salute, before he started walking. But even that precautionary balancing could not prevent him

from swaying from wall to wall in the narrow corridor. Wanda made one attempt to steady him for which he was rewarded with a black look. They stood back at the door to his office while he fumbled in his pockets, searching for the keys. After several moments of him turning his pockets inside out and cursing, Clara stepped forward and pushed the door open. Bedson regarded her for a few seconds then, seemingly at a loss for words for once, kicked the door wider and staggered into the office. He collapsed into the chair behind his desk. There was only one other chair which Wanda pulled towards Matrída. Bedson stopped him.

“No need to sit down.”

Matrída sucked her teeth and backed away from the chair. Bedson chortled.

“Matrída, you don’t even own a single chair.”

“Not that you ever bought me one,” she retorted.

“Because you never stayed at home long enough to sit down.”

Matrída advanced on the desk, bent over him and yelled over his head, “And if I’d sat around at home where would you be now?”

Bedson flung his arms wide and equalled her yelling.

“There you go again, still trying to lay claim to my success and fame.”

“The only thing you are famous for is your incompetence.”

“Inspector—” Wanda jumped in, not comprehending what the mudslinging was about, but feeling the need to stop tempers from flaring any higher.

Bedson turned on him and spat, “Get this lunatic out of my office.”

Unsure what to do, Wanda reached forward to usher Matrída out.

“Don’t touch me,” she shrieked as she slapped his hands away. “You, Bedson, I warned you that that *better* woman would drag you under. Look at you now.”

“It wouldn’t hurt *you* to look in the mirror now and then.”

Matrída picked up an ink bottle from the desk and hurled it at the Inspector. He dodged and it burst on the wall behind him, creating a striking dark blue splash. His chair scraped the floor and toppled over as he got up and came around the table. Wanda quickly pushed Matrída outside and planted his back flat against the closed door. The Inspector breathed hot air on him while Matrída’s banging on the door jarred his bones. After a while, the banging stopped and they heard Matrída’s voice fade as she made her

way down the corridor. Bedson crossed back to his desk and, when he had sat down, exhaled shakily. He pulled a notebook from a pile of documents and a pen from what must once have been one of his elder children's geometry set cases. Unable to hold the pen steady enough to write, he abandoned it, took a handkerchief from his jacket and wiped his brow. He turned to Clara who was watching him with a disconcerting intensity. He glanced at Wanda as if for reassurance before addressing her.

"So, you were kidnapped, huh?"

"Yes."

"And they let you go."

"I escaped."

Bedson let out a derisive laugh.

"Who is this fool who would kidnap a slip of a girl like you and not be able to stop you from escaping?"

"Rabson and Given, the father of the boy who went missing," Wanda interposed.

"Wanda, how many times are we going to go over this? What do you have against Rabson?"

"He and the boy's father killed Samson and obviously they now want to keep Clara from talking."

"I may be drunk, but I'm not stupid," said the Inspector while wagging a finger at Wanda, his upper body all but lying on the desk. "Why would a man whose partner in crime kidnapped his son team up with him to kidnap someone else?"

Wanda remembered his promise to MaBoy and battled to find a way to explain the plot to his superior without betraying her trust.

"It's all part of the plan, sir."

Inspector Bedson got up and began herding them out.

"Come back when you can talk sense."

"Are you not at least curious to find out whether or not a kidnapping did indeed take place?"

"Do not question my ability to make a sound judgement," the Inspector warned. He continued, "Rabson is in his shop as we speak. I saw him there this morning."

"Criminals always try not to act suspiciously," Clara stated matter-of-factly.

Bedson turned to her.

“Aren’t we lucky? We have another expert in the house.”

“It’s just something my mother used to say.”

“Your mother is an expert then.”

“She wasn’t. Not when it counted.” Clara looked pensive and added, “Else she would have known that she had a criminal right under her nose.”

Bedson’s mouth hung open. He looked at Wanda, utter disbelief written all over his face.

“What is she talking about?”

Wanda thought he understood her this time but dodged the question anyway.

“Sir, could we at least open a docket on the kidnapping?”

“Do you have a witness?”

“Jimbo.”

“Ha,” Bedson scoffed. “A witness who has a criminal record and is notorious for being a compulsive liar, and a victim who lives in her head. Get out.”

“Those are not grounds for dismissing Jimbo’s eligibility as a witness, unless proven so, sir.”

“Have you been talking to her mother too?”

“She never believed in crossing over,” Clara stepped in.

Bedson’s face registered both exasperation and curiosity.

“From where?”

“The other side.”

“Of what?”

“The grave.”

Bedson seemed at a loss for words. His expression changed to confusion with a hint of what could have been fear. He held the door open for them to leave. He stepped away as Clara passed.

“Officer, come back when you have something that will stand up in court. In the meantime, do not harass innocent citizens.”

“I need help with the investigation, sir.”

“As soon as you establish a case worth investigating.”

Wanda started briskly down the corridor when Bedson closed the door in his face. Clara hurried after him.

“He’s scared,” she said.

“Of course, he is. You scared me too.”

“Me? I meant that he’s scared of Miss Moses.”

At this point, Wanda’s patience was threadbare.

“What do you mean he’s scared of Miss Moses? He nearly throttled her,” he replied, his tone sharp.

“Then why didn’t he pull you away from the door?”

“He’s a policeman. He knows the consequences of assault.”

“He’s a coward.”

Wanda said nothing.

“Miss Moses was banging on the door because she wanted to come in. If you had not been in the way she would have come in and bulldozed him. He knew that.”

Wanda looked at her, surprised at the odd excitement in her voice.

She added in an exaggerated whisper, “He used you as a buffer.”

His fingers tightened around the cap in his hands. “Where’s Miss Moses?” he asked Wizman who was half-heartedly engaged in sketching one-dimensional soccer cartoons on office paper.

“I told her to go and breathe her fire outside. She nearly set the counter alight.”

They found Matrída on the bench, still talking to herself. She got up as soon as she saw them.

“Where is he?” she demanded.

“In his office,” said Wanda.

She started past them but he blocked her way.

“I think it would be better if you talked to him once he has sobered up.”

“How is that going to make him any less asinine?”

Wanda could not contradict her; instead he said, “Ma’am, you know that nobody in this township wants to get involved with the police, especially at this station.”

Matrída relented, though her heavy bosom still heaved with rage.

"This is not the end of this," she promised. "That man is going to regret the day he ever laid his eyes on me forever."

Clara leaned close to her and said conspiratorially, "He is afraid of you."

Matrida pushed her aside and picked up her bag.

"He's a toothless pitbull terrier," she said.

"I'm glad you didn't stay married to him."

"Who said I was ever married to him?" she asked, horrified.

"The chairs—"

"What about the chairs?"

"He never bought you any."

"He would never have bought me chairs even if we'd been married. He is so tight-fisted they say, when he was born, he wouldn't unfurl his fingers and everybody thought that was a sign that he would become a boxer – which explains his name."

"Bedson?"

"Boxer. Bedson is not his real name."

Clara giggled. The sound startled Wanda. That was only the second time that he'd heard her laugh. But the laugh was gone as quickly as it had come. An expectant silence ensued. He became aware that the two were waiting for his instruction. To fill the silence caused by his delayed reaction, Clara said to her guardian, as if their discussion had never stopped, "Thank goodness you didn't marry him. I don't think I could live in the same house as him."

"Shut up."

Clara caught her breath, astonished by Matrida's vehement response. Searching the older woman's face whose lips were tightly pressed together, jaw firmly set and with a slight frown separating her rapidly blinking eyes, it occurred to Clara that Matrida would probably have liked to be married to Bedson. The insinuated communication lost to Wanda, he announced that since he could not leave them at the station, the next safest place for them would be Jimbo's.

"I will not be babysat by a juvenile who is a menace to himself," Matrida declined and took off down the walkway.

Wanda hurried after her, Clara in tow.

“They wouldn’t risk going to him. He saw them.”

“So did Clara.”

“She is a victim; he is a threat.”

“If they would just pay attention to the township gossip, they would find out that I’m a threat too. To everybody.”

Having witnessed her literally come head to head with Bedson, Wanda did not doubt her words. He resigned himself to walking them home and letting Matrida have her way.

The township was quiet; the only sounds came from the churches they passed. Matrida’s street looked deserted. Wanda was just reflecting on how different the landscape of the street looked on a Sunday morning when they came to the spot Jimbo’s tuck-shop should have been standing. It lay flattened on the ground – the counter and the chip-fryer the only things left standing.

“Looks like he has finally come to his senses,” Matrida observed. “I’ve been warning him forever not to wait for that thing to fall on him.”

Wanda shook his head.

“They got to him.”

Matrida let out a short panicked yelp and bolted in the direction of Jimbo’s home. Wanda and Clara quickened their step yet, even at a run, Matrida stayed just a metre and a half ahead of them. Having never visited Jimbo at home, Wanda had imagined it to be run down and unkempt the way he presented himself. They found his mother, a well-groomed woman, knitting on the veranda of her pretty unplastered and oil-painted brick house. She was the first person they had seen since leaving the police station, a rarity in a community of the faithful. Matrida let herself through the small gate in the low fence and huffed her way to the veranda.

“MaJimbo, we just saw what happened down the road,” she panted.

MaJimbo looked at her with as much interest as she would a nail-clipping.

“Good morning,” she said, a greeting as cold and distant as a corpse’s salutation.

Matrida stopped dead in her tracks, adjusted her doek and switched the bag to her left hand.

“Do you know that Jimbo’s tuck-shop has been razed to the ground?”

“I know nothing about it,” MaJimbo replied, as aloof as her son wasn’t.

Thrown out of kilter, Matrida cast a glance over her shoulder. Wanda came to her rescue.

“Sorry to barge in on you so early in the morning, but is your son all right?”

“As far as I know.”

“Where is he now?”

She pointed a knitting needle towards the back of the house and went back to her knitting. Thus dismissed, Wanda led the way without a word, sensing that his thanks were neither expected nor welcome. Clara stole a glance at MaJimbo before the wall hid her from view and found the woman gazing at her with naked scrutiny. She looked away and hastened for the protection of the wall. Behind the main house was a one-roomed annex. A half-asleep Jimbo opened the door at Wanda’s knock. He immediately shut it again when he saw who it was.

“Go away.”

“Your tuck-shop has been pulled down.”

“I know. I’ve had nothing but bad luck since I started hanging around you. Go away.”

“When did it happen?”

“An hour ago.”

“Did you see them?”

Silence greeted Wanda’s question. He turned the door handle. The door was unlocked. He opened it. Jimbo, lying on a bunk against the wall, covered his eyes with his arm to block out the light.

“How do you know it happened an hour ago if you’re still sleeping?”

“I go early to set up my stuff,” he said pointing to the opposite wall. His supplies were arranged in piles. Next to them were several greasy five litre bottles holding yellow liquid which Wanda guessed was the cooking oil that he sold in recycled bottles.

“So, did you see them?”

Jimbo sat up.

“I don’t want any part in this, you understand?”

“Why? Did they threaten you?”

“All I’m saying is that you’ve messed up my life enough as it is.”

“What did they say to you?”

“Look here, you can wear your fancy uniform and cruise about town carefree like the President but some of us have to watch our backs all the time.”

“The President has had three assassination attempts.”

“Whatever. All I’m saying is that you think life is simple.”

“No. What are you really saying?”

Jimbo clicked his tongue, stood up and bumped Wanda out of the way as he exited the room. Wanda caught him on the shoulder and spun him around. Jimbo raised a fist but a slap on his already swollen head distracted him before he could land a punch on Wanda.

Matrida warned, “You punch him and that lip will be hanging over your chin.”

Jimbo held on to his head, his mouth twisted over words he dared not utter.

“Listen Jimbo,” implored Wanda in a calm voice, hoping to pacify the angry boy, “I can’t carry on with this case unless I have something to go on. What did they say to you?”

“Nothing.”

Matrida yanked his right arm from his head. She snapped, “Tell us what happened.”

He mumbled something. Matrida shoved an ear close to his mouth.

“What?”

He rubbed his nose.

“He said he killed his dog,” Clara spoke clearly in Matrida’s other ear. Matrida elbowed her in the ribs.

“Whose dog?” asked Wanda.

Jimbo dragged a foot on the ground. “Rabson’s,” he said.

“Rabson brought his dog?” Wanda’s voice carried disbelief.

That annoyed Jimbo who explained angrily, “Some time back I used to sell biltong and he had this stupid thief of a dog that he used to let run wild and it would come and steal my biltong almost every day. So one day I rubbed rat killer on a piece of meat. The dumb dog ate it and died. Apparently that was my fault.”

“You can’t teach an old dog new tricks,” Clara contributed.

Wanda and Matrida gave her mystified looks.

“That’s what I said!” agreed Jimbo. “That dog was never going to change.”

Wanda took his cap off, rubbed his head then replaced the cap. “So, what does that have to do with what happened this morning?”

Jimbo looked away. “Rabson says I’m capable of killing.”

They all fell silent. Matrida looked from one to the other, waiting for an explanation.

Well, I’m off,” she said when none came. “Is there a back gate? That mother of yours could whittle steel with those eyes.”

Jimbo pointed her to the gate.

“Will you come and–,” began Wanda.

Jimbo did not wait for him to finish. “No.”

As they approached the back of her house, Matrida rummaged through her handbag for the key. They stopped short of the door. It stood ajar and the handle was broken. Matrida rushed forward and opened it wider before Wanda could stop her. He came up behind her and peered over her head into the room. It appeared untouched.

“Anything missing?”

“My brand new gas lamp.”

“Is that all?”

Matrida rounded on him. “Is that all?!”

“I mean, has anything else been taken?”

She moved in, stopped at the curtain and signalled to him not to approach. She put her head around the curtain.

“Everything is just the way I left it.”

“So, it’s just the lamp missing.”

“Just the lamp?”

“It could have been worse,” Wanda said, walking out.

“I should have let that boy knock your teeth out.”

“Will you at least consider going back to his house until I can find you protection?”

“No.”

Wanda needed to eat. He could feel that he had now almost completely depleted whatever energy source had been fuelling him. "Okay," he said, fed up with her unwillingness to co-operate. "I'll come and check on you as soon as I can."

He did not wait for the inevitable resistance from Matrída. The nearest food store was Rabson's fish shop. He set out for the shop on limbs whose joints felt as if they would give way at any moment and with a mind that was conflicted over eating from the enemy's hand. But his indiscriminate stomach shot stabs of pain that spurred him forward. It was too early for a Sunday morning for business in the fish shop to be in full swing. Only a couple of lethargic non-churchgoers stood waiting for their orders at the counter. A gas lamp on top of a shelf of spices caught Wanda's eye. He hung back until the two customers had been served and left. Rabson grabbed a cloth from a hook on the wall behind him and began to wipe the counter.

"Officer. Not one of my regulars."

"I don't normally come to these parts."

"Can I get you anything?"

Wanda ordered chips large and a soft drink. He sat down and attacked the food before he had even paid for it. Within a few minutes, he had wiped the plate clean and drained the drink. Rabson had his forearms on the table, watching Wanda with open curiosity.

"So, what's brought you here today?" he asked.

"I'm investigating Samson's murder."

Rabson picked up the cloth and started wiping the counter again.

"I've already given my statement to the police."

"Two kidnappings have been reported that implicate you."

Rabson threw the rag down and narrowed his eyes at Wanda.

"Are you accusing me of murdering my best friend?"

"You were seen driving his car which you and an accomplice used to ferry a girl that you had kidnapped. And this morning, you threatened an eyewitness and destroyed his property."

Rabson's mouth hung open in apparent disbelief.

"You have got to be pulling my leg. I loved Samson but that, I'm afraid, did not extend to his car."

“I have two people who can testify under oath that you drove that car on Saturday afternoon.”

Rabson looked past Wanda on to the street, shaking his head with a small awestruck smile playing on his lips.

“What do the police have against me? First, they try to bust me when I call in to report the break-in. Now, I’m a murderer, kidnapper and car thief. And, who wants to steal a rickety scratched car anyway?”

“I didn’t know the car had a scratch.”

“Right across the back passenger door on the driver’s side.”

“When did you last see the car?”

Rabson opened his mouth to speak but caught himself just in time. His eyes narrowed slightly. Wanda could sense him trying to read his mind. He licked his lips, grabbed the cloth again and proceeded to wipe the counter once more to offset any tell-tale wavering in his voice.

“The day he was murdered,” he said at last without looking at Wanda.

“That’s a nice gas lamp.”

“Huh?” Rabson seemed momentarily confused, then following Wanda’s gaze said, “Oh, that one. Yes it is.”

“An acquaintance of mine had one just like that. It got stolen this morning.”

“Bad luck.”

“Why did you buy it?”

“You mean, where?”

“No, why? You have electrical lighting.”

“Blackouts. It was a present.”

Wanda gave a slight nod. “Do you know anything about the tuck-shop down the road?”

“Jimbo’s? What about it?”

“Someone tore it down this morning.”

“That’s a shame.”

Wanda waited. Rabson threw his hands in the air.

“You’re not suggesting that I ... For goodness sake, the boy makes cassava chips. He’s not even remotely what I’d call competition.”

“Have you seen him this morning?”

“No,” he replied too quickly, and then added, “I come here very early to set up.”

“Hmph. Thank you very much.”

“Er...” Rabson called as Wanda walked out.

“Yes?”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“If you have anything at all that you would like to tell me you know where I’m stationed.”

“That’s highly unlikely.”

Wanda departed with a more energetic gait, full and with not a whit of regret for not having paid for the chips and soft drink. *He had to give me something*, he reasoned.

He met MaBoy at the corner of her street. She was balancing a large suitcase on her head and dragging Boy after her.

“Where are you going?”

“Given thinks that I need a holiday.”

“I need to ask you some questions.”

MaBoy walked around him and carried on down the road. He went after her.

“If you could just give an official statement I could have these guys locked up.”

“I can’t talk to you.”

“Think about your son.”

“I am thinking about my son.”

“Did your husband threaten you?”

“I’m not sure if I can call it that. It’s his regular way of communicating with me.”

“The more reason you should have him locked up.”

“It’s that simple to you.”

“You will be protected, I assure you.”

“Like Clara?”

“Well ... I ... Things just didn't go as planned.”

MaBoy walked on in silence.

“What do you know about Clara?” Wanda pressed.

She suddenly stopped, nearly knocking him sideways with the suitcase when she turned to face him.

“Look here officer, I'm a married woman regardless of what my husband is or isn't and I have a son who needs me. I already gave you as much information as I could. Given has been a thief his whole life and will stop at nothing to get what he wants. That's about all I can say to you. I have a bus to—”

“Well, well, well. How long have these trysts been going on?” Given's voice broke her sentence. He wore a short-sleeved black shirt with flame detail along the hem and sleeve edges. His straw hat hung on his back.

“I was just asking her if you were at home.”

MaBoy did not wait to hear where the exchange would lead. She took off down the road at a pace that left little Boy raising dust behind him.

“As you can see, I am not.”

“I have some questions that I want to ask you.”

“Uh-huh.”

“You were seen kidnapping a girl from Miriam's wedding and driving away with her in Samson's car.”

“First of all, that's not a question. Secondly, like, I hope, everybody else at that wedding, I was there as a well-wisher. I spoke to a lot of people. Was I seen talking to a girl? Possibly. Did I kidnap any girl? That's a lie out of the very pit of hell. There are a lot of people in this town who have been waiting a long time to cast a blight on my name. They got tired of waiting so now they have resorted to making things up.”

“Last time I spoke to you you said something about an eye for an eye. What did you mean?”

“What? Now a man can't even quote from the scriptures?”

“Do you know Samson's car?”

“You call that pile of metal a car?”

“Too rickety and scratched?”

“Fresh long scratch on the back door too.”

“When last did you see it?”

“I met Samson at a football match a while back. He took that bag of junk everywhere.”

“So how do you explain being seen riding in it with Rabson yesterday?”

“I can’t help it if people hallucinate. Who’s Rabson?” Given did not even blink.

“Owns a fish shop? Everybody knows him.”

“I don’t associate with the cooking types.”

“Samson was a chef.”

“I knew him before he started cooking.”

“Your son was found locked in Rabson’s house.”

“Well, you rescued him. You brought him back to us yourself.”

“I have to say your indifference is uncharacteristic of a father.”

“I have to say you’re wasting my time.”

Overwhelmed by the complications of playing amateur detective, Wanda watched helplessly as Given walked away. Church was out for most people and life was slowly returning to the neighbourhoods. He set off towards the vicinity of his mother’s house. The wire was still in the shrub that he had thrown it in. He pulled it out and doubled back to avoid any chance of his mother seeing him.

When he arrived at the road where Jimbo had last seen Samson’s car, like second-hand memory, he recognised the small boys shaping wire vehicles on the side of the road, unconcerned about the dirt they were collecting on their church clothes. They pointed at him and at the wire and had a heated debate in whispered tones but all of them were too intimidated by his uniform to confront him. He had walked quite a distance up the road when he came to a wall-fenced house in front of which was parked a small green car. He scanned the front yard through the bars of the gate for any sign of vicious dogs before letting himself in. An elderly man wearing thick spectacles and a white vest that stretched over his potbelly opened the front door before Wanda could knock. He looked anxious.

“Is there a problem, officer?”

“I’m investigating a kidnapping.”

The man stepped outside, now alarmed.

“Not one of ours, I hope?”

“No sir, but we’re suspecting that your car may have been used to transport the victim.”

“That’s impossible. This morning we found it exactly the way we left it when we went away three days ago.”

“Have you looked inside at all?”

The elderly gentleman went over to the car and cupped his face against a window.

“Nothing different here.”

“Maybe if you opened it.”

“I don’t see anything out of the ordinary.” The man straightened up. “You have the wrong car, young man.”

“It’s more than a little dusty, isn’t it?”

“Well, I haven’t washed it in a while,” he said then bared his perfect dentures in an easy smile and gave Wanda a playful slap on the back. “If you would like to come around and give an old man a hand sometime,” he added.

Wanda returned the smile in spite of his frustration.

“Depends on whether or not you let me know as soon as you can if you come across anything suspicious in your car.”

“Good luck.”

Wanda nodded and took leave thinking, *I need help, not luck*. When he got back to the police station, Wizman was frantically writing on office paper. He picked up five pages filled with tight writing and shook them at Wanda. “I’m writing a letter to my grandmother about why she should forget about moving to the city. You know why? Because urban life is not the key to freedom. It’s voluntary imprisonment.”

“Can she even read?”

“You’re missing the point. She’ll get someone to read it to her. It’s going to be quite an occasion – a social gathering. Everyone will get to hear about how we’ve sold ourselves into slavery.”

“I don’t see you slaving.”

“Over what? There’s no crime or activity in this town. Nothing that requires the services of my hard-earned skills. I’m sitting here on a Sunday afternoon, wasting my

time, when there's really nothing for me to do. Why? Because I sold myself into slavery." He banged the counter to drive the point home.

"You do it well."

"What?"

"Nothing."

"Huh?"

Wanda stepped into the corridor.

"I have work to do."

"Sellout," Wizman's indictment trailed after him. The sound of Bedson's snorting snores assaulted his ears from down the corridor.

"I know," he replied but not loud enough for Wizman to hear. "Being a slave wasn't enough for me so I sold my soul to the devil too." He entered the communal working office, closed the door against his superior's sleep sound effects and sat down to open a docket on Rabson and Given. When he had written down everything he knew about the kidnapping in as much detail as he could, he locked away the file with the wire in his locker. He wanted to keep the file from prying eyes before he could look it over the next day and hand it to the Inspector. Not knowing what else to do, he set off to his mother's for a home-cooked meal.

ELEVEN

The thought of going back to the Great Hall filled Clara with dread. It was a week to date since the day she had been kidnapped. They had not seen Wanda since Sunday. Jimbo, who was normally on top of current community happenings, could not give them any clues to Wanda's whereabouts. He was back in business after re-erecting his tuck-shop but had lately been keeping a low profile. The week had passed with no incidents even though the promised security had yet to make an appearance. They had been sleeping soundly in spite of the broken door for four days before Jimbo showed up with second-hand door handles and fixed the lock. Clara felt the sense of security that had settled over her begin to wear thin. She put down her plate of porridge, her stomach muscles too tense to accept any more.

“Taking your sweet time as usual,” Matrida remarked with bite to her tone.

“I think I’ll stay in today.”

“Nonsense. The mayor doesn’t visit everyday.”

“He has to give everyone time to forget his speech before he can deliver it again.”

“Don’t judge. You’ve never heard him speak.”

“They are all the same.”

“What he has to say means a lot to many people in this community so your rubbishing him doesn’t hold water.”

“I know you’re only going there for the dancing and food.”

“And? What’s wrong with that?”

“I don’t want to be there.”

“Eat up and let’s get moving.”

Only a sprinkling of people was present when they arrived at the hall. Most of them were women renowned for being regulars at laying tables at public events. They were now busy on the podium putting tablecloths, which they had most likely embroidered, on the small tables that had been pulled together to form one long table. Matrida smoothed her blue floral cotton dress and patted her shiny afro-combed luxuriant hair before approaching the high table. Clara perched on the edge of a backless bench to watch as the women, with self-important smiles on their faces and a proud roll in their curvaceous hips, brought in refreshments from the little office outside. She willed herself to focus on the present, but an image of herself sitting on the bench outside the office kept flashing before her mind’s eye like a picture projected onto a surface that kept swaying away from the path of the projection.

“We are not getting any of that.”

Clara snapped out of her mental bioscope. Wanda, sitting next to her, was signalling with his nose at the high table which was now heavily laden with food that had gone beyond the definition of snacks. She had been oblivious to the hall filling up.

“Why aren’t you in your uniform?”

“I’ve been suspended.”

Clara turned fully to face him. “What for?”

“Rabson laid a charge of emotional harassment and false accusation against me.”

She looked disgusted.

“What about your investigation?”

“Someone broke into my locker. The docket and evidence vanished.”

Clara was quiet for a while then asked, “What now?”

“Looks like we have no case.”

They fell silent. Clara broke the silence.

“So why aren’t we getting any of the food?”

“Because the VIPs sit at the high table and eat while we all watch.”

Clara wrinkled her nose. “It’s mostly oily stuff.”

“I’m sure Bedson won’t mind dipping his already well-oiled hands into all of that.”

“Maybe he should have stayed with Miss Moses.”

“Wouldn’t make a difference. She loves a good show.”

“True, but she is also unbendable.”

Just then, a hooting cavalcade pulled into the grounds. Ululation started up and soon the mayor and his entourage entered the hall led by a singing and dancing troop of women. Matrida seemed unperturbed by the fact that just behind her, next to the mayor, was the man to whom only a week ago she had sworn to bring eternal regret to.

Clara nudged Wanda and whispered, “Look. Rabson.”

“Of course. He’s a VIP. Influential man in the community.”

Clara twisted her mouth and checked her nails. Wanda’s voice was laced with a bitterness that she had never heard before. Once the important guests were comfortably ensconced behind the festive table and before the drooling gathering, a commotion broke out in the front rows when the dancers wanted to displace members of the public who had taken over their reserved seats. At the Inspector’s order, the enraged women slunk away and lined along the walls. They tried their best to look dignified and important on their feet while rivulets of sweat ran down their faces and necks.

After a lengthy introduction from a councillor, the mayor took the stand and began to speak in dramatic and animated tones while the crowd responded with clapping and shouts of encouragement. Most of the speech went over Clara’s head. She tuned out when he got to speaking about how the potholed roads were next on his agenda of things that needed to be fixed in Hindpark, a promise Clara was sure he made every time he paid the

township a visit. She watched with fascination instead how the most influential men in town shamelessly wolfed down the snacks in full view of the gathered people, some of whom had not had breakfast. It seemed doubtful to Clara that any of these VIPs paid much attention to the mayor's speech. The crowd's applause grew less and less frequent and had just about died down by the time the mayor finished speaking. The one and a half hour long speech culminated in loud applause. Clara could not tell whether the applause meant appreciation or relief. By now the dancers had sunk to the floor. One of them heaved her ample body up and rushed to the podium to pour the mayor a glass of water.

Inspector Bedson knocked on the table to quieten the assembly.

"I will not take up any more of your time," he said, at which point everyone knew it would be another hour or more before they could leave. Some, not too worried about offending the Inspector and his revered guests, chose to leave right then. The Inspector thanked the mayor profusely for his visit. Then he proceeded to repeat every point that the mayor had made and thank him for having made it. As his speech dragged on, the crowd began to buzz. Babies wailed and people started talking among themselves. Bedson raised his voice above the din.

"In conclusion, I would like to stress the importance of respect for one another. It's the glue that holds a community together. When I hear grumblings of false accusations and people wanting to discredit the success of others, it breaks my heart." Rabson kept his eyes on the table but nodded his concurrence with enthusiasm. Bedson continued, "We need to help those who are jealous of other people's success to reform. If they do not want to change we should do away with them."

Applause erupted in the hall. Buoyed by this response, Bedson raised his voice higher and made one final remark. "It takes one bad apple to ruin the whole bushel."

More cheers followed. But the people began to file out as soon as he sat down. The dancers hollered for the crowd to sit down while they led the delegation out in song but no one heeded their pleas. Clara could not bear to see Wanda's reaction to the Inspector's last remarks. She pulled her skirt over her knees, patted the plaits in her hair, wrung her hands, anything to avoid looking at Wanda who seemed not in a hurry to stand up and join the masses in shoving their way out. Eventually she stood up and held her hand out to him. He took it and she said, "Bye," and melted into the crowd. He sat there and

waited until the last of the VIPs had passed him. Neither Inspector Bedson nor Rabson acknowledged his presence. They chatted animatedly with their fellow gluttonous dignitaries and did not spare him a glance.

Once outside, he looked around for any familiar faces. He spotted Jimbo on the edge of the crowd carrying his pink basin in which were small plastic packets and walked over to him. The only evidence of his beating was a small dark patch on his upper lip.

“What are you selling?”

“Chips.”

“Cassava?”

“Shush.”

Wanda laughed.

“Moving fast?”

Jimbo sniffed.

“Not yet. But wait until they are the talk of the town.”

“You’d think after watching the big guys pigging it out in there, there would be a mad rush for your treats.”

“It’s just a matter of time.”

“How is your mother?” Wanda asked with a wink.

Jimbo’s mood immediately soured.

“Why do you want to know?” he demanded, his voice bordering on aggression.

“Hey, I just thought it was funny that you found the idea of me living with my mother hilarious when you yourself live with your mother.”

“I don’t live with my mother.”

Wanda gave him a questioning look, but when he did not elaborate said, “Okay, see you around.” As he turned away, Jimbo tapped him on the shoulder.

“I heard something about Samson’s car.”

“I’m off that case.”

“It’s in a scrap yard – a little venture Rabson and Bedson run together.”

“I suppose some profit had to come out of this whole mess.”

“Parasites.”

“Maybe they are just smarter than the rest of us.”

“Hey, here’s a packet. Spread the word.”

Wanda took the chips, gave Jimbo the thumbs up and went on his way.

TWELVE

Clara couldn’t see Matrida anywhere. She wended her way through the crowd hoping to spot the group of dancers but they seemed to have scattered. She walked back to the steps of the hall and climbed up to get a better view. Her eyes swept across the crowd, and without warning, locked with Given’s. A smug smirk pulled at his lips as she held his gaze, but soon his expression turned to a frown when he saw her eyes glaze over. The more she looked at him the more removed from him and the sea of faces she became. She had the feeling of looking at the world before her through a screen; unreal to her yet right in front of her.

“Care for a puff?” The voice of Anabel standing below drew her eyes away from Given. She regarded Anabel with distant recognition, and the old woman laughed, “You look like you could use one.”

“What do they taste like?”

“I make them myself.”

“That’s not what I asked.”

“Come.”

Clara took one last look around. There was still no sign of Matrida, and Given was gone. She followed the old woman.

Anabel’s house was nothing like Clara had imagined. She had chairs and a hotplate. A proper wall with a door separated the two rooms where Matrida had to make do with a curtain. Anabel’s curtains filtered the fading daylight coming through the back and front glass windows.

“It’s nice in here.”

“My son fixed it for me.”

“You have a son.”

“Used to. Sit.”

Clara sank into an armchair. She couldn't remember when last she had sat on a cushioned chair.

“Where is he?”

“Disappeared.”

“How?”

“He was a murder witness. Just like you. My advice: keep your mouth shut.”

“This is my second time.”

“What happened first time?”

“I saw my mother being strangled.”

Anabel went still. The whistle in her breathing stopped. Clara continued, “My father always wanted to be rich but he was too lazy to work hard. So he opted for a quick fix.”

“Black magic.”

“Yeah. Apparently he was advised that all he had to do was kill my mother and he would be stinking rich.”

“Is he now?”

“No, poorer. My mother earned more than he does.”

“They always try again. You would have been next.”

“They put me in witness protection, but after a while I got tired of waiting and left.”

Someone knocked on the door and stuck a head in. Clara smiled.

“Jimbo.”

He came in and set his basin of chips on the floor and sat down uninvited.

“Miss Anabel is just going to show me her cigarettes.”

“Good, I need a smoke.”

Anabel turned from the sideboard and lit the cigarette she had been rolling. She took one drag and passed it to Clara. When Clara brought it to her face, the smoke stung her eyes and tears began to roll down her face. She shook her head and Jimbo snatched it from her fingers before she could hand it back to Anabel. Hungry for a tobacco fix, he took one pull on it and his eyes flew wide in surprise and he convulsed into raking coughs. Anabel took the cigarette from him and gave him a glass of water.

“What's in it?” he asked in a hoarse whisper when his coughing had subsided.

Anabel laughed her wheezing laugh and took a puff. Jimbo took a packet of chips and popped several into his mouth. He chewed on them furiously to get the taste of the old woman's tobacco out of his mouth. Clara giggled, waving smoke away from her face. She reached out and took a chip from Jimbo's packet. He stopped chewing and tensed up, watching her eat and waiting for her reaction. She wiped her fingers on her dress, took a sip from his glass, folded her arms and let out a sigh.

"My father smokes," she said and turned to Jimbo. "Does your father smoke?"

"If he dared, my mother would smoke him."

"Sounds like Matrida," Anabel said.

"Why do you hate her so much?" asked Clara.

"I don't. I just enjoy ruffling her feathers. She does too – drama queen that she is."

"I thought you hated me too."

Anabel turned her chin up and blew a column of smoke.

"You – you are just strange."

"My mother is nothing like Miss Moses," Jimbo said. "She would never cry if I went missing." He turned to Clara with an unfamiliar pained expression on his face. "And I'm her real son."

"You're doing just fine," Anabel pacified him in her gruff way. "Pass the chips."

Jimbo opened a packet and handed it to her. He sat on the edge of the chair waiting for her to finish chewing.

"How do you think they taste?"

"I don't know." She raised her cigarette. "My taste buds are dead."

Jimbo sat back, disappointed.

"Does he know you're here?" Anabel asked Clara.

"Who?"

"Your father. He must be trying to find you."

"He's been trying to lose me since I was born."

"So, when are you going home?" Jimbo asked.

"When Miss Moses gets back. She has the key. I'm sure she's on a war path to get some of that chicken right now."

She looked at Anabel and Jimbo, the hint of a smile on her lips, contented in the company of the odd pair, the only two people she knew in this town who ever really laughed.

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