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# Lies in the Night

Natasha Moodley

University Of Cape Town

Jo'burg City

I travel on your black and white and roboted roads,  
Through your thick iron breath that you inhale,  
At six in the morning and exhale from five noon.

Jo'burg City

That is the time when I come to you,  
When your neon flowers flaunt from your electrical wind,  
That is the time when I leave you,  
When your neon flowers flaunt their way through the falling darkness  
On your cement trees.

Mongane Serote, *City Johannesburg*.

“I hear lies being spoken in the night, anything you want to be you kin be, the greatest lie of all...

Yes, they will trample me underfoot, the numbers marching one two three, four hundred million five hundred six, reducing to specks of voiceless dust, just as, all in good time, they will trample my son who is not my son, and his son who will not be his, until the thousand and first generation, until a thousand and one children have bestowed their terrible gifts and a thousand and one children have died, because it is the privilege and curse of midnight's children to be both masters and victims of their times, to forsake privacy and be sucked into the annihilating whirlpool of the multitudes, and to be unable to live or die in peace.”

*Midnight's Children*, Abracadabra

## One

### *Jump*

They had left the town hours ago, passing the roadside kiosks and occasional sign pointing the way. The building on his right, he imagined to be the halfway station, before the Engen garage had risen up on the border. He slipped into the shade sizing one section shaped like a warehouse. Beyond it the land changed into foothills and far down into the shifting slopes of the Lebombos.

Towards the north, he expected to see a black cloud of rain boiling from Maputo. But there was nothing but the heat.

Manjate's face between beard and cap was a mask of exhaustion. Goncalves proposed lines in the murky soil, Manjate arguing it was the other way. So he left it and reached into the bag for flour cakes and the flask of tea. Would be wise to eat what they could since the Greens would strip them if caught.

He removed his own hat and wiped his forehead, thinking it was better travelling with Elario. Like this business with the tracks – Manjate was too silly and reckless. He did not believe in specifying actions – he was too busy imagining life back in Joburg.

They had made the jump before and Goncalves had tolerated Manjate's disregard for what had been agreed, this time would be different.

People were travelling to and from the capital, as well as Moamba's toll gate, the stretch part of the Maputo corridor where six-hundred kilometres of road joined the eastern ends of Mozambique's plantations with the petrochemical plants, the mines and quarries of Pretoria on the west. Night or day it emerged with convoys of cars and caravans, buses and bikes.

An hour later the two were taking the shortest route onto the border road, walking along the shoulder without being stopped by any of the gangs taking over these parts. Manjate's shoulders sloped with his stride though he carried only the sack and a dinged carafe of wine, "What's the matter, too strong for you?"

Goncalves snatched the palmwine away and a smile slipped into the younger's beard.

“Can’t be pissing our money on liquor,” Goncalves said, after a long swig, “Six months at least, if we’re caught...”

Manjate pointed to the metal in his trouser pocket, “We’ll pay with this.”

“Where’d you get that?”

“Relax *bafana*, it’s for the dogs.”

“Ay?”

“Put the dogs on us and we’re dead, this,” he says, patting his pocket, “Is the difference.”

But before Goncalves could reply, he was struck by the hold up of cars on the road. Some motorists were leaning against their vehicles while others fidgeted with the dials on radios. Delay was normal, at least a kilometre into Lebombos – among the busiest of posts.

He expected customs officials to begin wandering over and inspecting vehicles, with the barrels of their AKs falling on wheels, the freight drivers to squash out cigarettes, their mouths overstated in smiles, as if little lies could be disguised by teeth.

What he didn’t expect was the noise in every direction, the scores of women and children getting out of Putco buses, lots and lots of Makua were navigating to a spot in the southernmost tip.

He counted the bundles of women whose faces were smeared heavily in a white powder, ground from the barks of trees. They spilled onto the border with their tourist visas and blankets tight around middles. He couldn’t see how they would be identified. The women would have to wreck their faces with cloths to loosen the powder.

Moment to moment Goncalves looked at the queue, confused by a grinding noise nearby.

Until the cab of a double-carrier lurched forward and he recognised it as the gears of a truck shifting. A man in dungarees climbed out, clutching a wad of yellow forms and appearing in no hurry. Who could blame him? Many drivers were biding time.

Meanwhile, a scatter of hawkers rattled trays of roasted cashews and peri-peri powders under the windows of yet another bus. The commuters leant out to watch the crawling queue. Many shouting, ‘*ayikolo mali, ayikolo mali,*’ but the hawkers were heedless.

Finally, the door sprang open and the conductor barged out, step by step he shook his fist before the hawkers backed away.

By then they had followed a long procession and Manjate pointed out the military Greens kicking their feet from the wattle and daub wall, a few of them resting rifles on the verge.

The wait unnerved Manjate – it didn't suit his active style. "They're looking at us," he said, at the same time turning around to a woman in the queue. From the luxury of her capulana and bag, she appeared to be a richer man's wife and not in need of his company.

*"Guardo o'meu lugar. Eu volta ja."*

But she paid no mind. At any rate it was for show, Manjate needing to blend in had made idle chat. Still, he didn't risk a second snub and reached for the carafe instead.

"Easy on the stuff."

Manjate loosened his collar, "*Bafana* should have picked a quieter day."

Two men about a hundred metres ahead were zigzagging in and out the queue, Goncalves meanwhile focusing on the next problem, the Toms.

They could pay the Toms for the service of guiding them to where a hole would be tunneled under the fence, since the Toms bribed the Greens for information on the substations powering the fence before they made the very holes – the whole business of guiding and jumping a syndicated one. But neither of the two believed in paying for what existed freely, plus there was risk of being screwed over.

The first Tom was medium in height with a gaunt chest and skinny legs, his head appearing too big for his slit eyes and skew nose – possibly the outcome of a fight – and covering his skull was the tattooed shape of a flag.

The Tom wasn't alone (as Toms usually were not). Another man spruced in a self-designed style: wearing shades, loafing trousers with a matching shirt, rodeo boots (though Goncalves couldn't say for sure). Their voices filtered along the queue. He couldn't believe the Tom doing business in full view.

For half an hour more they waited in the stream. Goncalves realising, one path would be to follow the tourist inside the four-wheel drive - a tall blond with skin bleeding from his throat. So pink was he. Goncalves judged the man an Afrikaner, same as the customers

he'd encountered in Joburg and from the fishing rods popping out his van, he gathered the man had fished and pissed in the waters of Xai-Xai. From that position it wouldn't be difficult to walk through into the streak between bushes with the rucksack on his back, a little further on he'd clamber up the slope and from there assess the jump...

A band of women was led from the queue by the Toms. Though Goncalves was out of view, his pulse pounded. Doubtless a passage had been tunneled under the fence. How much were they paying for the guiding? He could trail them, hide in the bush and jump when the Toms cleared. Still, there were the bush-fucked soldiers on the other side and the roadblocks in Hectorspruit.

'Bush-fucked soldiers,' Elario had said. Same as the horseback patrols he'd encountered once, who were patrolling for Kalashnikovs and AKs. Elario was so black they'd mistaken him for Angolan...

They were midway in the queue by late afternoon, in sight of passport control, as well as the foot and mouth boxes near south gate. Goncalves could see the navy lines of the mountains and the yellow scrub of bush. He began to walk.

The Greens first settled on the verge, had by then moved on over to the wall. Older guys with berets angled over their ears. The man talking gestured with his left hand. One, no two fingers were missing at pinkie and index. Still, he arched his hand without a care and Goncalves spotted the stubbed knuckle.

He shook his head to dispel the unpleasantness.

All three Greens cut the fine figures of fighters: Frelimo men united now in national service with the same ironed lines on their shirts' backs. *Greens that'd been around.* The soldier leaning against the wall had the full-bloodedness of a mulatto with his olivine skin, shocks of plentiful hair and ample mouth. He struck Goncalves as impatient, listening distractedly. The third was offensive in size, weighing about a hundred with keg shoulders and standing no more than five foot. Goncalves knew – if stiffed, this man could damage him.

Seconds later he was fretting over Manjate. Had he driven home the importance of the next few hours?

Manjate had no sense for serious stuff. Yet his fool heartedness, his spin on every subject, was precisely why Goncalves had befriended him from childhood. Even then it made him seem so much wiser.

The soldiers hadn't grown aware and he guessed it was safe to slip with his rucksack to where the 'Toms' prowled.

Lebombo post kept irregular hours (separate offices for customs and tourist immigration). Despite the clean-up-campaigns, dormant landmines lay in wait along the fence, unholy reminders of the country's civil war; he was reluctant to stretch his chances. Hell, you could die from the mines, so jumping under nightfall wasn't wise.

Meanwhile Manjate was staring over the crowd and at the dim mountain beyond, wondering about Goncalves who'd disappeared into the chaos, 'Blend in and wait,' he'd said.

On account of their friendship Manjate had done so, now he worried about the truck parked a kilometre on the other side of the road, the armed Greens tying the canvas over the rear to the truck's sides, Manjate catching a glimpse at the wooden bench inside, any moment expecting more Greens to spring out. A sign that it was the end of their luck.

The sun was sinking fast and in an hour or so it would be dark, the carafe of wine nearing empty. He could feel the effects of the liquor when looking from the road to bush, where no view was sheltered. The trigger-fingered Greens would come in close, drilling rounds into the ground if he attempted to run into the thickets.

Just a trodden fence separated him and South Africa but for the first time it occurred to him, Goncalves might not come back. Maybe he'd been caught by a Green or been ratted out by Tom.

Then people were walking from the road, towards the streak of dirt. A Tom lifted his hand to those following and Manjate began to walk, catching up with those crossing at a discreet pace, while in the distance the truck started into life, Manjate tracing the metal in his pocket preparing for the possibility of using the gun.

Voices some steps ahead of him made him stop, the Tom was arguing.

"If you don't have money, then something else?"

Minutes seemed to pass before the confused man could answer, "I'm not with you..."

“Your wife can pay me... in the bush.”

The Tom looked at the woman, while another Tom waited in turn.

“Ever work as a mattress?”

“Mattress?”

“I passage many *skeberesh*,” he said, “When we reach Komatipoort I take my passage in the bush,” he paused for the words to settle, “Need a mattress for laying on.”

The man tried reasoning but inevitably relented, Manjate brought his hand to his mouth, finding it hard not to laugh. The group moved out, backwards, as sudden as they had stopped, he couldn't quite get up from behind the thicket without revealing himself.

Bush stretched before and behind him, finally he rose in the grasslands with mosquitoes materialising out of the sky. For once glad that he'd listened to Goncalves and worn long sleeves, as well as a wide-brimmed hat. The earth was soft against him and moist from the recent rain, the bush without the power to move him as it once had. He no longer wanted any of Mozambique's earth not even the dhows of Ncala.

By some oddness, he remembered his father who had never made it across country. His father who planked boats and pulled ashore shoals of codfish. Whatever work was found he'd taken.

Manjate had tasted the salt of barren dhows and of scaly, unsold fish. But he was a different man, needing concrete and steel in his hands. That was his kind of earth.

The light was fading when a horn sounded in the direction of Immigration Control, a calm and distant monotone signalling a change in shift. Alongside the office was a narrow turret being climbed by a Green. There was no room at the top of it for walking, the Green shuffling onto the edge and positioning himself behind a spotlight, as bright as the lamps on night-time fishing-boats. The light being turned at fifteen-degree angles, Manjate feeling the beams penetrate and excite the mosquitoes, swarming in a cloud above him.

It was going to be a long night. He reached for the wine, allowing himself another swig. Voices in the bush had become fainter, he could hear dogs barking faraway and a truck rumbling on the road.

Goncalves was surveying the scene – not far from passport check and the antiseptic boxes of disease control. The sonofabitch...he rarely swore but what was he to do? There were always a few hundred problems with Manjate like leaving and never returning to a place at a point, drinking all the wine, eating all the food...a few hundred irritations sober or drunk. Now again he had disappeared...But the big question, suppose Goncalves left Manjate and something happened to him?

By then most of the queue had disappeared into Limpopo, Goncalves anticipating the locals already inside fenced gardens where dogs barked in greeting, while he was still in the sodden bush with thorns thick as nails and the stumps of trees. For an hour he'd been waiting, turning up his collar to avoid bites to his neck.

So he scraped his shoe on a rock, before digging his fingers in the tangle. Clearing it, he decided, he had no choice but to leave Manjate, since he couldn't risk jumping under complete dark. At that point, thickets of bush were being lit by spot lights at various intervals, Goncalves pulling a pink bathmat and wooden plank about a metre long, from his rucksack. The plank with a spike in one end had been broken off an old chest and he was careful to hold the wood away from his body.

Manjate would say that he looked sick all right with the plank emerging from his side like an ancient sword and the trick of the mat...which he'd learnt from a thief who'd spread eagled over an electric fence and shielded his crotch with the rubber.

The bush gave way to a strip of cleared ground; Goncalves scanned it for sight of Tom or Green, while in the distance he could see the fence, improbable under the shadowed sky, the metal wire like a blade in the bush, cutting it for kilometres. It was almost as if he'd dreamed the coils of razor, inclining up a foot.

The fence had cables all along – forming an electrified fort end to end. He wondered how many substations it took to power. How far did Mozambique stretch besides South Africa? He didn't know the breadth of the border towns of Ressano, Busina and Ponta Do Oura. But even in the dark he could tell apart the rows of coils, redoubling as one formation to the topmost of lampposts. He knew the voltage wouldn't kill you, yet he couldn't decide and braced himself, as if he were about to fall. But it was just a feeling of being eclipsed by the jump.

South Africa was beyond the fence; her terrain bogged in mud with drainage ditches between the flattened earth, he would have to push his way all of the night. Where he stood, tracks led to his right for about two metres before drying up. Goncalves realising, either a passage had been tunneled under or a hole left in the fence. For a moment he walked, hoping Manjate would follow. But even if the fool had stepped into the bush, he'd be lost.

He could see nothing but the cleared strip and the fence silvery under the rinse of darkness, free from border jumpers with their chump change and the profiteering Toms...

His knees indented the ground and he was careful not to skin them or do worse while clearing bits of glass, rusted nails loose from the fence and shards of razor. At least three coils of razor had been sliced out at the bottom, leaving a hole with wire projecting in a circle. How many men, women and children had tunneled through the very passage, only to be deported and return the exact way?

His ears were filled with the buzzing of mosquitoes. He swatted his neck afraid of carrying Malaria or any disease into Joburg, for he hated the idea of contamination. After retreating to a safe distance, Goncalves listened for feet or voices; the bush quiet, while traces of light picked out the thorns and high grass. He tossed the plank against the fence; it made a solid thud before hitting ground.

No sparks were seen, so finally he unrolled the mat and pressed one of the suction pads to test its firmness.

Flyweight Tom emerged, obstructing his skewed nose with his hand over his mouth and hollering. He wasn't alone. The Greens shot up without warning – they had been there all along.

Goncalves had a feeling of his lungs and ribcage dropping to his stomach; he sucked the air, watching them slip through the thickets, pushing their heels into the ground while swinging their rifles.

He fumbled towards the fence while the Tom folded his arms with an expression midway between a snort and sneer.

To the right, the direction Goncalves was staring in was passport control - the building about a kilometer away, the dirt streak nearby the building angled off it. A different path led to the road and yet another checkpoint, this one running into the Greens. He could make the jump dodging the rifles, if he edged towards the streak where there was a chance of being seen by the diminishing queue...

For a moment he believed the sight to be a hallucination: Manjate with his huge hands above his head, was yelling, '*ajuda, ajuda,*' and running.

A long shattering of bullets filled the air, bringing Goncalves to his senses. Manjate was well and truly there. Goncalves was gripped by many emotions from fear, friendship to defeat.

While the Greens were thrown, working at cross-purposes aiming too high at Manjate, while the Tom expanded his presence and shouted words.

Manjate ran into the undergrowth and disappeared, the circle of his hat, a dipping curve. Goncalves wasn't sure how he ran so low and lost sight of him when rifle fire began to rip up the sand. He had no hope of sliding towards the streak, which just a grey-black perimeter.

The Tom spoke to no one, only signaling to hold fire. One Green looked at him and pressed forward, Goncalves predicting how the man would connect with and break his nose. The Green would enjoy teaching him a lesson. He knew he had to act fast, so he turned towards the fence, ducking in the bush and falling onto a layer of grass.

At that point, it seemed Manjate had managed to twist through the growth, a metre or so from the streak and was holding both his hands above his head with a grin on his grimy-bearded face, the sack collapsed besides him on the sand. There was a short silence before the Tom proceeded to move towards him.

Hiding in the bush, Goncalves concentrated on Manjate's voice, hearing his confused protests while the Tom shouted into his face. Somewhere to his right, the two remaining Greens were whipping the bush with the barrels of their rifles and flashing torches. It wouldn't be long until they found him.

He glanced over at Manjate, the Tom pointing a finger into his face then slapping him.

Goncalves could hear the scrape of footsteps, their voices clear and loud. He kept his head down, knowing he had to stay still. But he couldn't help looking around for Manjate who had been around him more or less the last two days, regaling stories and insensitive chirps, and what relief Goncalves had experienced when the door was closed on him!

Manjate flinched as the Tom prodded him backwards. Seconds later the two Greens were trampling at a close distance, while calling out to each other. What would they do to Manjate...?

With as much might as he could muster Goncalves reached for a rock and flung it several metres away. The thinly disguised distraction didn't last long – rifle fire found the soil close to his feet. Without thinking Goncalves stood up, turned his back and ran. There was no time to protect himself from the fence with the mat and it seemed a meaningless connection of pink rubber lying there in the dirt. He scrabbled through the hole under the fence, gunfire at his fleeing heels and back.

University Of Cape Town

## Two

### *Paasop*

Twenty odd men in the van are dressed mainly in jeans and old shirts. Goncalves is too proud to wet himself so he holds in his pee, the journey maybe one, two more hours.

The oldest amongst them is the *madala* who's nearest to him, "Going to Sindela," he says. "They'll kill us tonight," he laughs, stabbing a fist into his gut.

The new recruits react to talk of the drunken guards who at nighttimes let the dogs into the dorms, new recruits like himself clutching their orange detainee cards.

One man small in stature amongst the bulky stock, whispers to the *madala* who in turn drops a hand on his shoulder, "That's right," he says into the open, "better to give in than pay."

Caravans and cars streak by; Goncalves listens and hopes for the van to veer off-road, for the crunch of brakes. They are closer to the sleety mine dumps of the north and the higher plains with their towering blocks of grit, having travelled a long-long time without a stop.

His bladder feels squeezed, so he spreads the weight of it stretching his legs out in front, while others watch with indifference. Everyone is shutting down in some way and everything important becoming less so. Someone coughs and slumps in his seat and it's the same across seats, detainees crawl into the leatherette with their legs adrift and heads roll back. He recognises this as the posture of defeat settling one button at a time into the flesh until it reaches the heart of the man.

He had arrived in this official load after missing gunfire, after jumping and turning around to watch soldiers drag Manjate away. Safe inside South Africa, Goncalves had looked back at the impossible span of Mozambique.

How often had he listened to tales of the killer fence and the women raped, not once thinking that he would ever get caught...But the South Africans had picked him up in Komatipoort walking on the swing bridge, they held him overnight before the journey to the detention centre, the distances shifting past from Komatipoort to Nelspruit then Waterval and Witbank...

The *madala* appears comfortable in the company of the detainees, folding his hands in his lap and for the first time, Goncalves notices an emery board peeping from his shirt – an intimate item, the kind of thing one keeps private. By no means is the man an ordinary brand of detainee, ‘*Taking us to Sindela to kill us tonight.*’ The words are ripe with meaning as they ride steadily in the left lane, Goncalves making a move to the front, shuffling between seats as he goes along, his fingers finding his fly and he isn’t calm needing to pee. Bodies whichever sides watch him standing at the caged partition closing off the policeman in front.

“Need the toilet,” he says.

The policeman in the passenger seat laughs, but that’s about all he does.

When they finally reach Sindela he’s wet himself. There are patches flaring from inside his thighs when the building appears about a kilometre from the highway, with its symmetrical roofs stained green, sloping down to the peachy walls of its base and above the gates there’s a guard-tower rising into the trees.

His first impression is that it’s all too bright, that the brightness is a trick, the noise of dogs barking from somewhere behind the compound confirms this. The injustice of having wet himself is somehow drowned out by the sight of the guards in their dark-blue shirts and reddish ties as he marches through the gates. They stand around, slapping batons as gate after gate swings shut: deportation, death whatever it was would come.

Those ahead of him wait in an arrivals hall where cell phones and wallets are being stripped. And no one is given clear instructions – it seems that processing is done only in large batches. Meanwhile a guard in pointed boots stares at his pants and he feels the man’s damnation.

Three rooms are between the arrivals hall and a crumbling brick alcove, signposted as the sickbay. An hour later, they shove into the third room, where cement benches line the walls. One detainee for no apparent reason is slapped and holds his hand against his ribs,

“Fall on your bloody arse,” the guard says to him, “*Ek skop jou.*”

Oh yes, Goncalves is sure they’d know exactly what to do with his kind here. Somebody comes with some political thing and says it’s ready to happen but really he’s in a new kind of war.

Dressed in a striped, calico uniform he moves down a corridor, where squads of detainees are passing, some rubbing the ink off their thumbs. He watches the *madala* at the top, distinct with his shaggy black head and bent beak of a nose, displaying an air of restraint in the chaos of the place, unlike the Congolese national who's sweating and protesting all the way in French.

"Is it right for an officer to tear up a person's visa?" asks a man identifying himself as Osinamatu, the man claiming his visa was torn up by 'an Indian' cop who demanded a thousand rand.

They are forty or forty-five altogether in the group, and Goncalves is silent to their complaints.

Lefumbo, a former medical doctor from Zambia insists to anyone listening that the police and not immigration are to blame for the ruthless treatment – himself, a victim of head-butting and a teargas attack.

The men hold forth about their situations with two or three voices dominating, Goncalves catching the tone of an asylum-seeker who mutters out loud, "They don't want to release me, they don't want to deport me and they don't want to give me asylum."

So he's up to his ears in arms and legs and situations similar, yet he feels a stranger amongst them.

The sleeping compound of a hundred dorms has a low ceiling with a slanting zinc roof and here the new recruits begin to mix with the old. By now there are murmurs of apprehension, many seeming lifeless under the fluorescent tubes.

"Get used to sleeping with the lights on," the guard says, tapping his baton on the headrest of a bed, he exits, leaving the noise of his boots in the dorm.

There are thirty-two beds in all. On Goncalves' bunk, a reek of dank ascends from the blanket, whiffs of a wet kind of rotten from some diseased body having occupied it before. The smell makes him conscious of how he must appear to the others with his shirt and wet trousers folded in his arm and one hand over his nose.

The barred window in the room has been left ajar, he hopes for some sort of wind and makes his way, the window overlooking the concrete courtyard, elevated by its shower and toilet cubicles. With the sky darkening, shadows over the yard transform the cubicles

into unlit squares and it's a strange relief away from the brightness of the room. He could wait there for hours and hours.

But before the night is out there's another business. The previous occupants of the dorm are lingering on their beds, while out in the middle, half a dozen or so new recruits mark out spaces. Amongst them a dignified sort with a scholarly stance in his stooped shoulders, as well as an elderly man whose hairline slopes across his forehead, the man shadows a larger boy bearing close resemblance to him.

Bodies far outnumber the beds and the men are fending each other from mattresses, Goncalves turning around to an expression of shock on the face of someone hitting the floor, meanwhile another spreads himself over a blanket. For a fraction he fears the men will throw punches but after a bit, they simply take to sharing a bed. A man in a corner dozes off and Goncalves understands how very tired he is.

The next morning he climbs the stairs to the main floor, entering through a metal door, which stands wide and is clipped to the wall, metres of tables inside in the room in the same industrial grey as the floors. The air is carbolic like a hospital wards, the front of the hall occupied by a 'barracks-styled' kitchen with appliances of steel, colourless glass and blackened fans.

Mealtimes are at six and three or so Goncalves learns carrying a cup of porridge and a ration of bread to a chair bolted to the floor. He's still in uniform from the previous day without having showered or cleaned his teeth, everyone is the same, squeezing into chairs or biting bread.

Where he sits, he hears the early morning traffic outside, what he wouldn't give to stand by the side of the road. So he tells himself, he's just a passer, being given a glimpse of this dismal world.

"The supper is bad. It's for the pigs," says a man besides him- "Save your bread for later."

The man known as Moses appears a popular character from the passers stopping to greet or exchange tips, he strikes Goncalves as having lost weight since his detainment, the uniform baggy around his shoulders and middle, almost as if he'd stolen it from a

larger man. He's no poorer than the rest of them - many full of flu yet reporting for the meal.

Goncalves swallows his porridge and smiles. Seems Moses was the type used to giving advice, "I'm not making jokes," he says, "Rotten meat in the soup burns your insides brother."

Goncalves pays mind and wraps the remaining slices of bread in toilet paper.

"Attach yourself to your food," Moses says, at the same instance hoisting his tray and getting up.

"Wait..." There's much Goncalves needs to know, he doesn't guess why anyone would want to bolt the chairs and what about his phone call?

Meanwhile, Moses turns his head to the door, looking at the guard crowding the doorway. Goncalves noticing the man as well, wide from the shoulders through to his mouth, he stands out like a plank with a cynical smile curling on his lips.

"Hell, you need someone to take you in hand," Moses says and sits down again, through the next five minutes proceeding to explain how some months ago, a hundred Mozambicans restless to leave Sindela had demanded release, advancing fists on the gates.

The guards had unleashed the dogs, landed boots on bodies, the detainees retaliating with projectiles, chairs, anything remotely threatening...And afterwards, hours afterward they were still being beaten up.

Despite the commissions of inquiries, the human rights' groups and journalists in the yards of Krugersdorp, Sindela's guards were not to be outdone. So chairs were bolted down.

Moses pulls himself up in his seat for emphasis, "Wouldn't push for the phone-call if I were you," he says, "They don't need an excuse to acquaint you with a beating here - it's 'Sin dela,' brother," he laughs at his cleverness, "But what you need is the right kind of friend to cash your way."

He seems to think of Goncalves as hanging on to his every advice. But trust isn't in Goncalves' nature no matter what the situation, the strip-yard or soccer field even laying about with Manjate on a Sunday afternoon. He isn't convinced who not to trust.

Outside there are clouds over the west rand, a sure sign of rain to fall over the asbestos dumps and the hills of Munsieville on the outskirts of the town –which once featured washhouses with standpipes on every corner where names like Tutu had waited in line.

Times Goncalves had only heard of, the snippet of information coming to mind when crossing the courtyard fitted with pipes and plastic roofs over their cubicles; he wonders how much rain would seep into the concrete yard and the one drain running like a long conveyor belt outside the ablutions.

On one side, showers and basins emerge under the strip plastic of a few hundred metres with ventilation ducts in the walls to let out the mist. On the other side are the urinals and toilet cubicles, visible from the dorms, as well as the sick infirmaries. Something about the openness of the ablution is comfortless, despite the closed doors providing some shelter.

The gaze of the group comes to rest on him entering the showers, his towel around his shoulders and bar of soap in hand.

Sindela is not exactly a prison and so far he hasn't heard any rumors of detainees being raped or men made into other men's wives. But what he smells is piss swilling in the soap and an atmosphere where the system changes.

He turns the tap wide to the spray, icy on his skin, his hands going numb – he'll learn to rush for hot water in the mornings, circulating his fingers, he tries hard to avoid eyes by looking down at the floor of lime-scale, his feet trailing in damp and what seems like a bright black fungus surfacing. So he's unsure where to put his legs and his earlier nausea returns, for a moment his hand dropping onto his mouth. Occasionally, he glances at a few forearms, sliding backwards and forwards, he hears breaths. Just men with men's needs – a knowledge that's accepted by everyone here in the showers.

The towel is tight around his middle, as he walks to the change area behind the taps, looking at the hooks lining the wall and the solid wooden bench squeezed in from end to end. His eyes catching the graffiti, "No one is illegal," it reads in a red crayon on the wall, 'No one is illegal.'

Despite the cold shower, there's a slight sweat on him, leaning forward without his full weight on the bench. Wherever he'd go the words would stay with him – it seems so

remarkable a thing to notice in such a place— an ideal in a world of dreams. He hears feet squelching on the floor, men arriving and leaving the area. The towel slips from his waist, his head pushing through the neck of his shirt. There's a light beam flashing at the wall in front of him, he turns around, to a guard cocking a flashlight with his one hand and holding a baton in his other.

Goncalves self-conscious of the shirt brushing the thrust of his penis and his bare feet on the sodden floor, he has a vague impression it's the same guard from the dining-hall, and immediately envisions the man bench pressing weights in a gym— by the sheer size of his chest and biceps, not dissimilar to dumbbells in solidness or so he judges by their bulge. He pushes his legs roughly into his pants, by then having bundled up his towel and soap.

The guard idles, giving him the once over, "*Paasop*, watch out—" he says to Goncalves who by then slows down at the door.

They are standing less than a meter apart, the size of the guard squeezing the passage into a one way, where he stands allowing little room for maneuver. He points the flashlight as if he were unsure where exactly to highlight, lowering it, then glancing at the door with a glob of saliva on his lip.

Signs of the guard's nervousness are not as obvious as his size and Goncalves knows to be very careful of a man like him.

"Only one way to up and out, so here comes the clue...Moses been saying you need a friend and me, I need to catch me a *laaitie*, youngster ... Ja, so that's what we do...while you're in here, Sindela's your home from home, cigarettes, *ganja*, anything that needs looking after...me I'm a father with taste. But you, you must *passop*." The guard shakes his head, "What's it goanna be?"

It isn't the first time this has happened, he understands the swing in circumstances, from the occasions in the strip-yard where customers in suits had slipped their numbers in with generous tips. Of course he'd never called anyone up— and the yard thereafter losing the bashful man's business. More than his appearance, Goncalves had known a lot of it was to do with his 'blackness' maybe even his lowly status as a fitter. *As if his favours could be bought.*

But it's something else in Sindela. Most of the *illegals* are black men and most from the lowest ranks. Hey, no matter what he wouldn't let anyone bugger him. Even with his future and his plans to think of.

"No one's got to know arrangements between a father and his *laaitie*..."the guard says, "*Slaat kop*...take head." He closes the distance, at the same time freeing his baton from the hook of his belt.

Goncalves is anxious in the ablution where the showers have ceased to squirt and the rumble in the pipes quieted down, he watches the door which remains closed, wondering where the men are on the rim of the shower, those stepping about barefoot. No one seems to be hurrying over.

The guard reaches out the baton and brushes Goncalves' cheek, "Oubaas will help you and it's simple," he says, "For a bit of this and that. But nothing's for *mahala*, free, you get me?"

Goncalves does his best not to flinch, to pull his skin from the crawling touch of the guard. What he wants to do is to roll his head back and spit full-force in the face of the man. But no. That will get him wrecked.

Oubaas withdraws in a creepy congenial mood, as if he's changed his mind. Then he takes a key from his pocket and unlocks the door, demonstrating his power.

Goncalves dismays, since he'd no idea the door had been locked at all!

"Ja, that's what I can do to get my hands on a *laaitie*. Get my hands on your dreams if I have to. *Witgaat*, white-ass ideas and we have ways – not fit for dogs here," he laughs a terse laugh, "Find Moses and you'll find Oubaas," he says, shutting the door behind.

Two days later he's getting fresh air on a square of the yard, with the guard house and front gates within view. He still hasn't been given his phone call or news on a deportation date, maybe two thousand men are detained in Sindela, so he may as well be living in a cage.

If he escaped the dogs and scaled the wall...But where would he run to, the turnoff in the dark heading towards Joburg or in amongst the smelter furnaces of the westrand? He could rotate the route in his head and race along into the darkness with Sindela behind,

for a moment he imagines many of the souls around with directions written on the backs of their hands, making similar plans.

His worries are interrupted by a few men chasing after a ball, some shouting 'pass' as others trip or fall back.

'Free kick,' says the improvised ref from the sideline, who raises his hand. The men appear to reclaim some camaraderie of the outside world through the match, which occurs in the court of the control yard -a tarred and dusty area opening from the gates to a walkway, small stadium stands and tables. Players laugh and dribble the ball down to the posts of two well-spaced dumpsters; Goncalves too uplifted by the sight of a particularly good header.

Six men on a team include the goalies making lucky saves with the score drawn at one. The referee's voice in a pronounced Zairian accent is cheery but dominating the play and despite the spectators' obvious enjoyment, Goncalves overhears their irritation.

"He's killing the game," says one man.

A show of agreeing heads confirms the sentiment and this in itself, camaraderie.

Some players border on anger and excitement, outstretching their arms to keep defenders at bay, the man in midfield especially fascinating- Jean-Pierre elegant as a hotel doorman, in his tailored trousers and dark shoes scuffed by the dust and patchy soccer ball. Goncalves envisions him wearing these articles with a top hat and tails, and he wonders if Jean-Pierre had been picked up on the way to work. His torso held stiff and upright, his mouth elongated in speech and above his lip, the moustache extends in an inky line.

His play is defensive and Goncalves can't help his conceit, thinking on matches he'd played in Beira for Beira Mar, where he'd attacked with the crowd noise behind him and two defenders on his boot, within seconds he'd be up the flank to shoot into the corner of the net. Scoring again and again that season – till he'd been one with the bristle of the field. His soccer brain had gotten the ball into the box by a single touch to Caeiro Figo or a long pass to Cunha...for a goal.

Now there's a lull in the game, a few players are dabbing their brows under the flash of cloud. Despite the overcast condition, the match seems to put a strain on several, Goncalves noticing Jean-Pierre on the sideline with his hands on his knees, doubled up in

profile. There's a rush of attention, spectators wondering out loud about his breathlessness, if he were fit enough to play. Slowly he straightens, adjusting himself and not wanting anyone's help. He pushes away the hands on his back, "I'm fine," he says, "I'm fine," all the while, avoiding eye contact.

So the players drift towards the court, rolling the ball in step with a flourish of quips about the unfair calls made by the ref and Jean-Pierre muddles along to the dorms, ignoring their shouts to rejoin.

Goncalves can't help but rise from his seat and cut through the rows of unknown men, when he reaches the court, some players give him an encouraging nod. There's a flood of shouts from defense as the man scrabbles too late. One of the players mouthing some inexplicable instruction, the defender glares at him before mixing it up again.

Goncalves runs into the match, ducking and coming up with his head, before he realises, someone jabs an elbow into his stomach. Still, he manages to make contact with the ball before two hands pull him down and the ball bounces from his head into the right of the square, his feet planting two three paces backward before he hits the ground.

"Give me your hand," the man says, laughing as if the 'pull' had been his way of a greeting.

Spectators in the front row are heedless, brushing against each other – he knows it won't be long before the rains. So he takes the man's hand, pursing his lips not to betray his impatience.

Meanwhile, players wipe the sweat from their faces, the ball gathering on the right-hand touchline again and again, as the man in midfield hopes for a bit more support.

The referee blows his whistle, there's a rush of words about unfair body-checks.

"Come on move it," he says to the offender who makes a sorry grunt and twists around to the free kick.

Now there's a chance opening for the Nigerian to break forward but he's entangled by a defender...and finally with a set of slip-in-boots he shrugs the man aside and slides the ball across the square.

A good-looking cross, so Goncalves gets out and waits for it.

“Go on kick the ball!” spectators shout from the stands.

A long ball which he wheels, while scouting for the others. Several players are after him as he drives it to the posts. The stand vaguely in his sight, spectators blurring with shouts, “To the side! To the side!”

He knows this blind feeling on the pitch, when the noise begins to peter and the world appears almost at a distance, he’s dribbling, taking sense of direction. Another player grabs him by the wrist, so he throws away caution and shoves the man.

But where’s he goanna go? With his left leg he’s coaxing the ball just before it’s out and not for a moment anticipating the disaster of missing. Ten metres and he’s lashing it high over someone’s head and the ball knocks the dumpster down for a goal.

There are hands clapping him on the shoulder, a few players swarming around, maybe even envying him. From then on he expects respect, questions maybe about his soccer-playing days and some of the ragtag at least warming to him.

Every bump in the road to Sindela his bladder had crushed his belly, his urine spilling with the bends taken. Still he’d arrived high-minded and above the muddle and dirt of the place. He has a picture of the guard house and tree tops plus the stone walls surrounding the court, already, he is able to identify these forms in the dark. Sindela would have to be his home, at least till he was rescued. For a moment he thinks of Manjate rattling some cage in someplace...

“Was a lucky strike”, Goncalves says, feigning modesty and nudging past the Nigerian to a spot near another tall African, in the meantime the guard at the gate had come down to see the fuss, Goncalves smiles at the crisp uniform who forces a compliment,

“Just another hustler,” he says.

It was the guard’s way of giving him due, so he mock salutes the man and turns into the game where players are rearranging themselves. At least the man isn’t Oubaas from the showers, compliments Goncalves could handle.

He dreads the mist of those showers, since he’s no one’s *laaitie*. Maybe Oubaas would come in the night like a *tokolosh* if Goncalves didn’t succumb to him. Make him cry for it in his sleep.

He feels the chill of the clouds over the court and the cheer of the goal disappearing. The first drops begin to fall, from his skin to shoes. The faces around him dampen, by then the spectators scabble to shelter when the rain hits the zinc on roofs. Soon the drains will leak their oily drops.

University Of Cape Town

## Three

### *Nalugu*

When grandfather Maistry first came into some money, he acquired the neighbouring land and added to the family's home an outbuilding and garage with a gravel driveway that dipped towards the street. At the far end of the property, there had once stood a clump of hedges and shrubs and over time, grandmother had transformed the enclosure into a lush pod of plants, smooth stones and rocks.

She had spent many hours in the garden, wearing a housecoat over her sari blouse and slip, pruning branches or spraying vinegar on the white flies which laid eggs on the shoots.

Grandmother had tended the garden as she did her children, with a good measure of love and discipline. Uncle Mardi, the eldest of the Maistry siblings had an unearthly attachment to the home and when grandmother had died, bought out the remaining sibling interest at a price considerably higher than market.

Ravi arrived to the *nalugu* in mid-stream - it was tradition for her to arrive late at these events and to leave early. Cars were parked outside the gate and on lawns, the regular brands of Toyotas and Jettas interspersed with the BMW and Mercedes slinking at the top of the street.

She surveyed the vehicles, amused by her cousins and their high-flying husbands so determined to wear their new money with style. She could hear the notes of a large clarinet, the *nadeswaram* and the beats of the *melam* drum as she opened the gate, moving through full-grown plantain tied to the posts. Overhead were festoons of mango leaves with a garland of red and white carnations. She smiled upwards, suppressing the urge to star jump, bringing the whole elaboration down.

Whatever his attachment to the home, Uncle Mardi was no gardener, letting in a weekly service to maintain the beds, where workers were spurious, honing the lawn and plucking weeds from drops of catmint.

Ravi lit her cigarette stepping onto the stones which separated the rose bushes and smelt the pesticide, sulfurous in the air. Her grandmother had been an organic grower, frightening pests with reflections of themselves, by laying down an intricate series of mirrors taped to plant stems. Caterpillars had seen themselves in these mirrors and backed off. Now the garden had lost its humor and she'd make a point of talking to her uncle about it.

The Signet Shopping Centre imposed itself on the street and to her far left, flags fluttered from the temple walls. There was a scarcity in land available to rezone in the area, Ravi knew the borders were pushed by neighbours in Soweto and Eldos eager for the business and medical services within proximity. In the mornings the R59 going into the city was infested with cars, at a jam where the east, west and southern lines of Greater Joburg met.

The shopping centre itself had been a recent development, which her uncle had berated the municipality over, for months leading up to its construction,

“As if Lens needs another mall with more ATMs to blow up and so close to the temple” – Uncle Mardi had gone so far as to voice his objection on East Wave radio, broadcasted locally and for that had come under the rap from council.

Mardi was a civil fellow, attached more to Lenasia than the family home – he sat on the temple board, served as a non-executive, municipal councilor and impressively, was a founding member of TIT – Tamil Institute of Trade.

For him Lens was a blueprint of the world from which he seldom strayed. “Why leave?” he had asked Ravi once, “From the Ayurvedic Centre to the vegetarian market. Hell, you can undergo plastic surgery in Lens.”

“You're too closed minded *Mama*,’ she'd told him.

With some trepidation, she made her way towards the kitchen, surging with aunts and cousins, busying themselves behind Bastille pots, the younger women laden with trays of sweetmeats.

The *nalugu* was a formal affair where elderly ladies dressed in saris, their ears bulbous with rings while strands of gold were roped around their necks. The younger women wore the latest Bollywood styles, Ravi had come straight from work and was dressed in

business attire, though not for a moment had she contemplated wearing anything Bollywood fashioned – she hated the ludicrous three-hour Indian film premised on the ‘star-crossed lover.’ The very idea of styling herself after such a model....

Anyway, she’d come for her cousin Ramini who was soon to be wed. Standing in the corner of the kitchen, she wondered about her father and uncle... since men were a rare breed at *nalugus* - normally they were consigned to the groom’s home, participating in purifying rituals and drinking alcohol in the secret.

The kitchen transformed into a giddy space of frivolous dress and skins brushing past her, from cappuccino, mocha and one woman with the colouring of a peeled pear- much paler than Ravi and her hair dark as black coffee. Jewels glinted from noses, toes, wrists and she considered it peculiar that she belonged to all of this. On these occasions, her mind more than her clothes needed to be adjusted.

In the living room more garlands had been put up around an artless sign displaying the names of the intended. Girls of a marriageable age tottered about carrying trays, faking smiles with their necks stretched – *nalugus* were known as a prospector’s ground where mothers eyed suitable matches for their sons.

In the centre of the room, the three-piece ensemble of clarinet player, drummer and vocalist, performed heartily, the women bending their heads to talk. Relatives had come from afar a field as Laudium and Benoni on the east rand, many of the faces Ravi couldn’t keep up with.

She made for the backyard where the hand painting ceremony would be underway. Her aunty Rhada blocked her at the door and planted a determined kiss on her lips. Since Ravi had last seen the woman, she’d changed her makeup. The coverage which was too heavy curdled on her forehead like a bubble in paint.

“Everybody’s so happy for Ramini. What a good offer she’s had. Ram will be making partner and he’s so young... Even their names match,” she shrugged, before her next line of interrogation, “What about you? Any prospects yet?” And with that, she pinched both Ravi’s cheeks.

Caught at an unfortunate end of the room, Ravi stared at the flab folding over her aunt's sari waistband. But Aunty was not all nosiness and flab, she was known for her buxom heart. Ravi said, "I'm thirsty, aching for a drink."

"Hang on, just hang on, I'll get you one."

Soon as she disappeared, Ravi headed outside where women were chatting or sipping on fizzy drinks, an assortment of biscuits and savouries sat in platters on tables, the smell of fried food crusty in the air.

Someone had done a slovenly job of putting the marquee up, the roof sagging into the neighbour's yard and further back, the pool jets had been turned on. She could see water spouting in white breaks and dissolving the dark-blue surface, lit by clay lamps burning around the pool. The effect reminding her of the sea she had seen in Arniston once under a similar white and orangey glow at nighttime, where breaks in the waves and the halogens of fishing boats had lightened up the ocean. It always disappointed her that Joburg was such a congestion of land and concrete, a mass without the sea for its relief.

Her name was being called in the direction of the marquee. She turned to the woman holding the lapel wide – her cousin Salosha was waiting for her to join.

When Ravi talked business she was confident, liquid in her movements, yet she experienced a base dread with women of the family. She put herself at ease, by speaking first, "*mehendi on its way?*"

After the question had left her, she rebuked herself for its obviousness. The bride to be, had her hands spread on the table, the artist applying the dye through a cone. Whichever part of India the bride hailed, the red hue of the *mehendi* was tradition, one colouring divisions of caste and religion.

Ramini had chosen an elephant with a raised trunk to adorn the area from her knuckles to wrist – since the elephant was symbolic of luck and in the Hindu order of things luck had a lot to do with life. The great book was consulted at birth determining the letters of one's name but the stars determined one's luck.

She had missed the beautifying bath, where turmeric was pounded in a large gourd by the married ladies and pasted to the bride with uncooked rice, rose water and sandalwood paste, leaving the bride tingling and her skin sun yellowed.

The smell of *henna* (powdered dye sieved through a muslin cloth) floated in the tent – tea, eucalyptus oil and lime juice soaked up the noses around. For a moment she considered, the dye as having the makings of an exotic salad dressing, as it darkened on her cousin’s hands- a good sign, for the darker the stain the greater the happiness of the couple. She was surprised by her pleasure at this stain of happiness and how it united her with those around.

“Your father is he at Ram’s?”

The way her cousin worded her enquiries, with accusation in her eyes, put Ravi on the defensive.

“Not sure where he is.”

“Dear uncle, he’s been so lost since your mother,” Salosha said, as if Ravi were a stranger to her own father. “I wish there were something one could do.”

There was no doubt Salosha was beautiful. She had a dark, narrow face and was elegant with fine-boned hands and eyebrows severely plucked. The classical elegance of her looks gave her a reserve; she carried in speaking even when intimate. “I hear you’re living in Kensington these days. That the wisest?”

“Nothing to complain about,” Ravi said, “I’m fine,” her cousin always did that - questioned the wisdom of her choices with a touch of concern.

“Wonderful for Ramini, isn’t it? Ram and I served articles at the same firm. Cupid had a little help. He’s going places. Bye the bye how’s that storeman you’re seeing?”

“Store manager.”

“That’s right.”

Ravi contained herself; if she spoke her mind it would only dignify her cousin’s condescension.

“Wasn’t serious.”

“Pity.” Salosha laughed, a whimsical laugh, a sound you didn’t mind having repeated even at your own expense. “You know I could, set you up with someone suitable. But then again...” She paused as if to consider her words, “You don’t like your own kind...”

The undersides of Ravi’s thighs felt moist and irritated as she shifted in her seat.

“Cancer calls,” she said, digging into her bag for her cigarettes and leaving the league of family and friends without having greeted anyone in the front row.

She noticed Maria in sharp profile, standing next to her cousin Ramini, the girl tall as Ravi was, and muscled like a skater. She couldn’t help thinking that Maria’s legs had been made for slicing ice and what a waste they were, crossed under a corporate desk. Maria stuck out in the sea of brown faces with her hair army-style, wisps clinging to her scalp and her freckled skin. Her cousin and Maria had been friends since their days at Redhill and Ravi felt an allegiance with the girl, since both were smokers and interlopers of a sort.

From the driveway, she expelled the smoke in loops, watching the house brightened by the clay lamps around it and by the dim flush of lights in the windows. The ensemble of musicians had taken a break, snippets of talk allowed to drift towards her with one or two articulations held higher than others as if by the speaker’s right. “Mardi will want grandchildren soon.”

Ravi recalled the voice as Neela’s, a woman who managed to somehow impose herself on any gathering. There were congratulatory calls, words being exchanged in a fever, since the women wanted to get in as many, before the musicians regrouped and played. She felt a quantity of kinship with the people inside but was outside the sanctum of this occasion, walking while smoking to a small, square window around the side, she looked in at the sparse furniture in the lounge area, two women sat and inspected an amulet and choker, each fondling the item on the other’s neck, another woman closing the distance and sitting on the sofa’s arm,

“They put us in Lens in the first place,” she said, “Now it’s getting harder for our own people to stay.”

By then Salosha had entered the room, Ravi watching her move towards an arch on the other side without greeting anyone. On one side of the arch, a large mirror made of black iron and a glazy glass, from where she took a sideward position, leaning her hand on the mantle below. Her stance set her apart from the room, Salosha disciplined enough not to glance at her reflection in the mirror, though many seemed to scrutinise her two faces, dry and humored to them.

Neela gained on her, Salosha stiffening, deferring the woman's kiss to her cheek. Ravi ground out her cigarette with her heel and pondered her accomplished cousin, who had trounced the board-exam first time and had made an enviable marriage.

Salosha was the family's fiction of itself, their middleclass aspirations colluded and beautified. Ravi reached for her keys and looked up at the sky, where the moon had waned into a feeblish crescent.

### *Old Gum Oak*

The floor vibrated as Pat walked, needing to redeploy fast to the parts store in order to check under the counters and boxes before his daughter, Ravi arrived. There was always a theatrical emergency whenever she visited the shop; the cats were shooed off, their faces scrunching at the wave away and at times, the stones chipping the ground beneath their tails. A strange disorientation, since Pat often lavished cans of tuna or saucers of milk on them.

Every few months Dr Usma made the trek into the city to spay the cats, Pat didn't know when the Vet was due but if only Usma could offer him some solution on training the cats to use the basement's window for their nighttime departures. Scraping in and out, of the shop, they were triggering the alarm and both the Maistrys were receiving wake-up calls from the security firm.

Parts store was a basement area, home to derelict machinery and an overflow of parts, also where Pat kept his cats' litter boxes. He switched on the light in the dim oblong - a sizeable basement, which was humid and smelt pee. There were parts all around him, shelves full of headlights, mounds of shift-cable, the opposite wall lined with counters, a metre long and under a half-metre high.

He loved the presence of so many parts, distorting the shape of the room and releasing it from the order of walls and its uniformed floor. He loved that it was a place for objects with nowhere to go. Also, it was the least conspicuous of venues with two levels. The second level lower by a few feet, had a trapdoor which led to the outside. Before his daughter would arrive, Pat could walk through this door without any difficulty, returning

his cats to safety from the stalls and the scraps of the shop. He would never be able to describe the look on Ravi's face on the occasions she'd threatened to harm the cats, if Pat didn't resolve the problem of the alarm soon. The incident had left him in a sweat.

On the far side of the basement, stood the cat's baskets with sheets of newspaper spread out in front of them and drinking bowls placed on top. Luxmi the youngest of the strays (after the goddess of luck) crouched in a corner with her head raised and legs splayed; it was hard to miss her orangey fur and scorching stripes. He noticed something sickish about her; the hairs on her body seemed stiff, as if she were very hostile or cold.

Cats no matter how small were not always harmless, they could scratch, bite and infect you with fever and this was another reason for his fondness, they reminded him that fierceness wasn't always about size.

But Luxmi was only dazed, unsure of her way back to the catflap or perhaps the ledge of the basement window. His cats were needed as the city skirt, Braamfontein to Bertrams, had a fair share of rats and he had cared for them for years, finding them in drums, empty paint gallons or hidden under piles of metal. From some he'd removed thorns from paws, others he'd coaxed down from the tree. They were glossy grey, watery ginger, striped, sleek-bodied and he'd wheezed when collecting their hairs. But they were his cats.

It seemed Usma had shed himself into his earliest memories of the cats, Pat considered this listening to Luxmi meowing and slurping milk. It made him think on a conversation with Usma,

"Your pussies are Lalitas and Luxmis but your daughter is Ravi. A man's name," Usma had said.

"Please not from you as well, my friend."

They had walked back to Usma's car, Pat listening to the 'shambles' as Usma put it, happening in Fordsburg.

"The place is choka-block with Pakistanis and Calcs involved in all sorts of fraudulent scams. They're marrying our girls without them knowing it. You better watch out for Ravi."

Pat had assured Usma then that there was nothing to be concerned by. “Ravi doesn’t need me looking after her,” he’d said.

Much later Pat’s hands tingled as he turned the key, the chill outside had come on quickly. He could hear the cars, the nighttime vendors on the verge of selling drugs and people arguing somewhere in a distant fight. The journey home wasn’t dangerous, though muggers did at times roam the streets.

With the World Cup, government was upgrading the stadium and the area along Bertams Road to Second Street; the surrounds of Doornfontein and Lorentzville too, were all propelled on these same gusts of change.

He looked around the yard at its great feature, the tree, too big for the narrow one-ways of Bertrams and higher than many of the buildings on his street. His workers complained about the leaves landing in clusters on cars, the flower-petals clinging to sandpaper and discolouring the acid wash.

Also there was the question of his cats, Pat having coaxed many down from the trees’ boughs just which about wide enough to prevent a serious fall. If the tree came down, nothing would prepare him for the sheer absence in its place. It was an old-gum oak, the same as those at Zoo Lake, reddish brown with the leaves in spirals. He couldn’t say how tall it was and he couldn’t see the points of its branches at all.

This one constant would remain on after his body, after his yard had been fractured and split up. Usually, he had only a bit of a say in things with Ravi but who knew what might be in store for him. There were stones in his kidneys and he’d seen the blood in his urine for sure.

### *Near Ellis Park*

On her way to her father’s shop, Ravi realised that in her thirty-two years her father had every reason to complain.

His shop occupied a block on the corner of Frere near Ellis Park, where she noticed weeds shooting between the bricks of buildings, posters torn from lampposts and a jumble of paint and profanity on surrounding walls. Even as the sun was slow rising over

Bertrams, barbers were already out on the pavements sending tufts of hair into the gutters - a sure sign that the neighbourhood had changed.

Without thinking she punched in the alarm code and made her way to the back of the shop where soon the assemblers would arrive in their drips, apologies for the delayed taxi dwindling on their lips when meeting her instead of her father. Ravi appeared as someone not quite apparent to them whereas her father was above tolerance, as if he couldn't see in the murk of Bertrams, the Zimbabweans coming in six days a week and the Mozambicans many of whom she had marched before him and called them mechanics.

“Late again,” he'd say, “And I'll dock your pay.”

At these times, Ravi couldn't understand why he'd get so mad.

The shop's yard, the nucleus of the business, was reserved for servicemen and slid out at an angle lower than the front (a result of the road bending for some kilometres). Cars were in various stages of disassembly, some with their windshields on bonnets or the doors unhinged, the angle of the yard slanted whatever was around, as if everything were gravitating to a place elsewhere.

She stood in the middle of it all, near an eighties Cortina, noticing only one make and model of each car. Some cars were the ruins of accidents or aged in wrinkled metal skins with trunks sagging into fenders; while others had been abused by years of carting children to the crèche or dogs to the Pound.

Her father identified more with the cars than he did with their owners, since people were not amongst his favourite objects. She could hear the petrol attendants at the Engen garage across the street, exchanging *Obregados* and *Holas*. And even the factory shops sprouting between the rows of houses were beginning to stir.

*“Bertrams is set to change. The ordered chaos that we know and love is under threat,”* she'd read this driving down.

The family had moved the business from Lenasia in the early nineties, when Bertrams had experienced an exodus of its white, mainly Portuguese expatriates. Rent then had been cheap in a location on the city's cusp, Region 8 a humble neighbourhood of cashiers and cobblers, still clean and a stone's throw from Joburg's oldest suburbs, rich in their Randlord homes.

Now it was too late for many of the shop owners like her father to withdraw from the area, since either they had tied themselves into perpetual leases or they owned the properties, the mood of uncertainty in the neighbourhood intensified by the dins from Kasinga and at nighttimes by something of Kampala's heat in the sway of braids, in the boob-tube garments which girls stalked the streets in.

Saleem showed himself by the rattle of his keys - the only serviceman letting himself in (after her father had disarmed the alarm), Saleem coming in early to prepare machines.

Ravi watched him shut and lock the gate behind him, and for a moment absorb the idleness of the yard. Was he seeing everything as it should be? Or could it be a matter of his nerves, since the police were cracking down on businesses hiring foreigners in the area?

She looked at her watch, welcoming his arrival. Mostly, the yard had her clamped in tension and it wasn't just from the delay to her day.

Saleem hadn't noticed her yet and she wondered how she would appear to him. He was very slow placing his bag on the counter and turning the knob of the hot press on - a bright-red machine with shelves full of plates and a large tray projecting from the front with a dial on its right, much like a pressure dial. Her head filled with the sight of the machine and its thwacking noise, lights and sounds, too many of them as he flicked switches and levers on.

After some moments, he noticed her up at the cigarette urn. She could see her effect on him, still in his street clothes of long, *kurta* and brown sandals with their untying straps, his hair subdued by the circle of a *topi* (a round, traditional hat). He looked like an assistant houseboy in service to a British Raj and he cut an uncertain figure, so surprised by her.

Saleem believed too much in her father and too much in the yard. Ravi suspecting deep down he even harboured hopes of some day running the place. And why not? They come, after all, from the same sub-continent.

"Pat isn't well," she said, "So I've opened up."

"*Mam Sahib*," he began.

“Don’t call me that.”

“I’m sorry *Mam Sahib* but in my country we show our respect.”

Ravi wasn’t sure if this were a covert reprimand for slights he’d witnessed against her father.

Meanwhile workers were sweeping in. She could tell from the smell of stubbed cigarettes, the talk punctuated with slang, their laughter. This morning she wasn’t in the mood to exert her charm as she sometimes did, so before Saleem was ready for it, she said, “Don’t give it another thought; today’s your day to run things,” she smiled with the hint of a joke, “for God’s sake, it’s not a funeral,” she said and walked away leaving Saleem relieved.

A tree branched from the centre of the yard, Ravi looked at it, bare of flowers-given the time of year-she considered how relieved the workers ought to be, since they complained about the petals clinging to sandpaper or falling into the acid wash.

Goncalves the strip fitter especially complained, he was late getting back to the country and Ravi wondered about him, aware of his absence.

She walked past the stalls, going further into the rear of the shop, where she had a view of The Scope about a kilometer wide at its widest and bordering the stadium Precinct. It was her habit every now and again to scout the area, either from a curiosity of the recent assemblage of scraps or for a sign of her father’s cats.

Her meetings for the morning had already been cancelled so she pushed the gate, ignoring the sign. An air of remoteness hung over the place with only a few workers nearby, some paces inside she felt the dryness of cardboard under her shoes and the ground littered with dislodged parts, like pipes.

At first, the cars were in single files, then they stood abandoned as if whoever had driven them through the back streets to this final endpoint had simply given up. She saw what she’d always seen, doorless, windowless cars, soaring into a central stage. Even those on bricks were surmounting towards the middle with bonnets projecting in dented shapes. They were in pastel shades, some with flames along their sides, others with sharky American fins.

When Ravi was younger, she'd often sit inside the scraps resting her head against the scuffed leather seats, feeling the panels shape into her shoulders, her feet planted on the worn carpets. She had reached for the magic markers, the coffee-stained mugs and cake crumbs, once she'd found a pair of nylon stockings rolled into a lump. In The Scope, Joburg had seemed like a single pile-up of cars from one side to the other without a space.

Now it made her sick to look at, since there was no money in trade-ins or resale, her father's business a tireless rote of disassembly and restoration. Parts were made off with by the highest buyers, she could never accept the way each shiny spoke; each rethreaded tyre was shipped out for cash, and only to be damaged in another car's life. To Ravi this was awful.

Already the morning wore a dull gleam and it was time for the road, she wasn't ready yet for the starved refugees or the barrage of human-rights violations that the day at the Agency would bring. Sometimes, she had so much indecision about her choices in life. But she'd made a solemn promise to steep herself in doing good.

She took a final look around before slipping towards the stalls where in a few minutes industrious faces would raise their eyes at her, where hands would wipe pipes with dark rags.

From somewhere behind her came a mewling noise and Ravi turned to the sight of cats tripping from roof to roof. She saw the tops of their heads above the curves of the roofs, the cats appearing as stringy balls of grey and ginger, after a while emerging in a fuzzy twine, some with whiskers down, their presence enraging her. She brushed the cars, forgetting her suit and heels stuck in the sand, her throat feeling raw as her walk quickened to a run. She grabbed a loose pipe from the ground and continued to run, the cats sensing her approach began to scamper behind chassis, others through the steel cables of the fence, now and then their meowing growing louder. She flung the pipe, about tenish kittens and tabbies scattered in every direction.

*Her father was a bastard who didn't care who got fried, taking his stupid chances with the cats. But she'd stop him with a fistful of their fur.*

. One kitten fell onto its side, Ravi stopping short of its claws which drew out from under it, as she decided about hurtling herself onto its neck...*Hold still. Don't move.* But by the time she'd decided, the cat had disappeared.

Her father was conscious of what he'd done and he would pay for it. She saw him in the ill-lit corridors of the shop, shadows deep under his eyes as he pleaded with her. But she'd keep a tight grip on him, making him limp if she had to.

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## Four

### *The Infirmary*

They are standing under the infirmary window with the dorms behind them, Goncalves watching the floodlight circle from the tower and at times divide sections of the building into vivid blocks.

“Hoping to get out from Sindela, you may as well free your mind of doing it alone. Come on, I like you and I’m telling you, Oubaas don’t use no hole for a cunnie. He rehats a fellow, that’s all,” Moses says, examining his cigarette then sucking it.

Goncalves is operating on adrenaline: a side-effect of his frustration and fear, having seen whole men inside these walls displaced by shadows of themselves, so he knows the damage inside Sindela is effective. Still, some things he just won’t do.

Moses’ eyes are sunken in their sockets, as he squints into the light. Newer inmates sometimes resist, he knows, the nervous ones laugh more. His job is to feel for Oubaas in the canteen or out on the court, using strategies of persuasion. But if these didn’t work...

“Oh me, I must’ve had a list of principles when I first arrived,” he says, with the smoke from his cigarette curling above, “Still I made choices, ones I swore I’d never make. Of course you’re welcome, you’re welcome to refuse help, but you’re going to need it.”

The next week, Goncalves walks around the compound wondering about the dogs- if he plans escape, its best to know what he’s up against. A long way after the infirmary, he passes the door of a shed, which is secured by a chain proving easy to undo, he guesses there isn’t much of value inside the shed but perhaps there’s something he could use.

An overturned wheelbarrow occupies the centre of the floor which he steps over, there’s little legroom inside where walls are high and mounted with shelves, as well as hooks for hanging tools.

He rummages between forks and hoes, what appears to be the broken edge of a sword, reels of gutwire, twisted rope until finding a pair of shears with a spring between the

handles. He runs his finger over the blades which are straight yet sharp enough to open his skin. At last, something he could use.

He leaves the shed and the first thing he hears is dogs barking from somewhere behind and from across the yard. Goncalves realises, they're at least a pack from the noise. After a few metres of walking, six, long-haired-shaggy beasts with hair falling into their eyes, come into sight. Not the kind of dogs he expects.

A rail runs across one end of the yard, which the dogs are chained to and have limited movement from. With his approach they begin to group, snarling more than barking. The kennels on the other side, remind him of termite hills in the bush, their colour like fired-earth and one or two with the tops caving in. Next to the kennels is a drinking trough, rectangular in shape, the size of a bath filled with muddy water. A long-arm pump is braced to the wall above, a pump he associates with the water tanks in Mozambique- the arm back and forwards in an arcing motion. The trough seems too far from where the dogs are and he isn't sure how they drink.

Before he realises, there's an explosion of footsteps behind him and a few men have come around, there's no time to react to be afraid as they encircle him. Moses and the guard Oubaas, the remaining persons he doesn't know, he hears the dogs, sees their shaggy shapes strain from their leashes.

No one says a word.

There's a gap between one man and the pump on the wall, Goncalves rushing in the direction. But he's too late. Oubaas throws the weight of his body behind Goncalves, locking his fingers at the back of his neck.

I'm going to die, the thought comes to him as his head is yanked back and his shoulders stretch. The strength of the man...gripping his collarbone, jerking his spine into a spasm. For the first time he's terrified Oubaas will break him in two.

"Please," he says, feeling his legs buckle under. But no one seems to care.

Oubaas shoves him to the trough and presses his head into the mucky water while Moses stands apart, as a vague figure. Goncalves tries to push up but the weight of the hand on his head is so mighty.

He's gasping for air, muck streaming into his nostrils and ears. His head hits the zinc and he can not hear the dogs bark.

By the time Ravi arrived many days later, Goncalves had been in the infirmary for over a week.

What about his kidneys? She asks the state doctor. Her impression of the man is that he's a swimmer from his shoulders, which are full-sized without being bulky and tapering to a narrow-waist, his skin and eyes too have a reddish-chlorinated look.

"He's not willing to make a statement," he says, "Either he's too afraid or ashamed. They found him at the kennels with nasty blows to the body and back of his head, there was also an indication of near-drowning. Obviously, whoever had pushed him into the drinking pen and held his head down. He keeps waking in the middle of the night, pulling the oxygen mask off. I'm not dead, he keeps saying. Why am I in a grave?"

The doctor turns towards Goncalves as he speaks, the illegal immersed in white sheets with a drip reaching from his forearm and a monitoring machine above his bed, near his bedside there's a metal draw and on it a bottle of water with a plastic cup covering the top.

Ravi doesn't trusts hospitals or this infirmary, at the other end of the social scale. The doctor moves over to the machine, watching the rhythms of Goncalves' heart, recognising the same pattern again and again. Somehow by this doctor she feels reassured, he strikes her as the very model of fitness – a man with enough discipline to rise every morning and swim lengths in a gym pool.

He looks carefully at Goncalves while he writes, "Kidney's are fine," he says, "Might burn when he takes a piss though, but that won't last..."

He clears his throat, conscious of his lapse in language; "Uhm this sort of thing happens," his gaze wavers from the chart to her arms folded over her breasts.

Behind her there's motion at the window, she turns around, framed between the window's bars a boy and girl peer in. They are holding hands, the girl with short hair curling in at her chin, the children wave before running off. The same feeling arises, whenever she sees children at Sindela, though she's been many times to the camp. The concept of Sindela itself is simple - a facility to detain illegals until deportation. But her work with the Development Agency brings her into contact with the inner workings of the place and no amount of persuasion could convince her holding children here was right.

The doctor moves towards the doorway and attends to a nurse who's popped her head in, giving Ravi a moment alone. Not that time alone with Goncalves was necessary. She observes the mass of his body so lifeless, unlike his flurry of daily actions when stripping cars or walking through the yard.

The sheet is tucked under his arms and he's wearing a cotton hospital gown of the palest blue, wide at the throat to reveal his collarbone, the tie-strings at the gown's neck coming round to the front. She can't help but think how peaceful he looks asleep. One might believe he hasn't changed. Maybe, he's gaunter in the face, but there aren't any scars marking his skin or stretching to the curly hairs at his temple. She has always considered him on the 'Coloured,' side of appearance - well able to pass the pencil and brown-paper tests of the old country.

The nurse and doctor are speaking in whispers, Ravi unsure why since the other beds in the infirmary are unoccupied. The nurse has a middle part down her scalp, Ravi noticing the papery line as she bends her head to the doctor's.

After five minutes or so, he returns, "I'm afraid we can't release him," he says, in a soothing tone, which delivers the bad news. He's trained to break things gently and she wants to snap at him for this. *Don't use that tone of voice on me.*

"He's to be deported," he says, "Haven't set a date yet but he's a jumper like the rest,"

One palm slips over the other, brought down to his belly, the doctor's hands are broad, his fingers long, she envisions him treading water, pulling through the next stroke. For her it's a matter of distraction, since she doesn't want to choke on answers to his questions.

“I can tell you how,” she says, “I’m with the Development Agency. That’s right, my name he’s put me down as a point of contact.”

She goes on to explain, sometimes hosting some of the Agency’s chargers, giving them bits of odd work.

The doctor registers mild surprise, he’s scribbling on the chart contact numbers, address, there’s no one else around, although she hears the nurse walking in the corridor outside.

“You could be right of course...but they picked him up in a *buffel* a few kilometers from the border.” He nods, “If he doesn’t have papers...I’m afraid it’s the law.”

Ravi opens her bag, “Insurance will take care of it,” she says, handing over an envelope. They look at each other. The doctor takes the envelope in his swimmer’s hands and holds it by an edge before flapping it near his ear, as if he hears the rise and fall of the notes.

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## Five

### *Doctors & Keepers*

Pat had once dreamt of a shelter for Joburg's unwanted brands of felines, a flat green where his cats were partitioned off by low walls, where he'd play piano fortes for them to stretch to, where tortoises would slink spiritedly in and out their shells.

And when the sun dulled, the lotus petals floating in the green's fountains and the circling coy fish would take a suffused hue over their pinks and oranges. Here he'd have music away from the scores of the city.

As a boy there'd seemed no limit to what Pat could or could not do. Before *Mama* had decided that no money was to be made from pet shops and that Pat would run the family's hardware store in Lenasia, south of the city.

Lens with its mix of mosques and *mandhirs*, temples had been a bustle, attracting bargain hunters from afar afield as Eldorado Park and Soweto, and in the space of three decades the Maistry's had moved from a busy hardware store to a thriving parts business.

Now he woke up in the dull air of his office as if on another brain wave. The pet shop had lingered into the dream of a shelter, the realisation of it seeming to quiver in the room, all around the walls, on the patterns of his carpet.

So he was at odds with himself, wanting to get out into the sun. But he abandoned the idea, knowing it was only procrastination. Soon Ravi would arrive and though he'd prepared his defence, he saw her standing with her legs like tent pegs into the ground and her face narrowed into a determined point.

He looked through the window onto the street at the spread of small buildings, Fabrizio's Pick n' Tyre, Derby's Car Wash, at the undressed mannequins in the windows of Essop's Garments.

The long road had been changed almost overnight by the presence of cranes and beeping machines. Many shop entrances stood interrupted by men waving flags or the bulk of the flatbed trucks en route to the stadium. Still the murk of Bertrams lay

unconcealed in the shattered streetlamps and in the appearance of loiterers who grew like crops on the street's corners. Pat suspected that the murk of the place would be the last of it to go.

He watched the engine of Ravi's car fade.

She stepped into the broad day and gave the sign on the roof a poking look, Pat's Scraps & Spares (for all your scrapping needs).

When Ravi was younger he'd snuck looks at her unsure if she was his child. What niggled at him was her height, the sausage mole above her lip, the tiered spots on her nose...none of these were in the Maistry genes. Only the smoke reeking on her skin had reassured him - since theirs was a line of smokers. Whenever Pat passed Filepe the cigarette vendor at the traffic circle, he had a feeling of his lungs opening up as if his bronchiole knew that cigarettes were close by. Some days Pat still rolled a smoke and tapped it on the table.

Before he realised it, Ravi was swinging the office door wide and walking through smiling her lip-glossed smile, her eyes abnormally bright, surveyed the room before she sat down on the swivel-backed chair. She was not one to greet and he knew not to expect even a jot of affection from her.

For a moment the image of the girl seated on the same chair blossomed in his mind, bare legs knocking together at the knees, bobbed curls mingled with her tears. Then he'd laughed at her wrinkly nose and crying. A bygone time...how the girl had grown into a self-possessed woman wearing a suit with crossing lapels and square-shoulders.

Still, there was too much of a shine on her and he sensed that something was up. Already he felt himself agitated by her gaze. But he'd go with it for a few seconds.

She stood up and walked over to the window, as if she were checking on her car.

He wasn't sure if he should voice the subject, it was harder than he'd expected.

"Remind me, what you're doing here," she asked and turned around.

He heard the sarcasm. "Same as we've always been doing," he said with a nervous laugh.

She walked promptly to the desk and dumped her handbag on it; he wasn't far away, she almost leaned over him, her smile replaced with a face of interrogation, "Is this your idea of a joke?"

"I'm not sure..."

She cut him off, "No point denying it, I've seen them already."

He knew the effect was to startle him, make him admit without considering what he was saying. With Ravi there never was any straight dealing, if not with words she'd trick him with gestures, her angry or beseeching tone even the smell of her cigarettes, it was all in a spell of disarmament.

"We're not running a pet shop," she said. Again that glint in her eye, her face losing its sternness, her lips turning upward into a fake contour of sympathy.

*She was mocking him.*

But he had prepared his speech and he was intent on delivering it, "If we take the cats to the animal welfare," he began, "they'll put them down. Please let me speak to Usma first..."

"I mean, even with your full-proof security system," she said, "Do I have to remind you of the dangers of this business?"

But she had reminded him. The sharpness of it, releasing a chill he could feel in his veins and he experienced all that was wrong with him. There was no point in fighting Ravi, whatever argument he'd formed stayed stuck in his throat. He knew that he would bear all her criticisms, since it was the least he could do for her.

"You've got two weeks," Ravi said, "Rat poison works just as well on cats."

The next minute the two heard feet along the corridor, a dragging step in the hum of the shop. Manchulu the cleaner who ought to have been down in the workspaces of the stall had come up.

"I'm sorry..." she interrupted.

Pat tried to disguise his annoyance that no one had come to his rescue. Just sorry Manchulu, who was always sorry for some sort of catastrophe or the other (like discarding parts or important purchase forms) in one of her cleaning sprees.

Ravi embraced the woman who gasped at the greeting. Manchulu had been around forever, attuned to Ravi's jokes and much of her teenage angst. Quite often Pat had believed the two to be in league against him.

For some while he hadn't quite noticed the cleaner, just the blur of her hair in a pile of cloth as she cleared around him. No complaints just straightening out his mess. Ah well, lately he'd had a lot on his mind.

"What's going on?" his own voice sounded uncomfortable by the sets of eyes on him.

He'd been right to be suspicious of them. Before Ravi could announce it, he knew, and fumbled about in his head for the right response. What he found was anger and flashes of hatred for the women, no more than any man who was rendered powerless.

Manchulu had come to announce the arrival of Dr Singh who had treated the Maistry's for a long list of ailments. Pat's nails dug into his palms, the room seeming shadowed in his resentment. *What*. He didn't want doctors or tests or the weak tea drunk in hospital rooms.

There was a flicker on Manchulu's face which Pat recognised as the panic of an employee who realised she'd stepped too far.

Ravi saw immediately that Dr Singh was in more than his mercurial mood, as he dispensed with pleasantries and got right to it, "Where is he? You know I don't make house calls."

His voice boomed, the words expelled from his diaphragm. This combination of voice and long-trouser safari suit (which he always wore) had unsettled Ravi as a child.

Singh was so unlike the mild mannered television doctors she'd watched in their flowing white coats and striped ties. Added to that Singh was devoted to Sai Baba, from the examining bed in his rooms, Ravi had stared up at photos of the Sai, meditative under a mop of wild hair and wearing a flaming orange robe. The Sai, legendary for making prayer ash out of thin air and healing the lame, had spent most of his life in an ashram in India. For Ravi, it had been quite impossible to relax under the Sai's stare and this would forever add to her impressions of Dr Singh.

The brothers Singh had treated all generations of the Maistrys in what was considered a long association of shopkeepers and doctors, Bharath the bone specialist, Viktor the family's cardiologist and Vishnu their general healer.

Ravi summoned Manchulu, asking her to find her father.

"If anything happens to him, I tell you what...." Singh said.

"He's probably just playing with the cats. Have a seat and I'll get you a cup of tea, doctor."

Singh cleared his throat. "Never been the same since your mother."

"Let me see about that tea," Ravi said and made towards the door.

"My girl, I'm talking to you."

"*Ji*," she had picked up the word used widely in the northern parts of India from high-school Gujarati friends, she should have in fact, addressed Sing as *Doctorji*.

There was distress in his tone as the Dr said, "I don't have much time. What's the matter with the fool anyway?"

"I'm not sure."

"Of course you're not sure. You're not a doctor; apply your mind, my girl. Or have you gone rusty from all these parts?"

Much to Ravi's relief, her father entered the room.

Singh took in the pallor of Pat's complexion and the black smudges under his eyes, "About time," he said to Pat.

"I wasn't expecting you, Singh."

The doctor began unpacking his bag, taking out his stethoscope and pressure kit,

"Well Pat" he said, "I hope you've got a urine sample."

A week later, when the door was shut on the street and Goncalves was making up shifts, Ravi watched him with no one around. She stood in a gap between the walls used for storing wood and though it had not been her intention at first, the longer she stood there the harder it became to reveal herself.

The cars took centre-stage in their numbers, seven altogether with free-standing doors and smoky, double-barrelled exhausts. How much did a car weigh? Ravi had never considered this before, going to the other extreme she quickly calculated – it seemed a disproportionate weight of metal to the one man in the centre them all.

Nothing had improperly aroused her curiosity, since all was as she'd come to expect.

This was the first time she stood there, listening to the metal press in its final stages and the feet tramping into the outside from the change-room behind her. The sound of the machine and fading bodies were a restless stimulation, she wanted to say something, letting her presence be known.

But by then Goncalves was already surveying the cars, facing the windshields and the shells of bonnets. She had a view of his profile, rubbing dust between his fingers before tracing a line over one car's roof. Ravi was surprised, expecting more mechanical behaviour.

He smiled as if the cars acknowledged his presence and Ravi flattened into the gap, by then too late to overcome the embarrassment at seeing him, from his usual stance down under cars with a wrench and rag to this display of service.

After wiping the Cooper down, he lay on his side and with a few jerks of the spanner, pulled the bumper from the grid and placed it on the tray alongside him on the floor. She watched him rise to his knees, push his hands into the headlight socket, his fingers at the ends of the glassy eye, detaching it, before muttering into the shop, where the cars were indifferent to his flow of motions.

'Ronaldino pass it, get on there Frings,' and between these utterances she heard him say words in Portuguese, she didn't quite get.

There was only the sound of his voice with her father tucked far away in his sickbed and the shop's workers in flight to their taxis and buses. She felt a thrill at the sound of his words, her neck craning further from the gap.

A jack had been winded up and secured under a car on the other end, Goncalves leaning from inside the cab to pop the bonnet.

She caught his face as he moved around to the front and bent to lift the engine – he was leaner since Sindela, his cheekbones, the tops of his shoulders seemed to poke their way. Yet when he reached or pulled, the veins on his forearms were roped like cords.

He lifted straight-up, balancing the engine against his sternum, choking out a sound and standing for a moment crushed to the weight of it. Lips heavy and blue, his tongue flickering at the corners of his mouth. Bit by bit he walked out of her view to the stalls and Ravi glimpsed at the sweaty stain across his back.

She had not grown to associate such strength with Indian men. Since these were men like her father, insubstantial men imbued with softness. Even amongst the tallest and strongest of her cousins, Ravi could spot this underlying weakness. She realised that he was built with more than toughness that something virile was in every utterance, in every touch of his hands. For an astute observer she had been oblivious to this for too long.

Now she watched in guilty fascination, brushing the fringe from her eyes. He called from the arch of the stalls, walking in a dribble of steps. Ravi shivered. If he discovered her, she would never lose the shame from memory. But his words were to the cars, obscure snatches, names, Gomez, Enry; he went through an identical routine of calling out to them, ‘Pass.’

Finally facing the ensemble again in the confine of final-trim, he paused, as if hoping the cars would reveal a life beyond their extinguished skins. Maybe flare a windscreen wiper or toot a horn. She only imagined and smiled.

A sink stood against the wall and adjacent to it were buckets of acid washes, as well as strippers, Goncalves shook his head at someone’s negligence and pressed the lids down. He set to work with a puncher, first using a cloth to wipe away greasy emissions and fluid; afterwards he fitted the tools into trays. That done he filled the sink with running water and immersed the headliners, discs and mouldings into it.

Ravi gauged the spectrum of his duties and realised, she was watching only the surface. Day after day he laboured and she had come to expect it.

By then the rush hour traffic had passed, she wondered if he'd take the road downtown, his arms dropping in exhaustion as he closed the tap. She could hear men on the pavements outside, talking in foreign tongues.

Goncalves raised his head to the noise at the window, as if curious about the events away from work and within the city's nightlife.

Ravi unsure how to get out of the gap without embarrassing herself- clearly he was done for the day, having packed the tools and cloths. He turned and stared into an unseen spot, one hand idling on the buttons of his shirt.

She was reluctant to look at the swirly crop of hair spreading out from the calico into a v, his chest hairs in their earliest stages of graying. But despite her better sense, she watched as he peeled the overall to his waist, allowing it to fall casually over his behind, then pacing a step or two as if he were suspicious of someone there. Doing so he set the sleeves of his shirt in motion, his ribs, high and drawn pushed out from his torso.

She tried to anticipate his next move...

He dressed in his street clothes fastening the strap of his watch, no doubt wondering of her absence and walking in the direction of the change-room.

She had rescued him from the infirmary of Sindela and for that he was grateful. Yet by the hours of the day they behaved as two people, who were separated by the boundaries of position and class.

It is nearly six o' clock, Goncalves realises as he walks from the change-room back to the Fitment area.

If she's lounging in the office upstairs, as she sometimes does, chalking out the necessary lines over her father's books...

But that's the burden of the worker, having to wait and having to live in fear.

When he enters Fitment, he's surprised by her presence, her hand on the Cooper and downcast smile – usually, she's shouting orders to workers or her father. There's a word in Portuguese for women like her.

He cannot fault any of her features, but she's too tall too thin. In fact she's shaped like one of her cigarettes, another habit he disapproves of.

“I’m sorry,” Ravi says, walking between cars, her hands going from one to the other, “About keeping you.”

She doesn’t look at him when she speaks and he finds this puzzling. But there’s not much he can do, seems there’s something on her mind. The wages book lay on the table, a black, thick, ledger, with faded pages covered in blue scribbles and red margins drawn on the right-hand side of each page.

“Tell me then,” she says, “Have you been coping?”

It’s not easy finding his name amongst the list of workmen or verifying his shifts and number of hours.

“I mean, have you been coping since the camp?”

He writes his signature in the margin, his left hand raised, as if waving away her concern; he turns around, staring her straight in the eye, wanting to make a point of sincerity, his indebtedness, “You know I’m very grateful.”

Her face goes red, seems she’s embarrassed by his ‘sincere’ look. She turns to the window and he spots the edge of her mouth as she swallows spit.

He says, “Anything I can do to help, while your father’s recovering...”

But she interrupts him, with a raised hand, appearing contemptuous at his suggestion of help. “In the envelope...” she says, pointing to the pocket-sized envelope besides the ledger.

He picks up his wages; his pride will not allow him to count the notes in front of her.

Later that night Goncalves paces the length of his room, holding a burning candle in hand and in the wavering light, he remembers the mist of Sindela’s showers, the men hip-swinging their legs from the bunks to floor. He begins to shiver, his throat feeling scratchy and his head aches, as if he’s about to catch a cold.

The Indian woman was in the right place, opening the infirmary’s shutters, bringing him the light of day. Indians were always in the right place. He paces, progressing through his usual states of wakefulness and worry about being detected in the city, about Ravi and how far she would go to help him. There are times when he does not know what to make of her eyes on him in his working life, her concern for the health of the workers.

Yet she barks orders to them, there's harshness in her voice. Deep down, she must enjoy their subordination.

He could never again lapse to Sindela; he will require papers and a legitimate status to live by in this city.

Days later the phone rings.

Ravi doesn't know what to make of the shattering sound at three in the morning. Maybe work was bringing news of another more desperate client. She couldn't afford debating whether to take the call. Besides, what if her father had acquired his final illness?

"Did I wake you?" he begins, sounding more like a frightened child.

"It's three in the morning," she says, changing the receiver in her hands.

"Ravi..."

"You're not taking your medication," (it's what he does when he's nervous.)

"Makes me sleep during the day."

She imagines him hunched on the edge of the bed with his eyes blinking. Three o'clock is never an hour... "What is it?"

"Still need a hundred for the yard," he says, "Another thing, the Stripper..."

"Strip fitter,"

"Whatever his name, he hasn't been back in days."

There's a pause and she hears him breathe into the phone, she's tempted to slam the receiver. But at the mention of Goncalves, she pushes the pillows back against the headrest.

Her father knows her ambivalence towards the yard, wanting at once to disown all dealings with it but since this was impossible, she'd swing her energy into the workers, taking on the role of shop steward, looking after health and safety...

"Did you question the others? I thought so," she says.

"Of course yes...I did. Got out his records and called the number too. There was no one."

She can't help her irritation though his words are slurring. She's tired of these three in the morning calls. Soon he'll drop the phone, his head denting the pillow and she'd be left awake to his problems.

"Ravi..."

When he says her name like that... "Don't worry, I'll fix it," she says and hangs up.

What to make of it? Ravi doesn't know and looks around for her gown, on the chair by the fireplace, which is a walnut-paneled fireplace, an original feature of these early, Randlord homes. Of course it still works but she never uses it like many items in her room, on the far side the porcelain rinsing dish and jug, her mother's wooden trunk for all its adornments stands empty.

Some light from the curtains guides her as she half tugs the gown, at the same time glancing at her shadow on the wall, hair in a thick plait, resting on the flannel of her gown. She's too old for her years and how cold it often is when she gets into bed.

Like the sheet is sleeted in ice. Yet all the homes in Kensington are draughty, the cold cutting over the roofs and whistling down into the chimneys.

Goncalves, as hard as she tries, she can't bring to mind why he's disappeared.

She'd brought him back in her car, with warnings and pronouncements behind them in the dust. He'd shut the door, checking to see if it was properly locked. In the rearview mirror Ravi had seen his face, more than despondent, as if he'd shrunken in his skin, the tracksuit top hung too loose on his shoulders.

But it was more than the physical changes. In her mind Goncalves was connected with motion- freeing trim from seats, testing the torque in tools. A fluid person she had a clear picture of from how he'd stripped cars. Afterwards, when despondency again had settled, he'd seemed stiff, awkward as she paid his wages. While she had been incapable of saying anything real; even now she couldn't express how the immediacy of his presence had made her feel.

Tomorrow she would find him.

## Six

### *Birthday in the Park*

Three months ago two hundred squatters were removed from the river's plains. By six in the morning, a crew had begun clearing a tree downed in the shallows, Ossei had marveled at the chainsaw splitting the bark, at the diggers trawling the river for branches. The squatters appeared to have left it all for last: men pushed bicycles; boys chased chickens, mothers yanked up falling children. Finally, the bulldozers had set to demolishing the shacks amidst the cheers and blasts of toxic dust.

Ossei stood on the bridge which extended over the far-east bank and the river, dividing the township into old and new, away to his right ran a cobbled path, beyond it were the teardrop lawns. At first it had been desolate without the children on the plains, tossing around bitten balls, the outlying streets were within his sight and he glimpsed at the brick houses where the squatters were relocated to.

There might well have been only three, four years before the whole of extension seven had risen up from redevelopment. Going up fifty at a time were houses with raft foundations and compost patches plus the rental complexes with their bagged-washed walls. It always amazed him. There were schools, clinics, libraries, all in the name of renewal programmes – fresh coats of paint brushed with a detached kind of attention.

The very bridge impassive in structure was christened, Vasco da Gama. Ossei didn't understand naming it after the colonial navigator since the great hilarity around renaming in the country. Not everything made sense here and he wished the bridge had taken longer to build, since he'd enjoyed waiting for the soil to be stripped or watching the operator crane the giant drill, he'd gazed up at the incongruous head getting its bearings right. Flint and rock and clod had welled from the earth. Depending on size, you couldn't drill too low or the bridge would collapse.

Now he tested its sureness, leaning on the rail. No chance it would crumble. It was June and the sun shortened his shadow on the water, he could smell the cut grass

mingling with the smoke of a fire. A dozen or so tables were spaced away in corners of the park, some obscured by the planes of trees, others by the low hedges and swings. Drifters nearby the fence started the walk home, otherwise the park was quiet. After a minute or two he heard a car through the trees, the Chevrolet rattling on the main road.

He waited some time for their paces across the sandy parking then the stepping up again. The cold climbing higher into the day, he watched the two men descend; they reminded him of the Amigos he'd once seen at a drive-in theatre- with a mountain of cloud behind in the frame, hats pulled low, bags slung around middles like water-skins.

Manjate wore a furry belt crossed over his hips and swinging with his stride; Ossei chuckled remembering the motion of the Amigo's holsters. The youth was catchy in his buttercup jacket with a feather sticking from his hat; he seemed in a playful mood. Again it affirmed Ossei's affection for him.

Looking at the group from the bridge, it struck Ossei that decades afterward, as long as anyone cared to remember, the bridge would have been there dominating the landscape of the park.

Manjate gave the tables a brisk look, his eyes swatting the women at a distance. "Brought my own Cobra," he said to Ossei who was seated on the table with his legs apart. The other arrivals were unbundling, easing their bags off shoulders or placing cutlery onto mats.

Manjate pushed a Cobra, Ossei's way. "What'd you think?"

There was always something in his hands, tossed between palms or flicked over. Manjate had shifty hands. "About what?"

"Them over there."

Ossei turned his head to the women, noticing their empty glasses.

"Never seen you with a woman. Not even *skeberash*."

"You just arrived," Ossei said to him, "Wish me happy birthday first. "

He left a satisfied-looking Manjate to greet the others, the two wives of the Somali mason in their striped and woolen *hijabs*; the goateed blockman with his hair pinned against his

scalp and without a trace of building grime. He was troubled by this show of Sunday best, sneaking a glance at his own shirt ruined by varnish and despite the pitches of water and soap, his nails were permanently yellow.

Then Cormaj presented herself with her mouth in a rupture as she kissed him on the cheek, her legs disappearing in the voluminous skirt. How lovely, she was. He found her fussing over him, as his mother would.

“Where’s Eduardo?” he asked but before she answered, he slipped in amongst the baggy sweaters to find the man himself.

Pleased by the activity around, Ossei steadied his voice aware of his tone pitching higher— since he had never celebrated here before. Nowadays he lived with his heart although it might seem indecent – his singular celebration on Youth Day. He felt no sense of pride or patriotism towards the ’76 uprisings and the hundreds of children gunned. Today he wanted to remember himself.

The crowds on pavements earlier, groups of policemen whom bystanders had acknowledged, while Ossei had gazed across to the traffic circle impeded by a troupe of marimba players, he hadn’t heard the notes, only seen the *toi-toing* and lifting fists. When the parade had passed, residents had huddled back into their homes. And much to Ossei’s relief, activity had died with the cold.

The foreigners had the greens for their gathering, women circulating between tables, as well as Cormaj who dispensed drinks and the stewed fruit she’d prepared. Twilight planked across the faces in front of him, soon he would set the lamps onto tables and squeeze fire into drums. And in a few hours it would all be over.

Eduardo was tempted to explore the greens himself, though there was vacancy in the park and on the road without children kicking the gates on house-fronts. But it wasn’t a wise idea, so he waited at the riverside looking at the water already darker than the sky. Far across the other side, he could see the dome of the medical-centre buttressed by panels of steel and the dim lines of match-box houses.

“There you are,” Manjate said.

He passed him, keeping his gaze on the path, while other youths hurried behind, leaning so far forward down the slope, Eduardo feared they would fall. The river was bordered by logs and a not too distant a copse of trees, the trio waited at the bottom of the slope for Eduardo to join. Manjate flung handfuls of rocks into the water. He's just a boy, Eduardo thought, more reckless since his return from Mozambique. His sense was to keep asking him questions, if Manjate forgot his station in the city, he'd soon follow the rocks into the river.

At last Eduardo let himself down, tripping almost into them. Manjate mumbled something incoherent – before pressing on for bigger bits of wood at the copse.

With two or three peeling branches loaded into his arms, he could hear the trio ahead of him ducking the brambles further in. Soon with arms full they would return to load the kindling into the drums. Then the rings of fire and smoke bruising the air. Celebrations would suffuse with the night, although his common sense said not to – they were inviting trouble.

They returned to those gathered, Cormaj sitting atop a table with women around her. She had not seen him. She was singing. Everything about her, from hips to bosom was maternal and full, yet she had never nursed children who someday would nurse their own.

Eduardo wasn't quite sure what he witnessed amidst the circle drawing around his wife, who sang of mountain people welcoming each other and watching the time go by from their hamlets.

But how he admired her. He had no regrets, though Cormaj was in a fury over every birthday had by niece or nephew, some dead even those newborn.

He'd steer her into a chair, force down a glass of sugar-water. She ranted no matter whose son or daughter it was. Her mouth kept opening. Eduardo had withstood it all, deferring to her longing, to her curves wasted without birth. No sons or daughters whose veins flowed with his blood. Exactly now, if he cut himself, it would all be inside him.

By then the men were drifting around the wood, prodding sticks with other sticks, unperturbed by the women singing or whispering confidences.

He noticed Ossei levelling the ground with the back of a spade in the distance, a few men rolling drums forward, some already hoarse with laughter and he could smell the liquor on one crewman, unbuttoning his coat as if he had overcome the cold.

Manjate and a mason – whose name escaped Eduardo - reached for the bricks, stringing them as markers between drums. They had some practice in the business – and were aware you couldn't light fires too close. Holes had been made high up the barrels; balls of paper lain at the bottoms, some between the branches where the rotting wood had weakened.

He was caught off-guard by the blur of a drum being toppled at the furthest table, after the beechnut tree and halfway to the fence. Eduardo noticing the local men hunched over a blaze, their hands taking the shape of their talk. *How they were going to fix things in this country. How they wouldn't back down.* Each swill of beer seemed to mark a rush of new ideas, guffaws and stares, he looked at their shifting poses and realised that as foreigners, theirs was a smaller life.

Sparks from their drum had spilled like fiery drops onto the grass, the ash overflowing onto wood. One man pulled the shirt-collar of another to make a point. Still, they were located far enough and Eduardo couldn't hear clearly or read the hand signs made. The copse, rock piles and lines of the river were now enfolded in the dark and from behind the trees he heard the noise of the street.

No one besides him appeared nervous; perhaps it was the presence of the police-station on Fifteenth, right in front of the taxis. Eduardo had worked with the crew on the five-block building, a few metres inland. Besides, they had safety in their numbers and he'd programmed the emergency dials into his phone.

It wouldn't take long for the police to reach the park. With the new station, council had repaired the roads in the vicinity, which before had been so riddled with potholes that a single lane had been reserved for emergency vehicles and school busses. It was chaos with the heavy-toners like Uncle Sam's bread-vans heading up and the minibus taxis hooting their warnings at the bends. He was glad that some good for everyone, had come from the renewal programmes.

A transistor radio roiled a tune, the women responding by beating a rhythm with their bodies, moving towards Ossei and surrounding him. Ossei glimpsing at the legs entangling, the behinds in the air and at the shadowy figures of the men standing on the sides.

The park was constrained in the dark, soon Eduardo wouldn't see his own hand in front of him, save by the light of the fires or the lamps on tables. Few people remained, no one, he was certain was at the break in the copse of trees. Still there were the men from earlier...

Ossei wasn't used to the attention or the flagrant designs made with arms and legs. Eduardo observed this, enjoying his discomfort.

'*Dambagingo*,' Cormaj said and raised her face to his. Ossei obligingly pecking her cheek- you could tell how he didn't want the fuss. But he was too polite to the ladies. Eduardo knew him amongst the construction crew, somewhere faraway, while the men jawed with their mouths full. His daydreaming made for much mockery amongst the crew, especially Manjate wanted to wring out his dreams. Oh and Ossei was ripe for it. The two jested in a slang Eduardo didn't always understand with odd expressions like 'cabin' for home or they'd mix building tools such as front-loaders with words for body parts, 'Empty your front-loader *guz*?' leaving Eduardo to infer more from their actions. Young men were a separate class of men.

And there was Manjate right on cue, attempting a rescue from the convoy of women. His eyes were flushed from the beer and he bowed, making a wide sweep with his feathered-hat. The women piled in his direction, looking for a moment at his silliness. Most of them, wives or daughters nodding scarf-wrapped heads or *tut-tut-ing* tongues. Ossei escaped with a weak remark about starting the fire while Manjate grew inventive, challenging them to oust him. He was having a grand time, kicking his legs and flapping his arms in a 'chicken dance,' not unlike the dances at wedding receptions in northern Mozambique.

Ossei walked over the dead leaves, limey and brown on the ground, he was relieved to escape the women and grateful to Manjate for his usefulness after all. He reached for a bottle, uncorked it, afterwards holding a cup out to Eduardo. The two clinking plastic

before they sipped, the older man grimaced, unaccustomed to the taste, not that Ossei was much of a wine drinker himself.

“Fixed the houses here,” he said, “After the floods.”

“Ay,” Ossei unsure where the talk was heading.

Eduardo gestured with his cup in hand, the wine wobbly near the brim, “Minute by minute went by before the Mozambicans were pulled from the river,” pointing to the far table, “Take a look, just take a look.”

But what was that? Only local men warming themselves over a drum, enjoying the public holiday like the foreigners. Ossei studied them more to pacify Eduardo cos when he got like this...One sat on a folding chair and dangled his legs, he watched the man watching him, while another from the group crossed over to a pile of bricks, lifting one, putting his eye to the brick’s hole.

“Back home, we say ...”

Eduardo interrupted him, “Problem is you’re a dreamer Ossei.”

About a hundred metres from where they stood, a loose ensemble of crewman crossed to a patch of flattened earth where the fires were roaring in drums. Ossei became distracted by the mason whose name still escaped him and the middle-aged-Congolese operator, normally taking his shoes off during lunchtimes and exposing his bloated feet. The two shouted for them to join.

Ossei waved in greeting, before reaching down to tie his laces, when he looked up Eduardo was already tiptoeing over, careful not to cut the lines of talk and taking a place besides Manjate and another youth fuelling a drum.

On one side, the wood and kindling were surmounted by milk-boxes, gift-wrap and plastic: anything to feed the fire, while some men sat on overturned crates with empty quarts of beer stockpiled under a table nearby.

Manjate wriggled from his jacket, warmed by the flames and booze. Goodness, he’d regret it tomorrow. For a second, he swayed, his feathered hat shaking with emphasis of this or that. Opinions were his problem. It forever was. However Ossei tried to dissuade him, he had something to say. Now he protested to the ensemble without any sense.

“In Queilimane we have a saying, if you slaughter a goat, you eat it.” Manjate paused, “That means you do as promised. Brothers fighting the common enemy of enslavement

by the white man, they needed arms, so we gave them arms. Now they're turning our guns on us. That's shit *bafana*."

Humorlessness talk which didn't suit Manjate's speaking, his seriousness injected tension and some men cast nervous stares.

Eduardo observed Ossei trying to steer Manjate from the talk, faltering by his own hesitation and then finally getting a word in. Soon Eduardo would have to say something – since he was the closest Ossei had to an elder, he hadn't written anything down only rehearsed it in his head. The shop-steward onsite, holding his hardhat and negotiating the crew's wages or shifts, many suspected he was a convenient speaker but it wasn't the case.

He'd colour up (though you couldn't see it) and look around. Drunk friends, family and crewmen - little did they know. His English of the classroom; the jotter-books filled with spelling and imperfect tenses, outside of school in Quelimane hardly a word of it spoken. Eduardo felt aimless in English, speculating the next lines, not in Portuguese where his tongue didn't scrabble in spite of his accent. He sensed the keenness of those around wishing for Manjate's silence, Ossei standing so still amongst the touching shoulders.

Now was good a time as any.

"Comrades, brothers and sisters," Eduardo began, offering the old rhetoric from across the borders – the opening so familiar it seemed to fit any occasion.

"Thank you for coming tonight. My sisters you have outdone yourselves, spoiling us with a feast, your *chakalaka* sauce just the thing to warm up this winter. And may I be so bold as to say rarely have I seen a gathering of ladies so lovely..."

This drew a few giggles from the women, some of them a little uncertainly.

"Now as you know, today Ossei is twenty-five," he looked at Ossei, churlish, sipping his beer.

There was a roar from Manjate's corner, "Its time he takes a wife" – he shouted.

“Well,” Eduardo said into the whistles, “That’s been long overdue but my advice Ossei, make sure she’s not one of Manjate’s sisters. Since he’s the pretty one in the family.”

Generous laughter came from the group with a burble of hoots Manjate’s way.

When the noise subsided: “I’ve known Ossei for some time,” Eduardo said, “When he first arrived in the city, his lands were being taken, reforms introduced to give Rawlings more presidential powers and the price of everything in Ghana going up. Today Ossei has grown into a hardworking man, who doesn’t talk or eat much.

Truth is ...I can’t figure him out...”

For a second Eduardo caught Cormaj looking at him, pausing in mid-sentence. Her lips a pale crimson curled into a brownish line. She looked away and in that second he realised her guilt – she resented even Ossei for being born, for being mothered. Anyway he was pausing too long.

“Joburg is an uncertain place,” he said, “Everyone knows it’s not easy keeping your spot on these streets.”

By now the group had warmed to the lazy roll of Eduardo’s words, his leaning into and then uprightness, his occasional sweeping of the hand.

“It’s typical for us,” he said, “Those not born in the crooks of this country to celebrate quietly, to share private jokes. Just now I realised that in all my years of working and living here ...never before have I shouted or danced in the park. So thank you Ossei, for doing things your way.”

With that he raised his mug, “Happy birthday Ossei,”

Clapping and cheering went around; Eduardo’s eyes moist behind the mug.

## Seven

### *Hornby Vellard*

Manjate stopped at the foot of the stairs, still a distance from his flat at the very top of the Hornby Vellard. He pulled the bandana from his neck and blew his nose, hoping to clear the smell of cooking tripe circulating on the floor. Since returning to the city, he had seen Goncalves once or twice but the striker had come on so aggressive, like a freed bear. Manjate was wise enough to know that he needed time since the camp....

Doors were opening and closing, somehow he hoped to see the familiar face of his friend, with his boot wedged between their door and the frame. It hadn't occurred to Manjate that at this time of day, many residents would be returning home with their hawkers' nets, straight from the street stalls. Some doorways were crowded by children wanting something from him or by others clapping their hands in rhythm games. There was no sign of Goncalves and for the first time, he had a genuine feeling of concern.

The Hornby was one of seven blocks in a node of Berea identified for remodelling with plans for caged washing-lines and surveillance cameras as many of the buildings' in the city's margins. Yet the first-floor apartments were condemned and remained boarded up for years, Manjate had learned that white people had lived there in the early eighties, in assortments of five apartments per floor, with interiors of laminated floors and windows of coloured glass.

Now the flat's larger apartments were divided into seven rooms each, from the inside you could still see sheeting in the ceiling and the ends of electrical wire, these rooms inhabited by whole families. From the stairs, he watched the road separating swindlers with their fake watches from the pedestrians on pavements and faraway against the horizon, he made out the rotund head of Ponte. A bricklayer had told him once that English had all but disappeared from Ponte's foyers these days. Notices were put up in Yoruba and Hausa dialects.

The stairs vibrated from the motion of people climbing up, so Manjate turned from the street and continued. At the top of The Hornby he was grateful even for its dinginess – relieved to have made it at all back to Joburg. Their flat was at the end of an ill-lit corridor where an unsteady lightbulb dangled low and was squeezed in after a line of doors, occupied by residents who were jarred by the often violent motions of the city. His neighbour had two rooms- one housing a woman with her children and across the hall, the other rented by girl after girl, he didn't have a clue if the room was being sublet or of any strange goings on. No one was around as he approached (normally occupants poured out, stretching their fingers in a childlike greed, the mother turning her eyes and calculating when to smile, so as to appear desirable in the watt light – in these parts Manjate was a man of means).

The flat's door-handle was an old-fashioned knob with a large peephole on top, the doorpost cracked and disassembling in panels, he looked at the door and realised if he'd lost his key... he didn't have the strength to kick it down.

The last bottle of beer in the park had put him to sleep on Ossei's couch, where voices had chased each other in and out his dreams. He'd woken in his clothes from the previous day, reeking of smoke and booze, hair matted with ash and a headache flying like a Frisbee inside his head.

He searched his pockets for the key, looking over the balcony at the base of the building where steel rods pushed through the plaster, at this hour, there were no reflections from the rods. For the first time he laughed. Despite his hung-over state, he was too selfish to consider even a thought on jumping.

The after-work traffic nudged on the street all the way to the junction on the left, where he'd lose sight of the cars passing the Technikon building and further up the Lucky Dube memorial, where motorists often reminisced over the reggae music and miniature version of the singer.

With the door shut behind, Manjate blundered his way into the apartment, the flow of disorder too much for his eyes. Their flat, the last built into the corner of the corridor was the only one with double rooms and single occupants, the kitchenette setup in a small nook consisted of a hotplate, bar fridge, sink with a tiny window above and a chest of

drawers overrun by unwashed dishes, as well as jars full of till slips. Pipes leaked, plaster shed from the walls and though he could glaze windows and tar sewers, normally he was happy to live with an indifference.

He felt some welcome by the photo on the fridge though dog-eared and yellowed, showing Goncalves in midair with the ball sent off his boot, the crowd all blurry sharpening his face.

A week ago, home had been hard to envision. But he shrugged the thought, leaving the untidy accumulation in the kitchen. Goncalves's door was always open, like he was afraid of being alone in his room; Manjate drew back at the grainy wood filling the frame. No one was around to offer him even a pill.

At this point he heard a guarded knocking- Manjate hadn't detected any footsteps outside. The knocking escalating in frequency and he thought twice about answering. If it were a dirty kid or a snivelling woman wanting him to reach over and comfort her...Really, he wasn't in the mood. So he took his time, running water into the sink first and drinking, the rap of knuckles more insistent on the door, finally he gives himself up to it and answers.

He remembered her parading outside the workshop. She was the woman in charge, tall with too little meat on her bones. She seemed unselfconscious against the building, giving no sign of noticing his irritation.

"I'm here for Goncalves," she said, her voice confident. "Is he coming to work or not?" She looked ahead into the unknown flat and then at his chin where the blood had darkened into a prickly scab.

By her gaze he felt crumpled in his jacket and stained jeans. His earlier irritation displaced by an imagined judgement of him. He managed to stare at his legs, as if from worry about Goncalves, who hadn't shown up to work...

"I don't have to tell you there's no shortage of callers," she said, "Problem is everybody in the world wants a job."

Manjate realised, she'd come down from Illovo or wherever she lived to stand outside her worker's door. Either she really needed Goncalves or she cared. No wonder her proud tone.

Someone had turned a radio on next door; the announcer talking through the tuned speakers while the children came out into view and pressed together in interest. He saw she was beginning to feel uncomfortable and turned. Outside it was twilight, the shape of the corridor waned under the bulb, she glanced from side to side like she wanted to escape.

"Don't know where he is," Manjate said. The woman was after all, Goncalves's bread and butter; he wasn't back to his sharp, old self. Not yet...but he could deviate and smooth things over for his friend.

"Maybe he's gotten married and taken a long honeymoon" he said, reclining against the door, his pose less respectful.

He watched her face, the lips firming into a hard little line; there was glare on her glasses as she turned her head quickly. His cheekiness had riled her. Still, she was pretty.

"If he has some brains, you tell him, now's the time to use it," she said. "He's got two days."

Truth was though Manjate had done many women in his life, he had no experience with her sort. She had the smell he'd come to recognise on women from the suburbs, the wives of the wealthy landowners, the odd project manager who'd inspect a site in a hardhat and heels. Mostly, these women were white. She was something between.

He sighed listening to her footsteps past the reach of the children. Soon she'd be at the stairs, descending into the din of the street.

### *Green*

Less than a week ago, Manjate believed he was going to die. The guards had captured him in the weeds, while talking easily as if he were no more than a consideration to them, Goncalves jumping the fence with bullets missing him.

The third guard had acquainted Manjate with his hatred ...something he didn't quite understand down in the dirt and any moment expecting a bullet or another rifle-butt to his temple. They had driven him in the *buffel* with its massive tyres mashing everything in sight, a journey of seven kilometres from the post while the engine flared and mud went into the air each time they hit a pothole. Manjate handing over his money and the gun...

Been friends with Goncalves since boyhood, and when they'd fought it would go on forever, sometimes the one finishing the other's sentence, now and then the two sounding the same. Boys who'd rolled in the stockpiles of salt stored high on the banks of the river.

So he has no choice but to find Goncalves in the infinite spaces of the city, in the areas belonging to those below the law – like lots and parks, like the rises of mine dumps and the pitches with the greenest of grass covered by canvas.

Disappearing is what Goncalves does, just at the right time, when he's had enough of the sour air and chaos of Joburg. But Manjate knows exactly where – the stadium, after all not far from his place of work.

On the far side there's a construction hand pushing a barrow down a ramp and somewhere behind him, the noise of gates being stashed and crashed. Wearing his work overalls Manjate fits right in, just another half-seen worker from the site, while Goncalves sits very still on the stand; his gaze trained on the field, he's oblivious the construction around.

If Manjate walks a metre further, Goncalves will turn his head and notice, maybe contort his lips into an ugly sneer or fling a half brick in his direction – since many bricks lay about in the unoccupied seats.

He's nervous nearing, Goncalves with his eyes still on the field and the white line which splits it in two; he's taking in the fence too, shielding the stadium from the road beyond it.

Where Manjate is, the steps spread down one section of the stand, there are rows of plastic chairs clamoring below him, for a moment he wants to duck between rows, afraid of Goncalves' temper.

The field appears greener than usual under the white clouds and in the distance, logs are scattered at sections of the fence, as if some trees had to be taken down to make way for the stadium's bowl.

Goncalves turns with Manjate's approach, "You," he says and laughs a bitter laugh.

The sound of it cutting through the noise of the gates, if only Manjate could explain, say something about how he was beaten and later having to bribe a lift with the money in his shoe, how he'd hid in the truck under the reams of material... But for the first time in his life, he's quiet.

Goncalves signaling for him to make his way over, "You," he laughs, "I was hoping you were dead."

None of the ...what happened ...why you didn't wait questions he'd expected, none of the old anger showing on his face. Something has changed his friend who seems more a stranger to him, a stranger with a bitter laugh.

Both of them look ahead at the grass sweeping from infield towards the banner advertising around the pitch, neither having attended any soccer match here in Ellis Park where too many forces were entwined with the fans and their live-or-die attitudes in the local games. It was simply too dangerous for foreigners.

The silence between them is tense; Manjate aware, worse than a beating has happened to Goncalves, so he reverts to familiar ground, talking about a woman, "*Squeeza* came by *bafana*, the Indian woman from the shop."

Manjate hears him grunt, before his words rush out, "Ravi—she was there? With you, when?"

Manjate can't help his misguided self, "Don't worry *bafana*, told her you'd gotten married and gone on a long honeymoon." He laughs, coming forward and slapping his thigh as he does.

His flippancy goads Goncalves who gets up abruptly with his shadow falling over Manjate like an accusation, "Why didn't you stick to the plan? Same thing always with you. Never thinking just blabbing your mouth."

"Easy *bafana*," Manjate says, "I tried to smooth things for you. *Squeeza* gives you two days or you don't have a job."

Goncalves turns and walks towards the end of the row, after a few steps stopping and picking up a brick, he looks at Manjate and takes a step towards him. He drops the brick and walks away.

“Wait *bafana*, wait, you haven’t explained your whereabouts and what about your job?”

But Manjate was talking to a stranger already disappearing under the cover of the clouds, without an explanation or care. He did not believe Goncalves capable of really harming him with his hands, yet his friend had become one of two selves: the boyhood partner distinct from the man of a minute ago.

University Of Cape Town

## Eight

### *Morning Feet*

The high street of Yeoville is a long street with a host of walkers, hawkers and glue-sniffing children holding their hands out. Men in baggy jackets cross from side to side, eyeing those passing and there are scrappy girls from all the bits of the continent.

In the middle, somewhere between Raleigh and Rocky streets, the Hyper stands, a big-bricked brown-building, whose entryway is plied in torn notices for rentals and the services for cash conversions.

Mid morning on a Wednesday, Ravi only half hears him, since she's watching the yellow façade and floor of the store where few shoppers pick items from shelves, the strike discouraging the morning feet.

"If they choose to work fine, if they continue striking that's also fine. Fact is there are a lot of poor whites in this country who are hard up for work. Tomorrow I'll bus them in, the Bulgarians, right here on my doorstep." Ruttger says in a crisp accent, the German note detectible in his annoyance.

Ravi, no stranger to marches and sit-ins but Ruttger... She observes him, noting his hair like muffs over his ears and how he keeps smoothing it down. Still, there's a semblance of calm in his good blazer worn over the ironed khakis.

"*Scheisse*" - his eye is on the self-service fridge, where trays of skewered meat wobble on the shelf before heading in a down slide. "This is not even a legal strike," he says, "It can't go on," he limps out of the store, as if crushed by the fallen meats.

The sliding door wavers as he exits into the scene outside. Ravi unprepared yet to leave the cool of the air conditioning- the new system a considerable improvement on the old, with its large baffle-plates on fans grating long into the night. Not that the noise had been a problem on the street here. The big benefit was to Lathi the butcher at Fresh Selections, who sniveled less these days hefting carcasses to and from the fridge.

Ravi had asked around at the yard, she'd left a message at Goncalves's flat and finally concluded that he was either in hiding or he'd left town. After enquiring with both the

SAP and Joburg Gen, to see if police or the hospital had found him injured or dead, finally she'd made her way to the Hyper hoping for Lathi's help.

Since most of the yard's workers, shopped at the store (the yard acting as a kind of guarantor for credit on groceries) and the Hyper reciprocating with discounts on Christmas hampers Ravi arranged for the workers at every end of year. What she hadn't expected was to walk into the middle of a strike, there was nothing she could do but wait it out...

At full capacity, the store was a fairground of sights with its sawdust-speckled band-saws, mince filling the tanks like seaweed, the wooden cartons stacked in corners often spilling straw from their lids while the misplaced bags of onions had skins flaking all over.

Now the display cases glare without the finger smudges of the workers, Fresh Selections especially bare without Lathi who squeezes his own peculiarity into the place, prodding joints with a larding needle or deboning a lamb. The unused swivel hooks sway in the breeze of the air-conditioning, the blades of the choppers and cleavers are clean. Meat advice that Lathi applies to life, "If you let it hang too long it will poison you." At these times, she was never sure if he were talking about the joint of meat or Ruttger.

The silence inside the store amplified by the echo of a bullhorn coming from outside, Ravi can not make out the words, which sound an over-pitched garble. So she walks to the doors hoping to hear, instead she sees a mile of people on the pavement, she's shocked by the area, it couldn't possibly be more tail backed in human traffic.

Outside shoppers from the neighbouring Shoprite are letting their purchases go warm in the sun, as they watch the car-guards steer motorists clear of the line of policemen and a horseback patrol. Across the road the hawker's market selling everything from hairdressing and locksmith services at shop no3 to *morogo* and ox-head stew; also appear to have suspended operations. Ravi gathers this from the woman near her, wearing a bright *khanga* covering her chest and what remains of it, flowing over her jean-clad bum. The woman showing continental chic in clothes only - her hair parted in the middle; one section in stringy braids with an afro-comb stuck somewhere in the roots. Meanwhile, Ruttger has converged with the plentitude of riot shields and policemen and is attempting

to flag the commander who stands on a crate above them. The bullhorn slackens at the side of the starched uniform, stripes marking the man's shoulders and in the mid morning sun, buttons down his front have a blinding shine. Ravi realises that at his instant command the line of policemen would act.

She's never seen the Hyper staff so assembled or so angry. They appear as beings present and absent at the same time, chanting and pummeling placard-poles to the ground. She reads a banner, 'Fair work for fair pay,' and another – 'Man cannot live by groceries alone.'

Amidst the clamour of voices Ravi looks at the berets, who dangle rifles across their chests, only the colour of the guard has changed, the scene reminding her of the strikes she'd witnessed as a child. The nationwide anti-vat campaigns, Black Monday when miners forced the mines to crawl without their kneecaps, the many occasions of women running into the stings of *sjamboks*...

She's angrier still at the street's inhabitants using the strike as a loitering point. Why isn't anyone working today?

Up ahead over on the next block, she can see the double-storey of the Tandoor Lounge, painted in Rastafarian red, where young men are hanging over the balcony, smoking and waving as if a party's going on. She hears the reggae beat from the distance and realises, a car with its radio on full-blast must be parked directly outside Tandoor.

Head any direction on the high street and it's a pot of the continent. Kin-Malebo for Congolese music and food where she had taken a donor to lunch once, the two discussing funding under a strum of Rumba notes.

"Hell, after multi-million investments for upgrading parks and play areas, CCTV cameras at busy intersections, hell, all that and just look at the place."

Looking around now at the broken bottles on the kerb, she remembers the conversation and hopes the strike won't turn nasty, the rotten tomatoes and bricks remotely threaten.

The bullhorn brings her back to reality, "This is Commander Moynot of the South African Police. You are involved in an illegal strike. I repeat this strike is illegal, you are

ordered to clear out. Those who fail to do so will be removed by force. I repeat you will be removed.”

Moynot faces the crowd head on, his gaze straying to the car guards jiggling change, the morning’s activities bad for everyone’s business. Moynot orders bystanders to vacate the premises and there’s a flurry of baskets, with many shoppers bumping into each other in haste.

From behind the police line, Ravi dismays at the advancing fists and feet. The situation is impossible, she recognises Zulka, the aging blockman and Enid from merchandising (responsible for packaging the hampers), Enid protests in a space she’s confined for herself, her face reserved while pacing an imaginary line. Ravi thinks of her hands, tiring under the weight of the placard, reconciling the image of her with the busy yearend, when acute arthritis stiffens her fingers.

Zulka in turn shuffles, bringing his boot down to the tune of the chant, careful to avoid the water spilled from the gutter onto the pavement. A tall man, whose name escapes Ravi, leads the strike in a bold voice, his heels ascending as he shakes his placard.

“This is now a police matter,” Moynot says, “People are being intimidated. You called us in now let us do our jobs.” He ends the sentence smiling and its unclear if the smile is meant to reassure Ruttger or if enjoyment creeps in.

Ravi overhears the two, as she fumbles her way towards a bewildered Ruttger trying to dissuade Moynot – gone on to strengthen his position. No doubt Moynot wonders what Ravi is doing amidst the chaos on all sides. She knows she’ll come to no harm from the strikers or from bystanders in spite of the mounting tension.

Her work has formed an impression amongst the inhabitants of the city margins, amongst uprooted persons travelling from one nub to the next. They see her photo on pamphlets; hear her voice on the radio and television. For them words don’t mean a thing, safety, security, tolerance. But her face as the representative of Joburg’s Development Agency, this they remember.

Meanwhile on the front line, there’s a travelling hawker, pushing his way between police and picketers. The man loaded with caps, gloves and DVDs, shoves forward with the market in view.

Where Ravi stands, she notices the commotion, he's a workingman of thirtyish, an urbanite of sinew and bone just about had enough of the day's delay. He pushes forward, accidentally knocking Enid down and taking a moment to wipe the sweat from his face before apologising. Enid sensibly uses her placard to block his downpour of goods. One striker pokes at the gloves and hats, as if he's deciding what they are. This makes the hawker angry and he rips the items from the man.

Ravi can hear the pitch of the bullhorn a turn too high; at the same time she's focusing on the hawker reloading his goods. Before she realises the patrol moves out.

Much later in the morning, the strike is broken up.

Lathi consolidates some order, putting up the closed sign and righting bins. All Ravi had wanted was information on Goncalves but Lathi himself feeling queasy is of no help. The Strip Fitter had disappeared and the chances of his return diminish as the days pass. Ever since she'd seen Goncalves in the yard stripping cars, she had a strange feeling of being in suspension, as if forces beyond her control were swirling her towards a moment.

If she does nothing, maybe these forces will bring her to a place beyond the limits of words, where they have little meaning and enough is said with a look or long smile. The problem is she doesn't know exactly what it is that she feels but if she finds him, at least she'll have the closeness of his presence.

Today she'd arrived at the supermarket in the midst of a strike, but she isn't her father who searches for meaning in the obscurest of things and objects. The strike is a sign only of the times, nothing to be read by it...

Police sirens grow fainter outside and the car-guards resume making their hand signs, a fine haze of dust settles on the store front and the white-collars of passers, while in a loading zone, a driver awaiting a delivery stalls his truck.

At least a dozen times, she's heard about the good Yeoville years before her university years. Looking at the street, she shifts the venues around in her mind, Mamma's Place, Piccadilly cinemas ... originally CATs, which later became club Martinique... and now is a shop selling mattresses...the many midnight hours at Coffee Society on Raymond. Across the road from the BP on Bezuidenhout an all night chemist, on the other side of it, a florist, which no one had imagined twenty years on, to be reduced to a Kentucky outlet.

No one had imagined the neighbourhood's taste for fried chicken either.

There's a stream of freight shapes after Ruttger, staff to serviceman, he looks over his shoulder at Ravi outside on the pavement and waves goodbye. The sliding doors admitting him into the day's business.

University Of Cape Town

## Nine

### *Kaserne City*

The man Goncalves was looking for would come from downtown, three turns from where he waited in the shade of Home Affairs. Halfway to his right the Queen Elizabeth Bridge connected the city to its margin towns, Braamfontein with the university and down further the ghetto of Yeoville.

Behind him was a makeshift photography stall with a boot clapped together from folding screens and on one side a price list had been scribbled in blood-red lettering. Many such vendors were in the surrounds, photographers who adjusted lenses and bounced the daylight off their round, bald heads. He watched the clientele, sober-faced and primed for the camera's flash, some wearing discoloured *shalwars*, others the scraps of regal, *kente* designs.

A man shook a strip of photos to dry and smiled at the image of himself, his frame rising as if his faith had been restored. Goncalves envied him fearing his own man a no show. It was hard to see past the exterior of the Metro Mall projecting from the grimy crowdedness of downtown where food-sellers roasted cobs of corn and cranes hauled scorched masses of concrete away. The mall itself a replica of something he couldn't quite place - recently modernised with escalators and balustrades that zigzagged.

For weeks he'd worked double shifts to scrape the money and all it had taken was a wind of gratification to incite him, now as the hours passed his prospect of acquiring papers seemed to worsen.

That day he had finally mustered the courage to enter Home Affairs as if he had a right to, the place seeming freer than usual. The official at the door gave him a blank stare, first shrugging him as another seeker, he'd filled a non-descript form in the anterior of the room hoping for a lagging line, since there was no point joining a queue if all too soon he'd reach the counter. He'd chewed the pen pretending to think about the requisite details when the door official glanced across, Goncalves had known it was his own fear unnerving him, so he resolved to a line staring at the safety shoes he'd kept on, feeling a

stab of warning when the official aimed his way - he was a person without legitimacy on the form or anywhere else.

Another man entered the revolving door then, compressing a grin and walking with a light bounce, his right side swinging in step as he greeted the official who'd turned to his voice. This was Molopo dressed in a sixties-styled suit with broad lapels and broader bottoms; he'd taken a watch from his pocket confirmed the time, dropped it back inside. The men tapping the other's shoulder - it seemed to Goncalves a native greeting. Meantime he'd been progressing up the line, hating his anxiousness and uncertainty of the local tricks; at least he'd identified the tout by his watch and strutting manner.

Another official had entered from a wing door, an expansive, expressionless person surveying the room. After what had seemed an age, Molopo rolled his eyes in Goncalves's direction as if it were expected for him to be there all along.

Now the afternoon waned and he cursed his foolishness, when he had first seen the book he'd been carried on a tide of hope, thinking he would own such a book with its unlined spine, the bold lettering spelling, Identity Document, to think it would unite him with all things green and gold. At the time his doubts had been irrelevant...besides the tout had been referred... they hadn't talked much just confirming whereabouts.

What he felt now was not anger it was stranger than that; the same feeling which at times had fallen on him during soccer matches when blindsided he'd punched opponents and raised his tog-boots to their legs.

He sat for some time distrusting himself, the door of the photography stall closed behind him, from where he heard the din of sliding screens and a chair pushed bluntly along the floor, with these sounds a figure materialised against the darkening downtown, his shape blurry amidst the portions of hawkers' goods and the trumpets of prattling musicians onward to Newtown.

Goncalves walked to the corner of the street and flagged Molopo whose topmost shirt buttons were undone, his jacket unraveling from his shoulders as he wobbled and strained for the lamppost. He raised his voice, "Sorry Bra G. Fixing it takes long and I'm not making much from your job. I take a thousand full but as you know people, you're right

here where I feel it,” – he touched his heart leaving the words laced in drunkenness to hang.

Every minute that Goncalves had waited the weight on him had grown. Molopo leaned on the lamppost lolling his head unaware of the accusation on Goncalves’s face and behind it, something worse. Whatever fence he jumped there would be another ahead - the worthless tout who trifled with his hopes, the corrupt palm to grease or the exploitive shift boss to please and still the disdain of locals.

“Kaserne,” Molopo said checking his watch, “We go to Kaserne City and you’ll see Bra G, it’s a world up there. Today you get delivery. People have their own ways, so I do the talking. In the document business it takes all sorts. Sometimes, it takes more than the rand G it takes a man to ride along. Joburg means sacrificing.”

They made their way in silence to the end of a quiet, side street on the city’s eastern boundary, their journey reduced to a few hundred metres. Goncalves’s view was of a charred parking garage curving at the corners and soaring four floors, each floor with a balcony wall rising midway to the roof. There were large cracks splitting the walls and filled up with wire lath or sodden newspaper sheets, any moment Goncalves expecting some kind of ashen debris to roll down. Along the perimeter someone had dug a trench and seemed to have forgotten it, one section poured over in grimy cement, the other filled with the rubble of a broken girder, drained caskets of Sorghum beer, banana skins and what looked like police tape. On the front-facing corners, columns of concrete had been erected and around these the sludge piles had dried.

“Council was restoring Kaserne,” Molopo said, “But too many crooks were involved in tenders. Journalists caught sniff so they chopped the project. But you’ll see Bra G Kaserne works as it is.”

So many conflicting feelings had rattled him, his worst problem- the tout showing- had been resolved now he worried about the walls of the place and what they held.

Molopo ushered him onto a ramp and they crossed over into an empty basement, Goncalves noticing the brackish leaves floating in puddles, the surface of the floor seeming to seep. There were two elongated doors on either side of the basement also fitted with ramps and above, burnt signs he couldn’t quite read, the smell he recognised

from the beggars' alleyways in Mozambique where piss sidled in the tar pores of passages where the air was rancid with the permissiveness of the destitute, sharing sex and food in the same space.

Meanwhile Molopo talked on the phone. "*Guz* do you want to get paid or not?" after some length he said into the receiver, "*Eish* that's not the question I asked. I'm not a *skorro* but it's your show *Guz*." He tucked the phone away and said to Goncalves, "Believe it or not the lifts in Kaserne work."

They got out on the second floor, the tout's voice dropped to a whisper, his whole manner acquiring a new kind of vigilance, "Stick tight."

They were walking too close for Goncalves' comfort, brushing shoulders with long-legged strides and of course, nobody could see the dread seizing him – if this didn't work...danger in this approximated world of Kaserne, he heard it in the guttural calls which Molopo acknowledged here and there.

Daylight had all but gone and the place was shrouded in a bleary light drawn from kerosene lamps or gas flares reflecting off armatures used as screens or tabletops. No clear point Goncalves was looking at, his eyes swam in a sea of shelters, some constructed from corrugated sheets, car doors even crates. He couldn't say for sure how many people bunged the floor.

Molopo gave him an encouraging nod as if to say he were doing well and he sensed the man was withholding something, if tricked him in any way...

Molopo stopping two steps ahead, Goncalves behind him was unable to avoid looking at a woman cooking porridge on a primus stove. He first spotted her pine-green gown frilled down the front and tied with a sash belt at the waist, the gown striking him as a hand-me-down. Hanging on the door of her shelter was a frayed cotton shirt, coils of steam escaping from the pot into the shirt, the woman oblivious, snaked her hand around a child who attempted to hop near the pot.

Her shelter unable to withhold the cutting wind or rain, he could see some light between the battered wooden beams and he imagined she'd be drenched in the gown.

When she spoke to the child he felt a curious sensation in his breast pocket as if the notes hidden there had come to life and were behaving recklessly. But as it came his tenderness went, he couldn't afford to be generous.

Meanwhile Molopo had retraced his step, “*Sisi* is Congolese,” he said “*Muthle*. But there's plenty in Kaserne Bra working in the brothel on the fourth floor, they call it ‘The Room with a View’ he smacked Goncalves on the shoulder, “I'm not shitting you top floor is a *skeberesh* palace. Hutu women, Shangan from Zimbabwe even your sisters from Beira. I'll show you.”

Goncalves shook his head, Molopo was an unknown quantity, means to an end, he had no desire to continue the association longer than was needed. His confused fears making him reconsider for a moment – maybe he should ask for Ravi's help. Take her hand held out in kindness; answer her questioning, tender look. She had after all bribed his way out of Sindela.

Dozens of shades of graying faces were peering at him from under mucky eiderdowns, beneath *topees* or *hijabs*. Goncalves hadn't expected the sudden increase in Kaserne's population on one floor, he found himself in a barracks of men in overalls wearing hardhats with lights, babies strapped to mothers. There was also a scattering of objects - sandbags, jam jars, corroded two-bar heaters, a dinged camp bed. The very substance of Kaserne was bits of stolen or salvaged junk. He wiped his forehead, the gesture making him sorry for himself at the mercy of the tout, the whole day had been a trial.

Ravi must see him as he sees those around: no better than trembling animals, creatures with chattering teeth, no he couldn't, he was tired of his smallness. He'd have to press on with the tout, hoping in a few minutes he'd smile with relief at the book.

Sothzo's residence took up a hundred square metres at the furthest end of the floor, a location well suited to hosting the smuggled power box and cables arranged by a small-dealing Eskom guy. He tended what was dubbed a Founding Father's title –amongst the first to stake a claim in Kaserne.

His shelter was built from prefabricated walling complete with a ventilation duct and divided into two major rooms - a sleeping quarter where he slept on a spacious futon and a front lying room used as a living area. The nucleus of his business, a black minibus supported on bricks, stood protected from the wind behind the shelter.

According to Molopo, Sothzo was in the document business longer than he'd been in Kaserne and naturally, could afford legitimate digs. Why he lived in Kaserne wasn't proven.

But he was in all, a familiar sight handing out big suckers to the building's children who were often amused by his polished cuticles and lancer-shaped nails. And no one made forgery into art quite like Sothzo. When he finished a book it tickled you, if the book were squeezed it would reassure the pressuring hand but it was more than the perfection of the book, Sothzo's art imitated life. He faked names, numbers, addresses; the genuine existences of ordinary people from Tembisa to Tamboville and where he could he mined the rights of the dead, those souring slowly in the hospital halls of Dora Ngiza and Chris Hani. Of all forgers, he had the fattest moles burrowing deep in the broadsheets of Home Affairs, things that chewed and spat with unseen maws.

Still, he went further creating spectacular works of bank statements, employer references, running credit checks in the names of authentic persons whose details occupied the unlucky fields in a database.

And it was not that Sothzo was without his enemies, there were those who didn't appreciate his business: the document game was one grown from backyard operations in the nineties, with apartheid's demise and the borders opening up into a burgeoning network of catalogues and scanners, bureaucrats and corruptible personnel. As far as patrolling the borders went, Sothzo believed it hardly mattered; illegals were still swimming the Limpopo, braving the lions of Kruger and the fatal fence at Melalane. The spoils of forgery were plenty and so were his enemies.

Sothzo had known enemies early when his father had returned hungry on a Monday after the pitshafts, wages disappeared with the weekend's splurge, Sothzo hadn't understood the old man's *Funakhalo* as well as he had his hands and the queer brush of his moustache sometimes.

Yet he made no secret of his roots, wanting his ironclad character known. Hardship was the mother of invention, so was his motto. Tales surrounded him, affairs, connections to organised crime, certain sexual proclivities. The one salience abounding was that a man had once surprised him, thrusting a knife into his belly, in a single swipe Sothzo had lifted the blade from his own gut and slit the man's throat.

Molopo hadn't mentioned the extent of the operation, considerably better than Goncalves had envisioned, the passenger seats of the minibus had been ripped out and were replaced by discreet benches accommodating some legroom, as well as the equipment - a portable copier, laminator and printing machine; in addition a sizeable whiteboard was suspended against a rear window. It seemed Sothzo had spent some money on the velvet curtains screening the windows and the plush maroon carpet on the floor. The interior of the vehicle lit by a battery-powered studio-light that opened like a flower and across this was a miniature cabinet showing an expensive digital camera, on the lower shelf a clump of identity books brushed in dust.

Goncalves saw the satiny pillows filling a corner of the cab, the kind he'd glimpsed at in magazines piled on waiting-room tables and he smiled at these pretensions of comfort in the greater world of Kaserne. Sothzo had the combative look of a street operator in denim jeans, All Star boots and a bowler-hat worn sideward yet he took to convenience in his surroundings.

Goncalves placed him in his early forties though it was hard to tell from the clear mahogany skin and even teeth lined straight in his mouth or his hair poking out the cap at harsh angles as if it had been cut with very sharp scissors. It was not unusual for Goncalves to appreciate the looks of men often being complimented for his own leanness, cropped coils of hair and general handsomeness, he simply compared himself.

The professionalism of the shop had further helped relax him, the tout had delivered and he sensed the book now within grasp. The vehicle was cramped by the presence of the three, more so by Sothzo's reclining pose, lounging on the bench and spreading his thighs wide. The two sat squashed opposite him and it was hard to ignore the shirt lifting above the jut of his belly, Goncalves couldn't say for sure but he thought he'd seen the scar. Molopo greeted him, made the courtesy of asking how he was and Sothzo remained

indifferent, grimfaced even despite the casualness of his pose. Goncalves wondered if he were putting on an act as many people in Joburg did.

The uncomfortable pause broken by Molopo, “I was saying *Guz* dress him up and he’ll play the part, he’s light skinned enough to pass for Coloured. Better that than a Shangaan from Limpopo, this one’s Zulu is worth shit.”

“Your job’s to bring them in. Don’t tell me how to run my business,” Sothzo said in a rough voice.

“I’m only making a suggestion *Sothz*.”

Molopo had shortened his name deliberately, hoping for something in using the endeared term. Caught him looking at the illegal still Sothzo pretended...The muscle in his jaw flexing, betraying him, Molopo knew, though he felt some regret ...but who’s to say what anyone did or did not deserve.

Sothzo rose from the bench and crouched in front of the cabinet, his back to the interior as he spoke, “Bank statements, all the checks, someone else’s whole fucking life right?” He turned his head to Goncalves who was taken aback by his unmasked aggression, floundered for an answer.

“The works as you normally do, my man wants to start a new life.”

Sothzo returned to the bench without answering and propped the camera on his lap, he slipped off the lens cap and began dusting it, running his hand slowly backwards and forwards over the lens-shaft,

“You can’t beat the dust in Kaserne,” he said straight at Goncalves, who sensed from the way he’d said it that the rules had changed. There was no reassurance from the tout, who shuffled on the bench, all he said was,

“My head’s splitting and it’s been a tiring day. I need a drink of water.”

Sothzo pretended not to hear, holding the camera out in front concentrating on the display screen while adjusting the shutter speed and white balancing, satisfied with the job he began to randomly photograph Goncalves without aiming the lens at his face, the snapping escalating in frequency as if it the pixels on the screen demanded it,

“The face you’ll show to the world,” he handled the camera with obvious enjoyment, panning the lens from shoes to chest.

Goncalves couldn't at first imagine the need for it, what he felt was Sothzo's dislike and a pleasure taken in his discomfort.

Whatever happened Goncalves wouldn't jeopardise the book though the glare of the camera had unnerved him.

"It's just an identity photo *Guz* not a masterpiece," Molopo said, they had been left to prance around Kaserne for some while and the time had sobered him, Sothzo's games he could only play for so long, he was especially irritated by the trappings of the minibus and needed out. And he sensed a change in the illegal as well, from his initial awe at the shop now he detected stiffness in his body the all too frequent glances across, how unsuspecting Goncalves was he couldn't say.

For certain he could defend himself, he'd put money the illegal was not a man you forced unless you were prepared to kill.

Sothzo lowered the camera, "Of course," he said, "You could always ease your throat on the fourth floor and come back an hour plus, I'll have the bank statements ready. And listen to me, call before you arrive."

With that he pulled out a wad of fifties and flicked three at Molopo who smiled dryly at the pink-tinged notes sailing in the air before landing.

Molopo picked up the rand, thinking that the man fancied himself a Founding Father but he knew Sothzo was only a half-cast whom nobody had wanted, come to Kaserne with a mouthful of cock blisters, a *Skorrofied*. His skill with pen and speed with blade had transformed him into a lord of this stinking world.... Fact was they needed each other and not everyone appreciated Sothzo's wants.

As for the illegal were he persuaded, no doubt Goncalves was appealing and he was sure also that he'd had his share of suffering. Anyone who lived till forty in Maputo had lived long. Still there was a price for stealing a man's name.

Molopo rose from the bench and motioned towards the door, he watched Goncalves turning his face up to him, objection surfacing on his lips and dying, his eyes with indecision. There was no point to it. All the while they had trolled the wet floors of Kaserne Goncalves hardly spoke, as if he hadn't trusted his own voice. Molopo had seen this happen often – the identity book making a man heavy-jawed and blinding him with a

resolve to acquire it by all means. He pushed the handle listening in the silence to the dull slide of the door, his presence fading from the van.

He came to it always in the earliest of the morning when the noise from the street had roused him, the cackling exchanges of sausage-sellers striking down their small braziers, sometimes the *toc-toc* of a helicopter hovering over Ellis Park. And he knew that all too soon people would gather in the near darkness, commuters under bus shelters and the haberdashers wheeling their stalls. There were unexplained sounds like smashing glass or a pipe smacking the ground, around him was a foreign country.

What he missed were the marshes of his own land back in Queilimane, the seawater streaming to the Shire River and the great clatter of the saddle-billed storks whose heavy-red bills drooped.

When he came to it, he would rise and rinse his face with water collected in a bowl, pull a rust-bitten heater out from under the bed. There was no fire in his room and it was bleak enough without the ruby glow of the wood he'd once burned, stacking them with the slighter pieces inward, watching cinders settled on the hearth. He stretched his legs to the heater's bars; the callused soles of his feet reddening with the warmth they absorbed. More and more he withdrew to a place inside himself where the squawks in Zulu or the calls in Xhosa, all the accents whistled on the street ceased and it was quiet.

He slipped his hand beneath the mattress finding the lump hidden there and he did not play with it, digging straight into the nylon tearing the layers away.

When he came to it, his mouth swelled with feeling and he took the identity book by the corner holding it in front of him, he placed it on his lap smoothing it down with both hands.

He ought to have stored it in a drawer or amongst the till slips but he needed the distant pressure on his back while he slept reminding him of his connection to the green and gold – one that was hard fought for and won. He sat on his bed clasping the book or lifting it to the dimness and he thought of it fitting inside his pocket, the jacket firm against his heart, of his own image wedged between the pages and the bar-coded numbers that legitimised him.

He's inscribed these to memory, fearing if forgotten so will be his right to exist amongst the water-towers of Joburg and the statues in her squares. He rotated the numbers again and again, all the while trailing his hands over the pages, tracing the etched monogram on the cover, thoughts and movements in sync and tears were in his eyes.

He had let it happen looking at the book on the edge of the shelf, laying with his face to the pillow and cloying his nails into its satiny texture. His focus was the colour, the green of the book, same as the mint growing back home. Afterwards he left, clutching the book and another man's right to things.

University Of Cape Town

## Ten

### *Spirit of Madala*

Ossei leaned from the blue scaffolding on the building's north side. The men were eating sausages off paper plates with half loaves of bread resting on knees or newspapers. He could smell the onion and fat wafting from below - on a Friday they had a *stokvel*, pooling R15 for meat and two-litre Cokes.

Alexandra was in the distance, a blur of shanties and houses under a cone of smog and to his right, the minaret of the Marlboro mosque rose above the suburb's roofs. Earlier, the flatbed truck had come, making its way up the dirt road and trundling the earth in mounds. They had offloaded cement to the periphery, stacking the manila bags near the corner poles and casts. It was quieter without spades hitting stone yet it was never quiet.

Skumbuzo, the foreman, had taken charge of the grill checking his wristwatch as the crew lunched and talked. The men were accustomed to eating amidst the dust of gravel – the site no place for allergies or sensitive stomachs. Eduardo brought his own drink in a green thermos, drinking black coffee in all weathers. Ossei had said to him once, 'Papa, if you drink cocoa, you will never drink coffee again.'

But Eduardo had replied that he'd had cocoa.

'Hot chocolate is what you've had. I'm talking cocoa from home, Omanhene cocoa from Abono.'

Eduardo had insisted the cocoa would be too sweet, Ossei reassuring him that mostly the bean was bitter.

The conversation had been forgotten the rest of the year, as the pair mixed buckets of lathing plaster with Eduardo complaining about plastering being a dying art – they didn't appreciate texture in Jo'burg, just getting the job done. The two worked with a crew of city rejuvenators, salvaging houses or the buildings razed by fire; at times climbing on to rooftops to remove the bits of tombstone from chimneys.

In January Ossei had returned to the city with a tin of cocoa, the cover patterned after a regal *kente* design, and it had taken much convincing for Eduardo to drink the cocoa. At first he'd pointed to the crowned lion on the tin, wanting to treasure the gift.

Ossei smiled at the recollection, watching the plasterer amble with his thermos in hand among the crew of Tanzanians, Sothos, the odd Somali and Mozambican. He wasn't open to admitting it, but on the coldest mornings, Eduardo replaced his coffee with the syrupy cocoa.

From the scaffold bar, Ossei peered at the shell of a third-floor apartment, where an icy film had accumulated around the rods reinforced from roof to floor. In the busy mill of the city, he could find his way blind, groping along the alley walls or navigating by the sounds of boys playing soccer in the streets. He'd acclimatised to life in the greater Johannesburg but he hadn't accustomed to the winters where icicles hardened on his trowel or the burglar-bars of windows. Skumbuzo urged the men to finish up and Ossei climbed down, transferring his grip from hand to feet.

'You'll get a headache, sitting in the sun like that,' Eduardo said, handing him a plate.

'You're a funny one, Ossei!' – This was Manjati – 'Do you sit in the trees in Abono?'

'It's sun-tanning in winter. Besides, you should talk, with your yellow *takkies*. Makes you look like a canary.'

'You Ghanaians have no style,' Manjati said.

Eduardo half-listened to the chirps, thinking of the squads who were about. He was fond of the two, and made a point of questioning them often on their knowledge of the country. 'Who's the Zulu king?' he asked.

'That's easy,' said Manjati, 'It's Mandela.'

At this, Eduardo threw up his hands and everyone laughed, even Skumbuzo.

On a Friday the crew was transported to Rivonia's taxi-rank, the men seated knee-to-knee on raised sections of the van's carrier, unfolding lottery tickets or chatting about the women visiting from the country. Ossei heard little until Louis Botha Avenue, where he crossed to the warehouses and factory shops. He'd read somewhere there was too much speech in the world, and in a crowd of thousands he'd known the sentiment was for him.

Sometimes he wished people would simply shut up, even Eduardo whom he minded as an elder and stood before with politeness. He didn't mind talk about plastering, though – the lengthy explanations on creating new planes or scrimming walls. He realised that Eduardo had disappeared; the taillights of his Chevy vanishing.

Doubtless it was better for Ossei to make his own way, as he'd been doing since '99, when he'd first arrived outside Kruger. Television cameras had found his face with sympathy and there was much consolation, amidst steam rising from the camp, the crying babies and coughing.

The driver of the van handled the wheel as if he were at the reins of a powerful packhorse, surging and swerving, showing little concern for the rules of the road or other motorists. They were used to this Friday-afternoon gallop along Woodmead Drive, passing the bunkers of the golf-course ... So much concrete was poured around, with developments going skyward and shopping complexes with the pebbledash slashed from walls. Ossei couldn't keep up with the knocking down of things in the city.

In Abono his attention had settled on the cocoa factories scratched on the plains or the murky water of the embankment. He'd reach the house far from the footpath to find his uncle asleep, his shoes shining on the armrest.

Now he tapped the side of the van, glad of his sensible coat and second-hand boots. Ahead of him the sky turned grainy, residue and fumes netted the buildings in a blemished grey.

At first Ossei had felt nothing but fear and self-loathing for abandoning home, he'd stumbled on legs of concrete in Alex, slow to seek out the Jukskei or the soccer-named streets: Striker, Lob and Dribbler. There was Nuri's *spaza*-shops selling airtime and peanuts, plus the slip-alleys separating the one-roomed shacks. But these were his milder impressions; danger was on the western side, walking through the gutters. For years Alex lacked storm-water drains and dongas like craters had formed on the roads; in places the gutter indistinguishable from the street.

It was well after dark when he snuck behind the Madala - the hostel built from quarry bricks, the adjoining units spreading to the highway with no trees to absorb the noise. When a car's headlights appeared in these parts, Ossei's habit was to lift his collar and walk with downcast eyes.

Years ago he'd left Abono by train, mourning the stumps of the rain forests bled by inflation, at a time when a million Nigerians had returned to trudge up sand and old wounds on the banks of Lake Bosomtwe. He'd journeyed on a relentless toil of metal beguiled from Abono to the heart of Jo'burg, travelling from Kumasi, all the way to Swaziland, then Belfast and Benoni. Finally at Kruger, he'd said goodbye to the hammering wheels and the suffocating dark of tunnels.

Hostels, according to Eduardo, were apartheid designs to control the migrant worker, and it was no secret, with the new guard they had remained intact, used as breeding grounds by shady factions of the unions and political parties. What wasn't established was that criminals in all shapes took refuge at Madala. If you were not a resident and dared in, you were looking either to gamble or for *dagga* or for a fight. Friday was wages-day. The notes delivered fresh from the bank – Ossei could tell from the paperclip attached to the fifties inside his coat. He listened to voices muffled by the bodies in front of them as men surged through the doors with crates of beer, some burdened with meat and a few erected a makeshift counter in the yard.

Where Ossei stood, he could see a youth banging a stick on a drum and a man in a doorway wearing a hooded cape of the coarsest wool, one hand clutching a cane. Ossei hadn't anticipated such a presence. And it was difficult to guess the man's age from the distance, his manner of someone weary.

Two or three small groups were in an agreeable mood, taking hold of the cold with dustbin bags draped around bodies or bagging their hands in plastic grocery bags – this, a carryover from working in paint-shops, where similar sheathing was worn in operating temperatures of less than zero. The man had left the doorway and appeared to be friends with no one, buying a beer, walking to the nearside of the fence. Bystanders registered

blankness to his squat-handled cane or the roughness of his cape, and for a moment it seemed not unimaginable that he didn't exist at all.

Ossei's instinct was to leave the edge of the street and to make contact, the man's face striking him in size and shape like a medicine ball, large, so brown – and from under his cape his temples showed glimpses of silver.

What would happen if he lifted his bag from the gutter and went in? His nerves would make him stumble. In his life he'd brought off impossible triumphs from surviving underground misfires to the army knives on Park Station's trains. Nervousness was nothing that lasted. Besides, there were too many people for harm to befall him. If it happened, it would be after, crossing the bypass where the light was frail and the highway noise loud.

He went on a pace or two, noticing the shimmering bags, some bodies staggering on the hardboard floor, the man and his cane leaning against the fence. Ossei raised his hand in a reflexive greeting. There was no recognition, as if the man were beyond him in the confine of his fantasy. Those loitering outside quickly doubled in numbers, many boys with tough, wiry bodies, the rubbish bags lending them the agile air of municipal workers who jumped from trucks to rummage in bins. They glinted with an awareness of a new-found power: on the weekend they controlled Madala, approaching with beers to lips, searching the face of the man to see if he knew the stranger at the fence. The man leaned with confidence; deep lines furrowed his forehead and the sides of his face, his expression clear that he was not a patient man. He answered that he'd known the foreigner long.

It took Ossei some moments to collect himself, hearing the click of the bolt and the gate opening, the man had motioned to follow, turning his head in a strange, impassive manner.

Later they sat at a corner table, Ossei feeling an absurd gratitude to be in the silent company of the man, surrounded by laughter which he wasn't sure was at jokes or directed at him. The room was a sort of common area with elongated light-tubes fitted to the ceiling and glaring upon the thick-legged tables with their threadbare cloths. Ossei's

curiosity was open to the roof of the place and all it sheltered: windows set deep inside blackened frames, discoloured nails holding the floorboards down, algae dripping like an alien's blood from the corners of walls. By the floor's vibrations and the echo in the room, he knew the slabs had been laid thin. He couldn't resist thinking of Eduardo who'd gaze at Madala with a renovator's eye, wanting to pull down quarry brick by quarry brick. The two sat with casual gestures and drunken shouts erupting around; and, on the far side, a youth was rolling a plastic mat. Everyone was gobbling life with a certainty that came from taking everything for granted; it gave Ossei a bizarre sense of his own displacement.

The man's knees were drawn together, his cane abandoned on the floor. His line of sight was ahead of him, yet too high to grasp a ruckus spilling over in the front. For the first time Ossei stared boldly at the man's face, strained by something not quite tangible, at his weather-beaten skin cracking at the corners of his eyes and mouth.

The man began to speak in a dropped voice, but loud enough for Ossei to hear: 'We prayed in the village for rain, when the rains came we prayed for the ancestral feast, for our sons to follow their fathers and to grow into men. And when it got darker, we prayed for our freedom. It came with twilight stretching from Kliptown to Robben Island, all was well for a while and peacemakers were on the streets without the ding-dong of clocks or states of emergency...'

His eyes dimmed with his words, the hubbub in the room quieting, though his voice was a murmur. Scraping chairs, whistling, glasses clinked were all followed by silence; his presence elevated to the point where those brawling in the front stopped. One of the brawlers was dressed in faded jeans, turned up over zipped boots, the anger on his face dissipating as he slipped free of a bald-headed man with a sewn-up cut on his head – entirely noticeable by the thread sticking out.

Ossei's approach to life in the city was to deflect attention; curiosity had brought him to Madala and what he recognised as a desire for once to be at the centre of things.

Still he was burned by the eyes in the room gravitating to the man – the Zulu could descend with the spear and squash him in the gutter. Yet, if he were honest, he'd admit that secretly it thrilled him to be outnumbered, to know any moment all his strivings

could amount to naught. The man was speaking again, the flame of his words dissolving worries and suspending the room in a heat.

He said, 'We basked in the shine of plaques raised, the new names of our airports and streets. Everybody hurried to gather up the hope. It was our day to live brazenly, walking the white lines of Beyers Naude, watching the cars getting bigger. And we basked in the shine, though many still coughed and the skin fell from faces. Yet we raised our voices and sang our songs of battle, 'Umshini Wam, 'mshini wam, Kawuleth' umshini wam, Umshini Wam. My father, I lift my machine gun. If all else fails, count on my love for my country and people.'

Those sitting on tables or the ground didn't move and no one was blowing into their palms for warmth. Even the rustling bags around bodies seemed to firm into a silent cloth. The air in Alex was dense with the smell of sewage from the runny storm-water drains and the broken culverts and, though the doors were opened, Ossei couldn't smell cigarette smoke or the sewer. The man's voice heightened, his eyes closing as if the vowels were forming behind his lids. He didn't look altogether familiar and there was a chance it was not him. The idea was comforting – if the man were a shaman ... his jaw slackening, Ossei watched the tongue a flash of white as the man spoke:

'Who is it that works inside you? Who is it that speaks? You will hear me in the tune of the pennywhistle and drink my choleric waters in the Jukskei.

'My smell abounds in the corridors of Jabulani and Mapetla. I am where beggars raffle and newspaper boys count change. I am the spirit of place. When your heart stiffens, your feet go round and round, shout my name without shame.'

It took him some minutes to recover, his face glistening with sweat.

He had spoken in a crackling voice of struggle and freedom, inflaming sentiments of nationalism, occasionally clamping his hands around his shoulders and rocking himself. Ossei had imagined a slight tremble over the room, so intense was the listening; yet he'd finished the oration without cheers or clapping. High spirits of the weekend were sapped by a reluctant alertness that *isangoma*, man with powers of the divine, had taken

guardianship of the *makwere*, a foreigner. Ossei had stirred up amusement, resentment now Madala's men were unsure how to regard him.

He placed the empty quarts on the counter. Nearby a man with long, grimy dreadlocks lolled, wanting to say something. Whatever it was went unsaid, as if his tongue had been fatigued by smoking a joint. Ossei wondered if he ought to smile at him. It was hopeless. He'd been trained in heavy, averting qualities, so he focused on the barman creating a lethargic impression with his fly undone. Meanwhile, a group had converged at the far-side of the room, their gazes resting on him. His head spiralled to lightness. He hadn't eaten since lunch.

The maize in Jo'burg was brittle enough to bleed one's gums and there was something gamy in the meat. What he missed were the spicy yam soups, cassava stews, the spinach grown on the flatlands where the earth was cherry and clumpy ... not that food was plentiful in Abono.

En route to the bar, it had surprised him that no women were about. Madala was a men's hostel not precluding female visitors on the weekend. The stout and bandy-legged men crowding the toilets or crouching on the edges of chairs appeared to have no mind, for the space of the evening, for the chatty girls with chestnut braids or the women in *capulanas* who frequent *shebeens*. Ossei considered himself an unusual choice for the man's acquaintance. He doubted the spirit realm and the magic arts, so there was no accounting for it.

As a boy, he'd sensed a force greater than human ... when Rawlings had conquered the second time, quashing the coup, executing traitors publicly. Ossei had been lifted beyond the troops on the road to Abono. But he'd been a boy full of schemes, unwilling to believe anything, but his last legs had carried him. Resting in the shade of a kola-nut tree with the escarpment spinning away, his eye had stretched as far as the lines of women dragging children and balancing primus stoves on their heads. And he had no idea where they were going.

The man lifted the bottle like a warm bowl to his lips. He was worn under the cape, sipping his beer, staring clear of the doorway into the road. Drinkers came up behind, passing back and forth without a word.

The four or five residents, who'd grouped earlier, peered into an invisible ring on the floor before shifting focus to Ossei. One leading the discussion chewed on a tobacco stick, pausing every so often to wipe his mouth. Heads turned to meet his, a youth prodding his shoe into the ring, another nodding agreement. Ossei heard their thoughts like a clock's hand – if he didn't leave ... it struck him – he'd seen the group before, as a larger group in a dream ... their faces floating in a massed pattern from their heads above a field of yellow and sulphurous corn. When he woke, he'd examined his own face in the mirror, as if he were a stranger to the tongue shaped by Twi and skin the colour of a healing burn. All he'd wanted was to be someone suitable in Jo'burg, not to be despised as one wrongly entitled. He could sense the scale of it, the plots and schemes, the mistrust, all feeding off the difference beneath the skin. He grabbed his bag from under the chair, the man's joints creaking as he got up, fumbling for the cane.

Down the landing and beyond the rail, the man trailed him on to a strip of grass. Ossei proceeded to the pavement, about to cross the street when the man made a plea in blunt phrases. 'Wait,' he said. 'Don't go. Not yet.' Ossei stopped, with his coat firmly belted, feeling the tightness in his boots and the cuffs constrict his ankles. Odd as it was, he reminded himself to soften the leather with turpentine when he got home. Some force in the world had brought him to Madala. At times, he'd had to decelerate to see the sign but the night was mystically charged and he wouldn't fight it.

They walked a distance over the loosening topsoil to the building's side, footsteps raising the dust. From his pocket the man took a silver key; and there was some light shining under the door. The two entered a corridor, stepping on to cracked tiles, spotting the flaring lamps nailed to both ends of the wall. The place was draughty and dim as they moved single-file through a passageway until a flight of stairs, Ossei following the man to a gate at the top through which the man hastened. It wouldn't matter to anyone if he disappeared, he called to the man then he wished he hadn't come. If he returned and the

door was locked ... it was unthinkable to roam Madala without the guidance of the man ... He forced himself into the hall, a cramped and concave space with pigeonhole windows set high, many boarded up with planks. Someone had left the remains of furniture around: a broken desk and three-legged chair, all crusted with dust. He searched for the man, with each step finding a crumbling sensation.

Madala was rumoured to be a single-room residence. He couldn't believe the passage narrowing and sides receding into themselves. How close it was! He pulled himself past the beds fitted into cubicles and the curtain-shadows fluttering on walls, his head filling with the burnish of noise – groans in sleep, the static interference from radios. Small, private things made public. A bottle of brown vinegar; a rag and dish stood on the floor of one cubicle. Ossei could smell the acidity of the cloth as the occupant wrapped his hand.

And he closed his eyes, as one does when remembering. Crepe bandages, pots of animal fat, refugees cauterising their wounds and whispering in Portuguese, in Shona, the cloth and plastic lumped like balls of dirtied pap ... How sharp it was: so many residents lived as those in the camps had, as those with nothing.

And there was the picture of him first arriving at the officials. Oh, he'd been welcomed by this whole group of people with microphones, trying to give him papers but the tears ... running into his driest crevices ... before the police had thrown a jacket over his head. 'Come on,' they'd said, shoving papers into his pocket. And he'd taken them and flung them away, since he'd already received them on the train.

Now those around him wanted him to react in the halls of Madala. So he did by congratulating himself, Ossei of the Akan people, from a land where a new rule had stabilised inflation and lowered the interest rates and improved the nation's credit. And so his Ghana was well.

He made his way, exiting the hall into an ablution compound where another man stood at the urinal with his back to the room, the muscles in his neck shifting as he turned his head. Ossei heard the toilet flush and the man emerged from the booth still draped in his cape.

They were alone in the man's cubicle with the garment strewn on the bed. Ossei had never seen a cape so grey, yet he thought of russets, reds, crimson, azures, green and ochre – all the colours of a technicolour dreamcoat. He thought of Eduardo, who'd wait a day or two if he didn't show. Were he detained, he half-imagined the construction crew of Mozambican diggers and Somali masons, even the foolhardy Manjati, wielding pickaxes outside, the engines of the bulldozers making cold gas of the morning's air. Seriously, Ossei considered the man without the guard of his cape. The whites of his eyes had yellowed and he resembled something darned, with his skin patched to the bone, his mouth a widening hole where the words had fallen. He lay sideways, tucking his knees in, burying his hands in the double yarn of the cape. It seemed as if a torment had split his temples and wiped him out. He mumbled. It didn't matter to Ossei that he couldn't hear – the Spirits alone knew, he was tired of words.

He left Madala, without a glance at the stragglers under liquor or the sleepers wheezing into life.

## Eleven

### *Rattex*

It was Friday afternoon and the cat lay on the cement in the sun. Ravi went through the gate, closing it behind her. The cat stretched, first pushing its front and back paws out, afterwards laying with its head to the side and belly in the sun. She knew the cat Luxmi, as one from a litter had by an old tabby with weak hind legs and whose backside brought her down when she walked (Ravi had witnessed her father checking the tabby's bones once for breaks).

There were rings around Luxmi's tail and stripes running down the sides of her body, where Ravi stood she noticed darker spots in a line across her belly. Either the cat was asleep or hadn't sensed her yet. What do cats dream about when they're asleep? Ravi couldn't help but wonder even though she had a lot to do the next hour.

She rose from her haunches and moved backward, eyes still on the cat. Two boxes were in her bag, an intense red one and a green, both of which were covered in plastic.

For days she had thought of little else, feeling an uncertain figure in the dark, yet she knew herself, as everyone did know themselves. For thirty-two years, she had led a respectable life. Between Kensington where she lived and the shop in Berea, she'd ranged the usual states of doubt, worry and self-judgment. She knew that it wouldn't be easy.

If she had a favourite place it would be here, in the concealed delivery bay where boxes and crates flowed, where drivers with clipboards argued pleasantly while ticking items off. The shop's main storage was at the end of the alley, near parts store, which was only a short walk from the stalls and here the yard's cars were stripped. There was nothing special about the alley, with its narrow walls and dustbins overflowing with refuse at times, Ravi had developed more a fondness for the motion of the deliverymen, who brought something of the outside in, she envied how free they were to come and go, the drivers up in the high-seats of trucks for short moments touched the place.

Now the alley was quiet and although it was warm, the afternoon was foggy with smoke from surrounding chimneys and cars, an accumulation of black in the air when she looked up.

Despite the noise and her presence, Luxmi hadn't yet moved, the point of her tail still flat on the ground, Ravi contemplated going over. Maybe the cat was unwell. But she couldn't be certain about this. She'd seen a cat die at the shop once. There was vomiting, diarrhea before an epileptic fit and eventually kidney failure. The whole episode horrible for her father.

She walked towards the cat, reassured by her breathing. There were no wet patches or blood, still this didn't mean much. She had a full view of Luxmi's front and face, the dark rings around her chest also apparent. Ravi had never really studied a cat before; to her they had always appeared as springy, timid things, disgorging paper and wire, the ones with white fur at times covered in rust from the scraps. Maybe, Luxmi would wake up with a shock of recognition that it was her, only an inch from her whiskers and stick out a paw. But there wasn't even a shift of the cat's head, the edges of which were soot black, creating the impression of a dirty circle.

The afternoon was growing murkier, Ravi conscious of the time. Light was slipping to another city in another corner of the world and when the earth turned to bring the light back to Joburg again, her deed would be done.

Everyone had finished for the week and with her father's illness the shop remained closed on Saturdays. She put out the lights in the front, listening to traces of electricity fade, the area had a low ceiling reinforced with concrete to support the shop's sign and the shell of a Beetle car, which revolved on the roof and could be seen for many miles in many directions.

The shop's front window was a glass rectangle of about two metres, changing from a silvery to a leadish colour depending on the time of day. And there were no blinds to draw against the cold or the street, at closing hours a door was rolled down over the front window from the outside.

She had cracked the window as a child, splintering the glass in the middle. Over the years she had forgotten most of the details – or she didn't want to remember fully, the

humour of her mother, who was so unlike any other mother in her jeans and loose sandals wearing a sari blouse that showed her navel. Her mother had stood there laughing or admiring the crack from the inside before taking to the street for an alternative view.

Ravi had done it with a ball bearing, tossing it between her hands first. In the eighties no one had come to South Africa to play cricket, yet her uncles had talked often of Kapil Dev and she'd pretended a run up, bringing her arm over her ear like a bowler, before falling into the window unable to stop.

Her head cut, the blood had poured into her ear. Hashmi found it funnier still and told her that the window's crack was like a crack in the bone. This was one of their many strange conversations – much later did Ravi realise, her mother had never spoken to her as one did to a child, always maturity had been exacted from her.

Now she tried concentrating on all she had to do, entering the office kitchen, full of plates, bowls, dangling cloths, sticky bottles of dishwashing liquid and sprays. A ruined cupboard from her father's house, stood flat against the wall, it was splintering and discoloured with knobs on every door. Her posture was stiff as she registered items on the shelf until she found the cans.

Around six o' clock, on her way back through the stalls, she had no idea how long it would take. Why should this be the worst thing? Her doubts seemed to echo in the stall. She was nervous and right to be nervous stooping with the cans in her arms. She thought of lightening the moment by something easy, but couldn't think of a thing. Just about out of the stalls, believing she had crossed a border and that everything would be fine. When there waiting for her at the turn was a figure with a torch in his hand. "*Mam Sahb*," he asked, "Is that you?" the light beam hit her face.

Saleem closed the distance between them, bare bodied and wearing shorts, Ravi noticing his knees and hairy legs.

"What are you doing here?"

"Getting changed *Mam Sahb* then locking up."

The ambiguity of his statement was lost on him, despite herself she smiled, "You don't have to. I've come to do all that."

"No problem for me *Mam Sahb*," he rolled his head as he spoke.

The gesture irritating her, it was this and the *Mam Sahb*. Ravi suspected that at times, he did it deliberately, although many from the Indian-subcontinent had similar mannerisms.

“Go put some clothes on,” she said, uncomfortable at seeing him naked, she couldn’t help think how scrawny his shoulders were that there was no fat around his ribs or stomach, in fact his skin was loose. She had expected more muscle on him from all the work.

Saleem took a moment before asking if he could help.

At the mention of the cans, she felt them in her arms and the strap of her bag on her shoulder. She wanted to get out of there, fearing he had seen the guilt on her face.

But before she could reply,

“Sorry *Mam Sahb*. The light maybe, is hurting your eyes, no?” Saleem apologised, lowering the torch.

In her present frame of mind, she wasn’t sure if some clumsy gesture betrayed her. Suppose she were to allow him to help? He could stretch a hand and take a few cans, move ahead of her out of the passage down the stairs into the basement, making an accomplice...

When the deed was done, she imagined them in a room, Saleem facing her...it would never be the same again with her father...She struggled with the temptation of teaching him a lesson, forever burying his hopes of owning the yard...but she couldn’t find it to be so angry, “Close the door on your way out.”

He swung the torch towards the cans and asked, “What is it, you’re doing?”

Ravi brushing past him answered, it was only something she’d promised her father.

It was dark outside the basement area; the smell much stronger than on the stairs. She pushed the door using her body sideward, her arms loaded with cans and without hearing a scratch. She’d wished she’d brought a hanky for her nose, a firmer nudge and the door opened, the cans scattering onto her feet. “Just great,” she mumbled, stepping over them and into the room.

When she switched on the light, it focussed the hazy forms under the counters, the shapes of folding tables and patches of damp on the wall. She walked to the window, ignoring the cardboard litters on one side and the baskets on the other.

From here it was possible for her to see across to The Scope where she had a narrow view of coloured, metal sheets and wondered if any of the cars here moved on a windy day.

A lot of her life was caught up in this room where everything collected dust. But she wouldn't allow herself to think about that.

From behind a casement she retrieved a broom, bucket and spade, her hands were soft, the broom awkward in them. First she began with the centre of the floor, brushing the dirt into the middle, ever so often stopping to free the bristles from balls of wet hair, which were oily with food. Her hands were sticky pulling the hair out and it made her noxious. As she swept, the dust escaped from the floor into her lungs, Ravi leaned the broom against the wall hoping it wouldn't fall over and walked to the window where the sky grew darker. She couldn't see any of the cats. It was expected for her to worry since she wasn't a bad person, like herself the cats were unafraid of the dark. Even as a child Ravi had never been afraid of the dark. All Hindus all over the world swore by the light. So her mother used to say that light was the other face of dark.

Her father was immaculate when sweeping or shaking out the boxes, Ravi didn't suffer half his cares, well, he had always been father of the cats, choosing the basement for its privacy from the shop and for the low window enabling them easy access in or out.

Further along the room, a plastic liner ran from wall to wall and on top of it were the litters, transformed from large cardboard boxes with their insides covered in a sand lighter than mud, a sand incapable of being sand since the smell was of pine and pee. She had decided that it was pointless wearing gloves, since her hands would still need sterilizing after. The lids of the boxes were actually placed at their bottoms, ensuring sturdiness against crap and pee. If only her father were so methodical about his business about things that mattered. The box didn't seem to weigh much and the pellets inside were still fresh.

Her handbag remained on the casement nearby, she had been so careful wrapping the packages, as if they had the power to contaminate her bag. At the store Ravi had read the manufacturer's directions on the backs of several brands, some claiming to be effective even externally, plus there were strict warnings against flushing and for septic tanks. She had read the information and replaced brand after brand on the shelf, feeling self-conscious in the aisle.

Before she realised her hand reached inside the litter, the pellets slipping through her fingers. For internal or external use? Surely it would be slower from outside...

For the first time she saw the cat, alright, alright Luxmi seemed to say scratching the door with her tail up. Ravi noticed the skin from under her paw to belly, a very pale yellow, apart from this, Luxmi appeared fine. Despite herself, Ravi felt some relief. Luxmi as if reading Ravi's posture at times in shadow at times in light, entered the room; she sniffed the air, her attention on smell, before purring and trotting all the way to the centre.

It took Ravi some moments to make up her mind; the cans were in view spilled just outside the door. She made towards them when Luxmi surprised her, stopping at her leg and brushing up against it, the lines on her body swerving as she brushed and purred. Ravi could feel the fur through her stocking and wondered just how far the cat's legs would bend. Cats were a mystery to her. The warm, poky sensation interfered with her clear determination for the day. Luxmi continued brushing, making it difficult for Ravi to move.

She gave the basement a final look around with an idea that there would be a sign amongst the bars or the sidewalls flanked with hatchets, perhaps a pipe smacking the ground, anything to give her confidence. But wherever the idea came from, she had inherited her mother's logic and banished it. Hers was not a traditional mind, open to ideas of signs, to modulations of fate or Karma, to Hindu ideas. Ravi explored with reason as her mother had and despite her promise not to, she couldn't help putting Hashmi at the centre of all the dust.

It had happened on a Sunday morning. Before her mother had gone in to the shop, Ravi had run down the corridor, wanting to splash on her parent's bed, the door locked,

so she'd knocked and waited for the sounds from her mother, so unlike her mother's day sounds to quiet down. Finally, the girl Ravi had tired of waiting and returned to her room.

Later that Sunday her mother had pressed through the crowds on route to Bruma and all was as it should be on the bend of the street with the door over the shop's front. Hashmi had entered the basement wearing sunglasses and shorts, ignoring the clutter on the floor. The cats could be heard somewhere in the background as she'd wandered through in her familiar way.

Of course she hadn't a thought for the alarm or why it hadn't gone off. On her mind was the itinerary for the removals people, who were hired to cart the contents of the basement to a charity in the upcoming week.

No one knew how long she'd examined the suspiciously rusted machines or the tables to be salvaged as washstands. Ravi had learned much later that her father had the walls in the basement painted over black. Often, she had the urge to take a knife and scrape the black off in careful layers, till she reached the surface of the walls.

Her legs were weak; she had been standing some time thinking unproductive thoughts when she had a job to do. Luxmi was not in her normal place at the hour, nor were any other cats curled up in their baskets. At its worst, it was only a minor change in the environment because her father wasn't where he usually was.

Despite his baldness and smallness, she acknowledged that her father had made Hashmi happy though she only guessed at why. He came from an era of harmless Indian men, the passive types never wanting any trouble. Or so Ravi explained him to herself, the way he didn't fight for anything. She knew it was untrue, but she pictured him as pretty sexless, unable to see even a spark of friction in his parts.

It was the makeup of her psyche or maybe it was inevitable for memories of her mother to dredge up images of her father. Still, she was foolish standing there considering her parents.

The cans were placed on a board, salmon and turkey, some a combination of both flavours, 'high in protein, providing for all your cat's needs.' She couldn't believe the price tags, her father spared no expense and she felt a sudden rage. But she had lived with

rage for so long, a hundred times feeling its force. Nowadays she replaced this with a purpose for her life in doing good.

Her best action was speed; she grabbed the can opener and cloth hearing before seeing the flutter at the window, the shapes of cats as they entered through the gap between glass and ledge.

Then things began to fall into place. At least six cats cut hairy figures on the floor and she hoped she wouldn't have to push them off her hands before the cans were opened. She made a strange sound clearing her throat – having gone a while without cigarettes. The food was moist and pink in the tins - she hadn't expected such odour. And the cats they were licking their whiskers. Some even growled. Ravi grew a little afraid by the sounds made, 'Christ.'

One of the cats shook its head at her, as if he were communicating annoyance at having to wait. 'Back off,' she said.

It was ironical that she was the one a little scared by the rising and falling lips, by the growling. Her eyes fell on her bag, the headshaking cat on tiptoes. Apart from the packages, a durable bottle of SWAT spray lay beneath her wallet and keys. If she needed the time she would use it.

At night when the phone rang, the security company entered her dreams like a chasing ambulance and at various points; she'd wake up to a room of black walls. She wasn't brainwashed by her fear, what she was about to do was a question of necessity...

The cats' bowls were lined alongside their baskets and filled with greenish water, which after a day or two would darken to a murkier brown. She contemplated emptying the bowls and refilling them, since the cats, possibly would foam at the mouth or drool, this, followed by a deep thirst. There was much to get right and she was gripped by doubt, by an almost tearful guilt.

Finally, the packages were pulled from her bag. The vividness of green and red boxes seeming to glow in the room, to the left, the cats assembled in a loose line, oddly attentive. Ravi realising that she was responding like her father, for whom any varying behaviour took on special meaning and was studied to death thereafter.

She shrugged, as if to shrug him off. But the packages gave her an unusual sense of him, she imagined his office, him with a large envelope in hand, from it pulling the catless collars, first feeling the leather flecked with hair. How would he adjust thereafter?

She replenished the water bowls and when the cats had had their fill, Ravi left the basement behind.

University Of Cape Town

## Twelve

### *The Gravy-Train Goes Under*

“The place is Exchange Square. We’ll be going up Rivonia soon and remember if we’re stopped by the squads, I do the talking.

“You know what,” Manjate said, “We’re lost.”

“Excuse me...”

“Why not pull over and ask someone?”

Manjate looked at Eduardo’s mouthing face, hating to see the older man snarl at him. Today, he wanted only to please Eduardo who had arranged the work. Besides, he didn’t have the strength to argue, so he slid back into his seat watching cars in the rearview mirror. Despite the sluggishness of the Chevy, Manjate was glad for its convenience as they started up the hill towards Sandton, further north.

I know what you’re thinking,” Eduardo said, easing his foot from the pedal. The traffic had slowed with a bog of roadworks and construction ahead, the Chevy squeezing between a taxi and truck as the two lanes merged as one.

“*Eish*, not a word from me, I don’t mess with the pig who feeds me bacon,” Manjate said, patting Eduardo on the shoulder. The older man handled the comment in silence and Manjate sensed something else wrong, the feeling seeming to spread into his bowels and for a moment he felt even queasy. It was worry about Goncalves which had brought it on. Sindela had come and gone, by now Goncalves should have snapped out of it...

He tried to quell his uneasiness by focusing on drive, along the square mile dubbed the richest in Africa with its two-towered shopping mall and Italian-styled hotel, The Michael Angelo? (Manjate was never sure of pronunciation) there were the five-star restaurants, the bars and cafés surrounded still by more luxury hotels and theatres.

Organised away from this were the banking and investment houses, technology support and communication companies connected to roads, offramps to highways and airports. And on first glance you didn’t see the houses on the neatly laid streets with their security-guards manning booms.

The first time, he couldn't believe it. Sandton had been like a glossy page from a magazine opening up to the sky, a blinding difference to Joburg's margin towns and as for Maputo, well, what could he say about home?

"Birds of Sandton."

"You saying?"

"I'm saying Birds of Sandton," for a moment Eduardo let go of the steering and pointed to the cranes on both sides of the street, "That's what they're calling them. World Cup and they're everywhere."

"Watch it," – Manjate said, unable to help himself, "Only saying be careful."

"Are you the Angel of the road or something? You don't even have a license, you with your cute fucking sound bites." Eduardo paused, his mouth hardening into a snarl, while both his hands gripped the wheel.

It was so unlike Eduardo to swear, in fact, swearing seemed to embarrass him most of the time. It struck Manjate that Eduardo's frustration had been building up and he'd been oblivious. Problem was he had hide for skin and could skull almost any insult. So he expected the same from everyone else. Far as his freeloading ways went, he'd try and stop, though he was bound only to pick it up again later.

Past the Thrupps Centre, a convoy of refuse truck, an enormous bulldozer and excavating machine were being directed by a signaling roadman with a red flag – whom Manjate couldn't read head or tail of. He sat low in his seat in the standing traffic, feeling the tension from inside the car expand everywhere like a bad smell, to the nearby rooftops and the drizzle on windcreens. Meanwhile Eduardo maintained his silence, the tension inside the vehicle broken by wailing emergency vehicles - ambulance, fire-rescue and police-. Both of them to pulled to their full heights in their seats and looked out the windows, turning around at different instances, the threat of an accident bringing them together.

Manjate felt overloaded with stimulation, he wasn't sure if it were a lingering effect of Eduardo's earlier outbreak or if it were the certainty of work or his confused worries about Goncalves. He needed money, more than that he needed to be useful and the tools

of work gave him this. Not by any means was he the ‘singing, dancing’ worker. He simply enjoyed tools for their many purposes like taking his mind of things.

For example he and Ossei often made games from them, like classifying the tools according to letter: crowbar, chisel, cherry picker, *cray*-wagon (an Afrikaans word Manjate he couldn’t really spell). Honest fun which had kept them entertained for hours.

Once Manjate had seen a wire-artist turn a spade into a guitar, a pick into a large pendulum stick, and of course tools made the easiest of weapons. His mind was going at a hundred thoughts and he couldn’t for the life of him, reconcile any other object to have as many functions as a tool.

By then they were somewhere in midtown, a barrier stretching around one block east over to West Street, cordoned off machines and men in masks who were drilling into sections of the pavement and making a murderous noise. Further back from the road, the skyscrapers appeared powdery in the dustiness and under the clouds all around.

The front carriage of the car seemed constricted, Eduardo rolled up his window to the shut out the noise and at the same time exercising self-control without a word said on the commotion, he grunted a frustrated sound. The two were more aware of each other with their windows closed, Manjate wondering how long Eduardo’s anger would last. He snuck a sideward glance, thinking that he and Goncalves had known him as boys back in Quelimane, so he had the insider view. It was so like Eduardo to play ‘hard to get,’ when he felt wronged. Yet, he’d never before seen him in such an angry state. Perhaps there was trouble with his wife, Mama Fernaj, who was a very fine woman indeed...

Just for a moment he considered maintaining the status quo - whatever his faults were he didn’t deserve a speaking to like that. And he wasn’t very good at apologising either. Still, it was the duty of the younger man to make amends with his elder and Eduardo was the closest he had. After a deep breath, he started almost without sincerity, since there was no fairness in it. For the second time that day, he thought about Goncalves who’d rather starve than be made to eat his words.

Eduardo interrupted him as he spoke, raising a hand from the steering – not wanting a pacifying apology. It was startling the way he changed track while driving on, “We’re all

wondering what's going on down below. Gautrain. I guess under the circumstances, we must be grateful, it could be worse.”

“You're saying?”

“Gautrain. Haven't you heard? The gravy train is going under,” he laughed and waited, “Seriously *bafana*, you're breaking my heart. London, New York, in the first world rats travel like moles, underground. And we're getting our own express from the airport to Sandton and to where the fattest of the rats are, in Pretoria.”

Manjate knew that somewhere in Joburg's concrete roots, a train would someday drive through a tunnel over the drains and manholes. Already they were drilling with the special machines from Europe. Big deal. But it was best to play it safe and pretend ignorance, “*Eish*,” he said, “an underground wire in Joburg...”

Eduardo turned his head, assessing him and giving a dry laugh.

Manjate relieved that the uneasy tension inside the car had been broken; he only wished Eduardo would keep his eye on the road and still, he felt slighted by the earlier incident, as well as by the man's gaze. Too many emotions and adrenaline confused him so he kept quiet.

“In Mozambique we're free but still in the dark,”- at last, Eduardo had made a statement worthy of his nature, his quiet dignity which almost always understated truths about himself, others or the general condition of things.

Manjate appreciated him most then, when he didn't say more or less than was needed.

### *Suits n' Spades*

The Stock Exchange stood framed by the towers of the Deutsche Bank, which seemed to have grown up taller and sturdier around it. This impression was formed by the building's curvy shape and glass, compared to the solid-brick contours of the bank, whatever it was Manjate was surprised as a flourish of rubble rose from the lower court into the street. This block of Gwen Lane rested on a raised square, and he was struck by the banister in the foreground of the building designed in a curving line to match in shininess and shape. A small touch Manjate appreciated.

Much to his relief Eduardo had pulled over and instructed him to get out, while he found somewhere suitable to park. So he took his time admiring the building's presentation, which brought to mind a massive marble on a stage; the squares of fiber-glass suspended in steel frames were a bluish colour, unlike the silvery texture of several skyscrapers around with some sections darker than others. Manjate walked seeking out the darker squares, having a strange compulsion to touch the thing. His impression of wealth and success enfolded in glass, one he would remember always, although it left a feeling he couldn't quite explain.

Eduardo was nowhere in sight, Manjate turned around aware of the neighbourhood, which had established itself as a result of the four main roads in Sandton intersecting. Ahead or to his side, hotels were everywhere and he had a clean view of their spirals or slanting roofs, surrounding these were smaller office buildings, more banks, libraries, advocates' chambers even a civic gallery. He had never known so many different enterprises to clump so naturally together, the area was a huge source of employment and within the blocks were larger blocks of the capital controlling Africa. What he didn't know was how it was all done and Monday set everyone in motion, from vendors waving newspapers to the shoe-shine men laying out footstools on the pavements.

A chorus of voices caught his attention; the crews were on the far left in an area enclosed by sawhorse barriers, some men already wearing hardhats and belts. He parted the barrier and entered at the end of the line, worrying about his lateness and watching Skumbuzo the foreman climb to the second rung of a ladder with a practiced air while pulling a whistle from his pocket. Manjate knew him from previous digs – to be a serious foreman who didn't like drunkenness or blasphemy but one who was always fair.

The men read his gesture and everybody grew quiet without the whistle blown– a sign of the foreman's invisible power.

Skumbuzo divided up teams and tasks. Some moments into his delivery, Eduardo's name was called; he scraped his wheelbarrow and moved with it to one side, another man yapping onto his neck while following him. So, Eduardo had been there all along!

Several of Manjate's comrades were present as well, but the months he'd spent in Mozambique seemed to have distanced him from them. A familiar Somali mason, a bricklayer and blockman going back and forth between Eduardo and another crew. Maybe, it was in his mind but none of them even glanced his way. At any rate Manjate would have to deliver the older man's bag later...He looked up at the clouds – the drizzle continuing into the morning and it was anyone's guess if it would really rain.

Others made their way to the carriers – ready hands to unload collapsed segments of the girder first, since these were the heaviest and positioned on the sides of the carrier. One, two, three, four, five at least. It would be exciting to watch the girder with its diamond shapes between the rungs, go up and up the building. Of course Manjate would sit out the scramble by the trenchmen for the best spades. A spade after all was a spade. And he wasn't fussy about glazing sprigs or chisels since they were plenty to chop out the old, insulating rubber.

Close by a pile of plastic suits were sheltered under a tarp with the wet shoes (no one ever used), Manjate's clothes slightly damp and he could feel them beginning to stick, he had a sense that the rains wouldn't tumble down and that everything with his comrades would eventually be fine.

“Ha! Surprised you haven't melted yet.”

He looked up to the voice, taking in the familiar stride, the man with a coil of harness and belts over his shoulder.

“Even I can stand a bit of wet,” Manjate said, his face cracking into a self-conscious grin. Boy was he glad to see a friendly face.

Ossei extended a hand and they touched palm on palm, clicking their thumbs in greeting.

Manjate hoped his relief wasn't too blatant. The Ghanaian was cocky enough without being wised as to how badly he was missed. He decided to revert to his old self and amuse, “I know that's your head, but what's that?”

They were walking then, Ossei springing away as Manjate's finger reached out and poked him, “Stop that man! Don't make me slap you with these belts.”

When Ossei had first shaved his head, everyone had been hopeful that he'd blend in better in the township, since his smooth scalp had helped relax his West African face into one more southern.

Now Manjate couldn't make sense of it, the blush spreading from the top of Ossei's head to above his ears, "Why's your head so red? I mean, are you wearing makeup?"

Ossei said, "You're not aware of the new kinds of treatments."

"*Eish*, treatments?"

"Treatments."

Manjate glanced at him – okay, so today he had all sorts of ideas. "Comrade, if you have the HIVE...life or death's about split-second choices. You're living in Joburg."

"You know Manjate, the HIVE's no joke."

"Who said anyone was joking? We have a saying in Mozambique, 'If it's not inside its on top.'"

"C'mon that's Cremora."

Manjate looked at him with a serious face though he was stifling laughter, "*Eish*, you'll tell me or you'll tell no one."

Ossei felt a flood of annoyance, since he had nothing to be embarrassed about. He recognised Manjate's insincere face and couldn't help his evil thoughts. But he would conceal them and give in, for now, "Just a rash from the safety helmet," he said to the youth, "An allergy to plastic ...today, I won't wear it."

The drizzle fell onto Ossei's face as he walked a short distance to the building's front, outside the main door and soon at the steps, he realised the rest of the crew were drifting elsewhere. Raising a hand and smoothing his scalp, Ossei felt less inclined to return to the crew and the youth's mockery of him. The doors opened wide and out poured men and women wearing blue and orange jackets over their trousers or skirts. Everyone had headsets on and everyone walked and talked.

He hadn't expected such people in such a place, who struck him as no better than fishwives in housecoats. What he had imagined was women with their mouths lined in lipstick, slipping off their pointy shoes under their office desks – ideas he'd come to associate with elegant, business types. No one saw him standing there, trying to grasp

words like bullion, index, indicator, Thou and Jones. The staff, oblivious to the surge of equipment and workers paused in conversations only to sidestep tape before haggling again with some unseen sellers on lines. The reception area warm from the air-conditioning and out of the drizzle, everyone was expecting Ossei but the work didn't have legs, he would spare a few minutes in the warmth listening to the phones ring. He decided to wait behind a plastic fern protruding from a large pot in the corner of the foyer. If anyone asked— he'd say that he was lost.

The woman behind the desk strained to silence the signaling lights and to put people on hold, repeating a standard introduction, "JSE good morning, *goei more*, hello."

She wasn't dressed in the severe coats of those around and though connected to everything in the place, she seemed more human than the rest. Her voice rang with a different stress— that of someone who deferred to others as part of her job.

Ossei felt guilty watching her, a fortyish woman wearing her hair in telephone cords. He felt an insane urge to wind her hair in his hands and to touch her skin, which was white but not as white as her blouse. He couldn't help noticing her nipples through the fabric. No way could he get 'anywhere.'

Manjate was crude; boasting about the finest asses though neither of them had had a white woman or another kind for that matter. Apart from under the sheets, Manjate had no idea. Still, Ossei worried that he had something of the youth's crudeness. The woman's voice drifted - she was noting details complying with someone's demands. Really, he had no business being there. He left sneaking a final peek at her.

Outside, a cement mixer was under permanent siege with one man ripping open a bag and lifting it to the turning cylinder, another shoveling spades full of screte and sand. He walked in the direction of his crew offloading segments of the girder at the rear of the Square, after a dozen steps or so he looked back to the mixers, recognising Mandla who appeared younger than his sixty years and who usually operated the heavy machines —a random change which ought not to matter.

"Hey sleepy," he heard Manjate call. "Daydreaming again and lose your way?"

Ossei dropped the belts from his shoulder to the ground, “My eyes were eating. Oh yeah.”

Manjate began separating the nest of nylon, sorting out belts from harnesses. He worked in silence, choosing only the sturdiest belts.

Ossei was alert to his act– the youth wanted information without appearing too eager for it. “She was nice,” he said, aiming to prick his curiosity.

“Who was nice?”

He smiled at Manjate’s upturned face, sometimes the best revenge was to tease, “All the way up to her ass.”

But the noise of bars and hinges interrupted them, Skumbuzo signaling for all hands in the same direction.

He watched Manjate move without hesitating to the volunteers under the first frame and the men on either side holding up steel segments of the girder. All of them acting on command as Skumbuzo directed with hand signals and without glancing once at the blueprint (because they’d done this so many times before). Frames were cut and stacked to size, slings slipped through the holes in the framework, and each one numbered as if it were too valuable to risk losing.

The action revived Ossei, prowling near the ironworkers who were sitting, standing or leaning upon their sheets of iron. Just a bunch of maxi-pad girls – he thought, since it was their job really, to hoist the girder. But what could he expect from that crew of mainly locals.

At last the crane had arrived from the lot across the Square. This should have pleased him but the machine with its barreled wheels and bridge-swinging neck bothered him. At the very top of the crane was a chain and hook with enough size and strength to sway about a great, metal ball. He knew how much damage could be done from the smallest mistake, (the crane had a reputation as a hydraulic cemetery on sites: palisade and brick slipping from high elevation to bury the workers under). Operators needed first-rate judgment to turn the neck in fractions, to sense as well as sight when and where. Not just anyone could do it.

Ossei had a mind for the facts and yes, he enjoyed the technical talk. But if he were honest...he'd admit how he despised the work. There was too much churning and chuffing of machines too much tearing up of the earth. He was so unlike Manjate and Eduardo who were made for tools and trade. Only the birdie views from the scaffolds and high girders or from the tops of buildings lifted him.

The crane trampled on making a whistling noise and sitting behind the steering was his fellow countryman Fela, who had earned the name Gold Coast by conveying the impression literally in his smile, where three or four of his front teeth were replaced with nuggets. Ossei recalled him as a maimed worker from a Bosomtwe mine, now more machine than man behind the wheel, as if he had somehow absorbed the mechanical capacity of the crane. Gold Coast was unsmiling and with the focus of ten men – his eyes on the girder ahead. Ossei unsure if he could even hear – not once did he glance at Skumbuzo standing on the side.

Two volunteers had left their stations as the crane rolled along, not far away rotting lumber, sand and rubble were heaped into a tower, which would later be trucked. The volunteers directed Gold Coast from the obstruction, as he descended wheel by wheel towards the girder.

By then the lower segments had been assembled, Manjate with his head between the girder's rungs, gazed at the crane without flinching. So at home in the uproar of the crane's turning neck and shifting gears. He didn't seem to mind the noise or fumes either.

Some of the crew had rolled up their sleeves and were fastening frames together with the slings through the holes; Skumbuzo's hands, a horn around his mouth as he shouted instructions, "No short cuts. Hear me? Smaller ones go first. C'mon finish up."

The sky was so dull and for the second time that day, Ossei found his thoughts with the woman in Reception. Her kind excited him, especially when he hadn't been expected. His presence left such women guileless, their mouths contorting in confusion and sometimes they swallowed from nerves. He loved stripping a woman's composure.

The dying engine intruded on him, a flurry of ironworkers drawn over. Ossei looked at the men congregating in a kind of carnival with Skumbuzo as ringmaster calling them to stop or backup. The frames had been stacked on an empty case, the ironworkers aligning

and securing them with spud wrenches, all motions in tune with the abruptness of the orders. Finally, a rope like a heavy-galley rope was attached over the whole case, to prevent it from swinging when the crane would eventually hoist it up.

Across the way, Ossei recognised Eduardo stuck between a bony man in a navy overall, certainly past sixty and a Somali mason with his feet out and over his shoes. The trio rose and snapped the lids onto lunch tins and closed their flasks. The mason glancing over at Eduardo before jerking his feet into his shoes, and after a minute or two the three turned their attention to Ossei, who raised his hand in a greeting.

He recalled that Eduardo's companions were in attendance at his birthday gathering - such a long time ago when divisions amongst them were much less. He found it difficult to associate the festive fires in drums, the dancing women and good wishes all around with the prickling tensions on site. The digs were growing increasingly grimmer and filled with angry men who seemed to have no other use.

By then the morning break was halfway through, Manjate talking with his one leg up on a cornerstone and ever so often his hand going to his knee as he leaned in to listen or clarify someone's confusing attempt at a question. Ossei deplored his careless ways, why didn't he just shut up?

"So all of a sudden, I hear them go *boom boom*. But what can I do but lift my hands up and walk? I think the Green's about to go crazy. *Eish*, I look at the Green and think fuck this, I can work on my arms and legs, night or day, but when it comes down to it . . . money's just money, right? "

He talked without self-consciousness or discretion, showing off to the locals, Ossei was unsure what the youth was trying to pull -he was after all, a foreigner in a foreign town and if he shat in someone's food, there was no sense rubbing their face in the plate as well!

He sensed anxiety of the others as a can which had been kicked in their direction, rolled on the ground, the group looking at the bunged cola-can spreading the dust and it was unclear which passer had checked it their way.

Manjate shook the incident as only a slight disturbance and continued,

“Whole fucking place is full of bullets. *Eish*, so one hand is up in the air and the other goes into my pocket... I’m a fucking professional, huh. So I take out the fifties and wave it. Now I don’t know bout you *bafana*, but I didn’t walk those miles, cross those mountains and trick those bastard touts to turn around and crawl right back into it.”

The youth was making everyone uncomfortable. Gold Coast full of small movements, listened and kicked the front of one shoe into the side of the other. Ossei couldn’t see his face, yet he knew it would be covered in worry. The man was nervous despite his earlier certainty at the crane.

Manjate’s voice was full of bravado and amusement, which never left the air even when he sipped his coffee, “It doesn’t shame me to admit it, yes, the Green was flaunting himself. Right there, he came up around and sniffed me. Like a dog. Then *boom boom*, bullets into the ground. Not kidding you. I mean, who the fuck do they think they are? That’s why any and every dog we find... understand?”

Ossei was in the company of a dangerous youth, who often pulled ridiculous tricks. The ironworkers nearby scouted out the details, the names of border posts, when and how he’d jumped. No one could threaten Manjate without a gun, so he did whatever he wanted. And as far as Ossei could remember, no one had managed to drag him back by the ear either...He knew talk of the woman in Reception would distract him. Manjate couldn’t say no to chatter about the finer points of an ass, still Ossei wasn’t sure how much of her he wanted to share...

Sawing, drilling and hammering noises returned to the day- a fortunate thing in the end since the din drowned out words. The workers backed away in silence from Manjate, some towards various divisions of the site and one or two locating the toilets.

Manjate advanced, holding out a harness with a belt already attached and a restraining weight in the middle to secure it. “Pay any price and you get the dreamy jobs,” – he went on to explain the small favour from Skumbuzo.

A surge of joy shot through Ossei, as he listened –he had been expecting work in the trenches but today, they would fit windows on the tenth floor. Ah, how shallow he was altering his opinion of the youth so soon, since managing to land this pleasing chunk. From the window’s ledge Ossei could see into the core of the building, where traders

walked the floor, where black men talked to white women and on the streets, the cars marching and reducing into specks with distance.

More than the money, I need to work. Manjate thought this putting his gloves on which were roughened on the outside and so, suitable for holding onto slippery ropes. Once or twice, he'd walked up the ramp to find Skumbuzo thrown by the rising rain, occupying himself with another member, also assigned to the windows' crew. Manjate stood by, reluctant to interrupt since the foreman especially hated this.

"Imagine, just imagine a mole in a concrete city without grass or sand to burrow in?" Skumbuzo asked and then answered his own question, "The mole won't survive see, cos it won't have no purpose."

"Maybe, it would rush through someone's door," said Wiseman, the twenty-year old.

"See, then the mole would be mistaken for a rat, by a squealing person. A dirty rat which bites and there's a big difference between a mole and a rat."

"Maybe..."

"Moles have bad eyes. See, they easily believe lies in the night. If they aren't run over by feet or the cars first, they mistake drains for the wind or swimming pools for mud. They fall in, they drown."

"Maybe..."

"And another thing, unless someone tried to trap it, a mole wouldn't bite you."

Manjate tossed his empty toolbelt into the air, watching the flimsy ends flap, the gesture intending to remind Skumbuzo of his presence.

The foreman turned to him with a lopsided grin, "Goanna spit pots and pans today," he said, pointing skyward, "See, I'll shift your crew to the diggers," and he gave him an almost fatherly look.

Manjate could suffer a bit of wet, and already he'd shot his mouth off to Ossei, he looked at Skumbuzo, "You forget I'm from the *barrios*, flood lands. So fuck the wet, besides most of the work's done on the inside . . . and remember, we must pay our bills on time."

Skumbuzo pondered this, Manjate capitalising on the foreman's fears of delayed schedules and project cut.

Wiseman had been quiet till then, Manjate realising, he was the final tool needed in persuasion, "On your monthlies again?" he asked Wiseman, "*Eish*, the wets goanna bring out your blood."

And of course Wiseman rose to the taunt with similar chagrin, "We're from the *barrios*," he said to Skumbuzo.

Later he felt a little off-centre going up the girder with a wet face and the world down below.

There had been a cliff once in Quelimane, which Goncalves had dared him to climb. Boys who had touched the foot of the mountain, finding the rockface still warm, the cliff rising about twelve feet above ground. The next year, grown into taller, sturdier boys, Manjate had scattered stones across the edge, looking up at the cliff and placing his foot without intending to, on Goncalves' hand.

Manjate had made it all the way up, Goncalves without the stomach to follow. Poor Goncalves had never gotten over it.

Now the drizzle had a glittery quality about it, shining on the rusted joists and the buckles of his harnesses. His feet firm on the rung below, his hand reaching upward.

On the building itself, the drizzle slid in streamlets sponging out the panes of bluish glass. The tenth floor was higher than Manjate had imagined and the girder like a long line under his feet, he glanced across and saw Ossei, Wiseman and another member crouched over the tops of rungs.

Metal plates, squares of about a metre wide, were cut into the girder at varying points and used for holding material. Each one attached with a chain on either side to the bars crossing each other in diamonds. The plates had a powdery surface from residue and corrosion. Ossei's habit was to swing his legs over and to hoist his body till he sat in one. Despite his many daydreaming heights, he had never broken a bone. Today Manjate would have a word with him, though the man could walk up the thing easier than walking into a brothel.

The first few girders Manjate had been up were as he'd expected, his boots pushing from rung to rung. One time though, halfway up the bridge in Alex, the unfinished pass had seemed to seesaw in front of him, the guardrail at a harsh angle over the road. He had glanced down at the tarmac and its broken lines, the view swinging. Yet he had climbed higher many times before.

The rain came down one drop after the other, catching each thing and no longer the random block of the Square. Still conditions were safe, unlike windy days when gusts hissed and fell on machines. Wiseman posed with his hands in his pockets, while Ossei straddled the rung and reclined – both men, as if they didn't need their hands to balance. It wasn't a tricky act, since the two wore harnesses with safety straps fastened to moorings. And this connected them to the girder at all times, the straps designed to hold around a 1000 kilos.

What bothered Manjate was that even in the drizzle the pair had no sense of urgency. Of course, Ossei grasped the view and Wiseman stood there like driftwood in need of a surge.

Meanwhile below on the ground, an excavator started in a noisy grind, *cutta-cutta-cutta* it sounded into the air. One worker clasped the side of the machine and directed the driver, while another passed by on his way to a trench, carrying a bag of ashlar on his shoulder. Manjate noticed Wiseman looking down in confusion and then clapping his hands over his ears. Yes: this was too much even for Manjate who never lost his temper on a job. Wiseman would get himself killed if he couldn't hear.

He began his instructions, robot like, until Wiseman and Ossei worked. Windows on the lower level had already been fitted inside, what remained was to replace the sill bedding, by first lifting the old silicone and in a few places clearing it by hand. Over time and exposure Manjate guessed the bedding had hardened, instinctively his hand went to the knife and chisel in his belt.

What he appreciated was how calm Ossei was, always trying to fit in and please people. There were few outbursts unlike with Goncalves and Ossei didn't have his handsomeness. Most important, Ossei was tolerant of humor. *Eish*, when it came down to it, work was just work, right?

After some moments Wiseman had set about his task with diligence, securing screws in the corners of the frame, he screwed a turn, paused, before screwing another and examining the window from a different slant. He reached into a plastic bag balancing on a plate filled with shiny sprigs, silver against the brackish surface. He stopped to shake out his sleeve and two or three sprigs tumbled out almost on top of each other back into the bag. All Wiseman had needed was a push. Not once did he sit and stare into space.

Thirty vertical feet of frontage was to be covered in the day, and Ossei stood there measuring windows with a spirit level. With one hand holding the level, he made weird calculations at different angles of the frame, his body going back and forth, as if he couldn't believe variations in the window's height. There was no purpose to his actions, which went on for some time. The longer Manjate watched him, the harder he found it to interrupt his friend, remaining something of a mystery to him. The sky was still grey, yet to the east some light had slipped through the clouds. Ossei turned towards the distance.

He wasn't doing any work and yet, by his own design he was keeping busy, pulling a mutton cloth from his trouser pocket, facing the window, lips close to the metal coating on the surface. Skyscraper windows were designed with a mirror effect, so he couldn't see in, only his own reflection back at him. From top to bottom, Ossei swiped the cloth in lengths, pausing and turning to the sky before returning to the task with renewed concentration.

He could hear noises circulating on the tenth floor, at first Manjate thinking nothing of them, since some employees still worked inside the building, on the far wing, (only one section without windows). He stood up on the girder and stretched his body, pushing his head through the frame, voices growing in loudness. From where he was, so high up, they sounded important. He considered investigating, since it was only a small jump from the girder to the ledge and then to inside. He cast his eye in Wiseman's direction – the man industrious enough for them all, then he couldn't see Ossei and hoped he'd appear. Half a minute went by, nothing happened.

“Choking the monkey Ossei, where are you?”

Wiseman laughed from down below.

“You’re very good to me, ay”– Ossei said, seated on a metal plate around the side and lower down the girder. His head propped in his hand as he stared up at Manjate.

“What are you talking about *bafana*, get back to work.”

Before Ossei could reply, someone inside the building screamed. Manjate rose to his full height, witnessing one man in a suit lunge at another. The two on the topmost floor, fell back, knocking over a bucket and sending paint rolling. Blood poured from one man’s nose.

“Get back, get back,” Manjate shouted as the two emerged from the floor, locking arms and nearing the open window.

But they were heedless, the taller pulling the shorter around, trying to topple him and surprisingly, nobody in the office rushed over to intervene.

Now Ossei and Wiseman were overcome with the hype from above, their words were everywhere and Manjate barely heard. *He didn’t need this shit.* He took a step forward considering the jump, the strap and mooring of his harness would be long enough. Somebody ought to intervene.

He watched as the taller man rolled a fist and ascended over the shorter on the floor, his delay punished when the shorter kicked out his legs to send the taller stumbling, backwards to the window, his elbow smashed between frames. The man recoiled unable to prevent his left shoulder from hanging out.

“Get back,” Manjate yelled. But there was no response from him, grabbing onto the end of the frame and gathering his breath.

By then Ossei and Wiseman were antsy to climb up and help, Manjate certain that they would see the inside of the man’s ear – his body was so far out of the window.

Meanwhile the shorter had recovered from the floor, his hands reaching for the taller.

Someone else entered then, “What the hell’s going on here?” This man was dark haired with a thin moustache and wearing tinted glasses, he didn’t seem to know what to do. “Hey, stop that, hey.”

The two tearing all over the place again and coming to blows.

“I don’t believe this right before my eyes, I don’t believe this,” the dark-haired man said to Manjate, who in the same instance could hear Ossei and Wiseman climb up. He looked to their faces pressed against the girder’s edge, their legs unusually long in the air.

He didn't waste another minute, holding the strap of his harness and swinging his free hand while jumping, and when he landed he grabbed hold of the building's inside wall.

There were no airplanes, birds, dust or smoke when Ossei reached the topmost rung, the sky a grey cover with shifting cloud. Grey and white, white on grey, the drizzle all but disappearing.

Manjate was between bodies trying to pry them apart, his movements restricted by harness and strap. Meanwhile, some unknown person just stood by and watched.

Ossei wasn't sure if he ought to go over but before he could make a decision, more suits entered the room, his watch showed that it was two-thirty and somehow this seemed important. The suits were combed, slicked and at odds with the spread of blood and paint around, on the shorter man's face – red flowed from his nose to chin. Finally, the two were being pulled apart, the impact of it, almost dropping Manjate. Everyone appeared to separate into factions then and to wait, until one of the suits got a hanky from his pocket for the bleeding man's nose. This gesture stirring them to file out the room.

Ossei waved to Manjate – appearing exhausted and who at the same moment was engaged by the unknown person in dark glasses, coming around and patting him on the shoulder. Ossei curious to know what was being said.

“Yes, yes, thank you,” - was much as the man could muster, before licking his finger and counting a wad of notes. Then with a final sentence, he left.

Manjate walked towards Ossei and talked, giving a backward glance at the stain on the carpet and the bucket which someone had uprighted. “You see what I'm saying *bafana*? Suits or spades, same goes...the true colours of men.”

“Money my friend makes us different. No, I take that back, even without money we're still different, in here,” Ossei said, with a gesture into his gut, “Now let me be a friend and carry some of your notes? You're looking tired ay.”

“*Heh heh*, you’re a funny one Ossei,” by then Manjate had made it to the window frame, his foot on the ledge as he spoke, “Need to empty my front loader *bafana*, be a friend by taking over the shift. You know me on this point, huh.”

Ossei focused on Manjate standing two feet away, both his feet were firm on the ledge, he stretched his hands between the window’s frames and blinked as if he were fighting fatigue. Was this odd? It seemed to Ossei, they were staring at each other, as if into full-length mirrors only without their reflections staring back at them.

“*Eish*, I’m saying I need to piss,” – to emphasise his point, Manjate’s hand went to his crotch and he grabbed it hard.

Ossei’s old annoyance rose up at the youth for his crude ways. And where was Wiseman during all of this?

Ossei slowly maneuvered himself on the girder to allow Manjate through, while the youth kept on about Wiseman being the only one to work, then an unmistakable crunking noise was heard and metal ripped.

Manjate’s voice was clear, “what?” he asked, with a startled face. It seemed to happen incredibly, the mooring detaching from the harness, the length of blue nylon receding to the ground, Manjate at the end of it giving Ossei the barest of glances. His hand grabbed air and the whole of him with suppressed screams was gone.

## Thirteen

### *Posh Ponte*

The Posh Ponte had been converted from the shell of a penthouse apartment on top of fifty-four floors and ever so often drinkers caught the light at the windows reflected off the Vodacom sign on the building's head. Goncalves couldn't see it from inside but he knew the sign as every city dweller knew Ponte, from street level, where the cylinder of the tower rose above its passers.

He was cramped at a corner of the bar, alongside a lofty African parking his bag on a stroller and taking up the room of two bar stools, the man had a bone at the cartilage of his nose and both his cheekbones were marked. Outside, every hour or so a car's alarm wailed, sometimes followed by glass smashed or by someone's screams. Goncalves reconsidered saying anything to the African about his bag.

The bar itself led out to a corridor with chrome windows all around, you could see through to the other side or down into Ponte's core, first at the windows on the levels below then to the bedrock pushing out from the building's base and when he looked down at this view, it had the effect on him of rushing, like he were a child on a steep water slide having to step back.

He knew many of the construction hands around from his outings with Manjate, who was familiar with the piece boys in the city. A surge of them nearby in their workman's boots, hardhats squatting on the stools beside them and some resting forearms on the tall tables were clearly occupied with the door. Without Manjate's presence Goncalves was buoyed amongst them but today he didn't mind, since his mood blended into the ugly edges of Ponte itself.

He made for a refill, passing by Card who controlled traffic at the door. Fernao Cardoso was a man of forty resembling one of fifty-five, born in Angola but raised in Mozambique. They called him Card, since during the war he'd dealt in explosives.

Goncalves observed him lifting a side-fist to a newcomer in silent greeting, his knuckles blackened by gunpowder and the liver spots on his face broadened out from under his eyes over his skin.

An unexpected tap stopped Goncalves on his way to the bar, he looked up at Card having ascended over him, without him realising it.

“The glass stays behind.”

Goncalves had the urge to collide with Card, swing his fists into his face. But there was something more in Card’s voice, between annoyance and enjoyment - the diseased slut was toying with him. Goncalves would plan better for the fight.

He left the bar, exiting into the corridor, on the stairs leading to the next floor, a couple sat and shared a joint. He said hello while parting them with his feet – it was easier to ride the lift from the level below. The pair unconcerned by the smell of the joint or the attention drawn by its encircling smoke, as this was Ponte where no one cared.

For most of the week Goncalves had installed himself at The Posh, liquor at least giving him temporary numbness. If only so much hadn’t stood in his way...now there was nothing he could do about the feelings inside him.

Around him, Ponte’s residents carried on with their routine business, a man put up a notice in what Goncalves conceived to be Hausa and music sounded from behind the closed doors- Zouk, Kwasa Kwasa tunes- on the other side, he heard the pull of a chain, water flushing the toilet’s bowl. As far as he could see in both directions, the floor was populated with doors, like his own building further in Berea where many two-bedroom units had been squeezed into three-room rentals.

Landlords calculated on silence, on the desperation of the immigrant tenant to exist in the machinery of the Republic. From Tower of Babel to denizen of drugs, Ponte had names, so much so that Manjate had insisted in the nineties, some bureaucrat had the idea of withdrawing the building from public life and turning it into a prison (figuring they already had half the criminals there!). Goncalves couldn’t believe it, whatever else was denied them out of hate, simple ignorance or fear, at least they had a place in Ponte.

On the street, the taxis he ought to have taken sped by, until finally he stood up on the pavement and walked across to the vendor outside the Technikon, the man leaning to the side and coughing hard into a hanky, smoke from the brazier fanning his face and the white cap on his head. Goncalves was a distinguished eater, relishing cheese sandwiches with pickles and mustard, rinds of meat in sauce, *peri-galinghas* and he had a taste for rice.

By then others had wandered into the cloud of cooking kebabs, he inhaled the chicken-scented air, feeling improved.

Students in the queue carried satchel bags, while some of the women wore weaves. Goncalves grimaced at the straightened strands of hair, having forgotten all about female flesh. Maybe, it was just the thing he needed to pin some girl onto a bed.

He reached for the kebab slobbered in grated tomato and three kinds of chillies, fractions away from the face of a girl. He could graze her bony elbow; hear her tongue suck on a sweet. Possibly, a girl from Uganda on a bursary here. Sure he'd have a chance with her, if she'd been in amongst the crowd when he'd pushed the ball into the net... Now she'd shudder even to look at him.

He gazed at the sign on Ponte's head; points of white light shaped the letters of the advertiser's name with the earth's logo alongside it, rotating in a digitised green. For a while he stood there breaking bits of bread and chicken and when he was done eating, he squashed his serviette into a ball, unsure what to do with it because of the things running through his head.

That morning squatting on the toilet, he'd identified a burning sensation and slowly, separated his ass cheeks. They were surrounded by blisters. He couldn't quite understand the squishy feeling on his fingers, making him pull his hand away.

Now he expelled the air as if to rid it of the feeling, which didn't leave the mass of him. So he began to walk comforted by the solid ground under him in the direction of Bez Park. At the intersection on Saratoga pausing, undecided where to go, right and he'd tramp around the Technikon into the heart of Doornfontein, straight through and he'd enter Charlton with Joburg Stadium on the side.

He could see in the semi-darkness the forms of doorframes, the bars on darkened windows, there was a drab ten-storey building in a brownish brick, and he had a sudden flash of Ponte, of all the plans he'd read about to turn it into luxury apartments with turnstiles, cameras and guards seated behind concierge desks. What a fate to be condemned to the refurbished models of other buildings, like those in Berea and Bellevue East! He knew all of this through the Soccer World Cup and its comings to Africa, how the inner city would benefit from the storm-water drains and street furniture put in.

The bowl of the stadium was fenced in a grey fabric; he could see only the tops of the rugby posts reaching up to the halides of the lights. Though he was in midstreet, he was in a timeless space with no one around.

No beggars with their decaying wounds, sleeping on newspaper rolls to taunt him. Lately, he'd had a feeling that everyone knew about the figure moving towards him and reaching across in the dim confines of the van...The event replayed in his mind: the hands lingering on his hips, the wet thighs behind him again and again.

Goncalves swayed before sitting down on the street unable to control his direction. Whenever these images recurred, his whole body seemed to ache with the shame. At the end of Charlton where the road ran to Berea; he crouched on the rise, arms clamped around knees, for a very long time he sat there.

After what seemed like hours, he heard shouts coming from far ahead. Standing up on the rise he hoped for a better view but the air was obscured with a whitish dust. The noises increased in volume, Goncalves estimating at least a dozen men were gathered nearby somewhere. After minutes of walking further, he noticed an orange glow in the sky to his right, the whitish dust distorting into smoke.

Now he could smell burning and hear objects splash onto a fire. Still, he was too far away to see the outlines of bodies, the shouts sounding more and more like shrieks.

Manjate had talked of demolition crews who were carried in double-trailers to sites sometimes at nighttime, to make bonfires of unsalvageable goods, from mouldy ceilings to the tired timber floors...When all the objects had flooded the fire, the men would drink and dance around – since wreckage was a festive time. Goncalves hoping he was walking into such a wreckage with someone like Manjate standing by with a warming skin of

brandy. By then he had expected out of the smoke, the stench of melting paint and varnish. But what he smelt was paraffin and he knew the night had worn him down. He turned from the mismatched sounds, his walk brisker. Actually, he was running away. Why had he come out so far?

Turn after turn newer blocks were separated by the older, shabbier streets, he was in a part of Doornfontein or New Doornfontein he wasn't sure of. Finally, he could see Ponte and then Hillbrow lying behind with its chunks of retail and residences outshined by the beeping green lights on Telkom's radio tower.

Exhausted reaching Ponte, he climbed the flight of stairs – since he never took the elevator from ground level, on the first floor few lights were on, here vaguely making out a stubbed candle on a windowsill. He wasn't used to this dimness. Anyway, he would try going upstairs to the Posh for booze.

The numbers above the elevator door flickered from thirty to twenty-nine; he turned his head to the sound of banging and a flurry of people rushing out into their doorways, a few of the men going around to the other side. At least five minutes went by, panic spreading on the floor as more doors were opened and children shooed back inside. Many women in nightgowns stood around refolding their arms, waiting for the men who talked and glanced ever so often at their own doors. Meanwhile, nobody paid any attention to him.

When he reached the Posh, music was sounded from inside, one track coming off with a scratching noise before another played on. But he wasn't back just for booze. Inside he noticed a man standing up, kicking a chair; surely the man was aware that Card didn't handle drunks.

Before he realised he was in amongst them, men stooping and rubbing hips. After a step or two he stopped, as if recognising someone in disguise – but it was only a youth under a hood of a tracksuit top who resembled Manjate. The atmosphere of The Posh was so different to Manjate's ways, with its bottles and glasses glaring at him and the cold air whistling through cracks. A few drunks in overalls dragged their tools with them and any moment Goncalves expected some kind of a crash.

*He hadn't seen Manjate in a week and he didn't care.* A whole line of elbows and forearms were alongside his on the counter, in shades lighter or darker, as if brightened by some magical lamp above. Men like him from every contour of the continent and his eyes hurt to look at them.

Something happened, which had been happening a lot lately. People were staring at him, like they were sorry for him coming here to this city just to be shat on and used up by bosses and resented still by beggars for his change. No one in The Posh could possibly know how he'd pulled his pants down without the guts to say no. Only the Tout...that fucking bastard...if he saw him...he'd be dead, acting like the liar he was, he would turn around and pretend he didn't know Goncalves in The Posh. Goncalves moving in closer as if to shout above the noise and oh Molopo would feel his heart change...

Again he felt itchiness in his ass. He couldn't use the urinal in the toilets to scratch himself; he'd have to go inside a cubicle. Sometimes he wondered if the shame would ever leave him. He wouldn't use the toilets. No. Besides, he hated the filthiness.

Behind him the blue bag remained where he had last remembered it, the tall African using the stroller's handle as a hand-rest. The African raised his glass to Card, who in turn dropped his jaw in mock surprise, the two men sniggering.

Maybe, Goncalves was out of his mind. But it became a problem for him when others fooled their expressions. The two kept at it, tilting heads, sticking up thumbs – they were getting off on him without words.

“Wait a minute,” he said to the African, “You think you own the place?” Card's eyes on him from across the room; he was certain any instant he'd push past the drunks in their chairs and stand right up behind.

The African seemed awkward, unsure what to answer or if at all he'd heard right.

“Something wrong?” he asked, standing at least three inches taller and ten kilos heavier than Goncalves.

But when he got like this Goncalves didn't care. “Screw your mother, *puta...*” He wanted to say but didn't.

The construction crew at the tall tables seemed to sense an impending fight, staring at Goncalves then at the door. One of the men clearly returned from the toilet, stood

fastening his belt and drying his hands on his pants, while another lit a cigarette for him. But there was no rushing in through the doors by Manjate.

The African fixed Goncalves with a gaze more than a rebuff, “You don’t have to waste no time. What’s your issue?”

When he’d first sat at the bar Goncalves considered it dangerous to stare now the man almost in his face, left him no choice. He guessed he had come from Chad or around the Great Lakes, and if you saw him in the dark you’d still be able to see the white bone at the end of his nose and the toothed scars on his cheeks. His shoulders were stiff or maybe it was the effect of his words making them appear so, “Looks like somebody got his tongue eaten.”

Goncalves had no idea where Card was then, expecting him in it already, the bar too quiet. He resisted the urge to start smashing bottles...Card would come straight at him drop him facedown on the floor and stamp on his head.

Meanwhile three men had wandered over and were watching Goncalves and the African, above their foamy mugs of beer; all three wearing knitcaps over their ears and sunglasses. A cold winter had been predicted for the year, still Goncalves wasn’t sure about the need for sunglasses.

The African turned his head also at the three, speculating, as the beer slipped carelessly from their mugs to the floor.

“Fuck,” Goncalves said out loud without realising. His mind working on and off, one minute expecting Manjate to burst in, the next he was distracted by the three drinkers. What he really wanted was to obliterate everything in sight, to slide bottles and tins off tables to blacken the windows and the mutilated posters on the walls where girls stood with their breasts torn-off.

The African seemed to expand his anger by repeating the question.

Goncalves shrugged before he hit the floor, the African over him while he pretended motionlessness. Card arrived after some minutes, at that point screams sounding from the street and everyone inside began hurrying out.

Some drinkers dropped to their hands and knees, crawled down along the counter towards the door. Goncalves raised his head and called to someone, but no one stopped.

Chairs were falling all over, Card and the African realising that circumstances outside were bigger than the bar or the facts of themselves. The Posh deserted in a matter of minutes. Goncalves pushed himself up from the floor, listening to people along the corridor moving towards the exits, some of them helping others through. He doubted that anyone would take the lifts.

It was as if some kind of external pressure had been exerted on Ponte, objects streamed the floor, bottles, mugs, glasses, hardhats, packets of chips and ashtrays. The reflected light at the windows appeared to vanish, the glass almost a curve of near darkness was broken up only by its silver panes, he speculated if the sign on the building had perhaps not fallen down....

The roar from the street filtered all the way up: people were running and screaming, cars busting around corners, the sirens of police vans as they sped by. Goncalves sat with his limbs fixed to the floor in a kind of paralysis, the identity book fallen from his pocket.

He carried the book with him, since random searches were happening in the city more, and you could only escape with currency or proof of your legitimacy. He remembered his pain, the ring at his anus widening, how he'd done what was unnatural to his own flesh...lifting the book, he thought how light a book it was. He had the same thought over of how lightly he carried legitimacy.

Ravi would have helped him, had he asked. Right now amidst the scent of burning, amidst the grit and ash in the air her life wherever it was, continued in the same way as it always had. No one would break down the gates of her townhouse; there would be no roadside chanting and sirens on her street.

Tomorrow maybe, she would deal with the victims of the night, as it was her job to.

Himself, he could not go back in time. He would wait for those on the streets to come, because he could not live or die in peace here.

## Fourteen

### *Queens*

The din seemed to challenge the music and the players glanced up from time to time into the confusion of about fifty people shouting at once, the women an outnumbering quantity to the men. Queens was in the heart of Alex and it wasn't just any *shebeen* or tavern. Ossei had a keen sense the space had been converted from two adjoining houses into a single venue on Seventh, a convenient location slipped into a dead-end and not too far from the new mall and rank. Three or more turns away were the *shebeens* he could never enter – those frequented by hostel residents, which he'd passed by, barely glancing up at their lighted signs.

Queens was a venue for the wealthier patron wanting to let loose in its ill-lit corners, he gathered this by the drinks ordered of rums and Cokes, the identical smelling cigars and ties slacked from the top-two buttons of shirts. With a week's wages to blow, he gazed around as if he had some expertise on the women, yet he had never been to a brothel before.

Even amongst the whores, foreigners were unwelcome and someone would soon be over to harass him but what could be done to him today when time had stopped? His own pulse, his own heart frozen by a scream and then an instant of dizziness and incoherence. The bond between him and Manjate so fierce, at times it was hard to understand, yet he'd been unable to move, hypnotized by his friend's falling body.

So it is said, Ghana is geographically closer to the centre of the world than any other country, since the Meridian runs through the town of Tema. If Ossei believed anything, he believed today, in that scream of death, he'd been at the centre of time.

He ordered double rum from the barman, casually dropping a hundred rand on the table. With the day's events fear couldn't triumph and he was clear about it. He was going to have a lover and it would be a whore. At any rate there were not many Akan women in Joburg to choose from, the mix of Mozambicans and Congolese, he ended up paying for it anyway with groceries or trips to the hairdresser. Local girls would just as soon spit at

him as go to bed...He'd make an exchange, no fuss or flattery needed, before someone threw him out...

Across him, an old man sat with the uncovered breast of a young woman in his one hand, Ossei could tell the woman was a feeding mother by the milk leaked from her nipple to the hand. The woman belonging to the big, afro-haired type with lightened skin and far too drunk for Ossei to take full notice of her naked breast. The man wore a tanned hat with a broad-brim and string fastened under his chin, giving him a traveller's air, as if he had just arrived from safari. A grey rucksack and raincoat lay on the stool next to him; clearly not from around here.

The musicians at this point intoxicated as much by their instruments, with their fingertips running over the holes from the top down and playing with express speed. Those who had come in earlier were singing along, *Kwela kwela,* 'echoing in a hoarse and offbeat chorus. Meanwhile, a few women nearby stared Ossei down and conferred wordlessly with the whoremonger circulating the tables. Customer or not their eyes asked about him, the room swayed then by the music in one direction, the penny whistlers blowing forcefully and no one attempting to even sing along.

Ossei noticed the women moving to and fro, out of rhythm to the whistling. One, grown a slight beard, the characteristic *kanga* draped around her body and tied at her nape, exposing her hairy underarms and shoulders. She wore a black belt which was unusual, as if it would keep the *kanga* tied had someone attempted to undo it from behind. Ossei doubted if she had many customers.

Close at hand, another girl sat on a chair with a short skirt hiked to her crotch, he could see her thong ending in a red v and the tattoos on both her thighs. He wasn't sure if someone had drawn these with a pen, the girl without a drop of makeup, closing her eyes and sucking her thumb.

How black this other woman looked in the white robe which fell to her ankles, a blue sash binding her waist, her breasts curving against the whiteness and it was hard for him to miss the dark flare at her vagina. She was naked underneath and there above her left breast was a green veldt and metal ZCC badge, Ossei realised her robe was that of the

ZCC faith, apart from the colour. These women normally were in bright blue with green berets or green jerseys and blue berets – depending on the time of year.

The last notes of the penny whistle seemed to fade. She mocked him lifting both her hands shoulder high, the robe winglike, as she encircled the air bringing her hands together in a prayer. An evocative gesture, which moulded her body to the robe.

They looked at each other then, “And to my bed you will come, *morena*,” she said, shifting, “*M-m-makwere*, I’ll take you in my womb invader,” her tongue traced the top of her lip. The woman encircled her hands again, garbling out words.

By the end of the afternoon the drizzle had subsided and like everyone else in the city, Ossei had felt relief the rains had finally made up its mind. Now the thunder above the brothel’s noise annoyed him, since there had been no sign of it on his way.

A figure sidestepped him, changed his mind and turned around, here was the whoremonger, recognisable in his black from head to foot and parting a long, leather jacket to reveal a holster at his hip. He looked at Ossei from under a skullcap pulled down to his ears – the man an albino of about fifty with a crucifix around his neck and over the top of the holster, the silver handle of a gun showed. A black man with skin so white...who was all about contrasts.

Ossei lifted his hand for another, “Rum,” he said, unconcerned.

The barman poured, Ossei feeling the whoremonger stare and after a moment drag a stool to sit on. As for this means of intimidation, Ossei couldn’t care less. For a moment he thought it not possible for such a man to exist, surely light would shine through his naked skin and show his insides.

In the meantime the whoremonger ordered exactly the same drink, with his close presence the whores were more intent, plotting moves. All of them, besides the woman in white, who drank a large beer from a mug. She slurped, sending foam over the mug’s sides and onto her chest, with a sigh she turned away. Ossei wasn’t sure if this were a game until someone else seemed to claim her: this woman doing a performance by leaving the side of the ‘traveller,’ both her breasts covered this time and her afro sweeping the airspace. She extended the grey raincoat like an extravagant mink to the

woman in white. Meanwhile the ‘traveller’ had left his position at the chair and neared the door, rucksack on his back and hat in hand.

The woman in white glanced at Ossei without any subtlety, then across at the coat weighing her options. Ossei’s drink was nearly done; he could feel himself slip into the helplessness of his needs, already half hypnotised by her body under the robe. She traced the top of her lip with her tongue, licking off beer. Ossei read it as an expression of what she could possibly do to him and the bulge in his pants confirmed this.

Outside, thunder deepened against the pulse of the township, he knew the wind would come up as it often did with the Highveld’s storms. Now Queens was filled with the rise and fall of background music, three chords of a guitar, low-key lyrics in Zulu or Xhosa... From the street came the horn-blasts of cars and the odd shouts of congratulations. When the storm hit, few would be about since the locals shuddered from even the mildest storms. The roads would empty in Old Alex on the westside of the river through to the Far East Bank and his own home in extension seven, all the way to eight, ten and the ARP houses near Linbro Park.

He took in the rest of the room with the whoremonger still seated. Men were entering and exiting Queens, the whoremonger showing no interest in those popping their heads through the door and turning back around, or others who came up to the bar and ordered drinks fluently in the local language. Ossei realised out of the blue that no one spoke English in the place and why this was important...

After about five minutes, the woman in white finished her beer. It was the moment to offer her another and if she chose to accept, the possibility of financial arrangement and retiring to one of the rooms he’d heard about at the back.

No doubt, negotiations were ongoing – with the afro-haired woman nuzzling into the woman in white’s neck, and whispering something in her ear. By then the lamps on the tables had been lit and the lightbulbs downed, only one of the penny whistlers blew a fluty sound, which seemed to curl in the air. She leaned over and kissed the other woman on the cheek, breast grazing breast, the effect arousing him.

Ossei looked to the doorway for a sight of the ‘traveller,’ whose grey raincoat lay in a pile on the floor between the pair twisting their bodies to the flute.

Like he were watching from a distance, himself in a contortion of breasts, thighs and bums, a bed with him between the women and his cock sucked forever...afterwards they’d kiss, the big, afro-haired opening her legs and the spread at her vagina as commanding as her head.

The whoremonger slid his hand along the counter and picked up the hundred rand, judging that it was perfectly alright, he gave Ossei a once over and let the note slip. Ossei checking him with a respectful smile before ordering another drink, he had nothing to gain by being reckless and so far, he seemed to pass. Despite the turmoil of the day’s events, acceptance wasn’t something he could resist. Part of the enticement of Queens was its reputation and the whoremonger himself, who had initiated the place without a care for what anyone at the time had thought. Just a place for drinks, whores and whatever you couldn’t find in a regular *shebeen*.

Even back then he’d known what Queens was worth in its crumbling locale. Things went nice n’ smooth, yet the whoremonger welcomed trouble: since spending his schooldays on the other side of the river up in the trees, which leaned over the main roads to throw rocks at passing patrols. And no one knew Alex better than the whoremonger did, these were established facts like Queens itself without anyone telling Ossei.

Then there was the squint eye the man had, the pupil stuck into the tear duct nearest his nose, which he liked to boast about. It appeared after a *gatta* had beaten him so bad with a baton. That was during the Sharpville killings – the whoremonger launching a bottle full of petrol with a burning, cloth wicker into the guard.

Ossei grinned recalling the tarnished history of the man and place; he could feel the whoremonger’s eye upon him and caught his nod. Then he believed everything would be possible, he would play with the whores and charm them all. Meanwhile, the ‘traveller’ edged from the door to the women dancing, the big-afro-haired stretching her hand and clutching his, “I’m coming back,” he mouthed, slipping away, out of the room again.

Ossei was aware the woman watched the door, as if semi-detached from inside Queens, every now and then stopping her dancing altogether.

The whoremonger had a view of all corners, from the absurdly loaded tables and chairs to the pennywhistles resting on their stands, to Ossei the brothel seemed settled for the evening in its own peculiar history and smell.

A man named *Oupa*, *Oupa* Shocks with rings on every finger, made a show. Someone called his name from a distant table, ‘*eita Oupa, eita Shocks*,’ the echo forcing Ossei to take notice. As did the whoremonger, who gave him a pitiful look. He was obviously going the wrong way, wandering to the dancing women instead of the table where calls grew louder.

He passed by without self-consciousness, at the same time exploiting both women with his eyes and finally, when within their reach, he pulled the woman in white up against him. She was reluctant and tried pushing backwards out of his arms.

Ossei wasn’t expecting what happened. All of a sudden the whoremonger stood up and went over to Shocks. Without touching him, he stared, muttering some strange spell. Shocks didn’t seem to care much and Ossei knew to keep away from this madness.

The whoremonger stopped his muttering, turned to Shocks, the noise drifting out the door as coldness crept in.

“Take your hands off my whore.”

Shocks overconfident and foolish said, “So you and *Makothi* here are getting married? Sorry comrade didn’t get my invite. How much you pay *Labola* ha? Maybe, her father pay you for damages instead. *Ha..*”

The whoremonger grabbed Shocks by the shirt and held him.

Ossei certain, everyone in the place was certain, the whoremonger was prepared... “Just joking brother,” Shocks pleaded, lifting both hands. After that, it didn’t take long for Shocks to leave, which was a fortunate thing in the end.

Men were plying the whores with booze all over again or gifts above payment, Ossei didn’t hear any aggressive tones, yet he wondered if aggression was reserved for the bed. An icy hand touched his shoulder from behind and he couldn’t help but flinch at the sight

of the whoremonger so near and so ugly, a misfit amongst the lumbermen, one who'd make trees his best friends and in half a blink cut them down.

He snapped his fingers; the woman in white walked over and sat, harassed by the speed and insistence of the order. A menu was placed before Ossei and without words being exchanged, understanding in the air. The whoremonger made for the circuit of tables, leaving Ossei with a sense of a trap.

He could smell her body, tangy with the scent of berries and sweat, presenting new possibilities to him, her chest rose below the robe as if a hot wind were under her skin, one settled, only to pick up later. From time to time she fondled the shiny badge above her breast, this fascinated Ossei even more, whatever her intention wearing it in a place like Queens...a badge of spiritual significance, like she believed that despite her circumstances she belonged to a higher order.

By then he was far gone on the rum, wanting to fuck the badge right off her, first forcing her to her knees in the open and pushing his *shlong* into her mouth, until she gagged. He'd cum in the mouth of the twisted whore...

She looked at him without lewd invitation, pointing to the menu and reminding him of the business.

### *Specialties*

1. Hand job with g-string on, allowed to touch breasts – R50
2. Hand job with full nudity and body to body contact – R70
3. Hand job with fingering anus (of customer) – R80
4. Hand job with kissing – R80

\*note: Hand jobs at a maximum of twenty minutes. Only SA rand in cash.

5. Oral with a condom – R60
6. Oral without condom – R90

\*note: Oral sessions at a maximum of twenty minutes.

7. Oral without a condom plus intercourse with a condom – R130
8. Oral without a condom, kissing, intercourse with a condom – R160

\*note: 7 & 8 at maximum of forty minutes.

9. Full house (8) with a condom, cum twice – R200

\*note: session at maximum of fifty minutes.

10. Anal only – R200

11. Anal and oral – R220

12. Anal and (oral without a condom) – R250

\*note: R20 extra for kissing. All anal with a condom only, each session maximum of forty minutes.

Prices are subject to increase without notice. Unreasonably lingering guests to be escorted off the premises!

Thank you,  
Management.

Now he tried focusing on the whore but everything in the room swam, the menu, the splashing cokes, he was floating into another space. And she was saying something; her hand tugging his shirt, her beery breath not far; he pushed attempting to stand and swiped at her head instead.

She reeled on her heels, calling to a nameless face, Ossei grasping for this open space without time, in which there was only life.

Thunder broke in loud claps and those inside Queens heard it flash against the zinc-roofed house, gathering in loudness and frequency, casting a bad mood over the brothel, many looking up, as if some unseen God were warning them. At least the weather prompted some wakefulness in Ossei, steadying on his feet and catching on to approaching danger.

He had an urge to tighten his trousers and tugged at his belt, his free hand in a sweeping gesture, grabbed his coat. There wasn't much goodwill from the crowded room and it was difficult maneuvering away from the vigorous arms, bumping into someone's throat, he apologised.

From then on he realised, everything which happened would affect everything else, Manjate was dead and the thought of being dead himself occurred.

No more than a matter of minutes he was outside, walking the street and glancing backward over his shoulder, till the corner. Ossei sensed the whoremonger there too in the middle of the night, concealed behind a pillar or stalking him through some unseen fence. He heard footsteps; one or two men keeping their distance to avoid detection. He turned around, unsure.

The journey home would be a zigzag through the dim quarters of Old Alex, if he went towards Marlboro South he'd turn at the very top to reach Extension 7, a longer route but it would beat the distance to the Far East Bank, where he had no choice but to cross the river.

Now the thunder was in full force and the doors stayed shut, with hardly a scent of anyone going in or out, it was suddenly very late and the emptiness of the street scared him. Without a real idea of what to do and still feeling the rum, he began to run. Ossei fearing the whoremonger stepping from an alley, remembering his gun he imagined the silver in the dark, as the whoremonger fired bullets into his back.

The men were gaining ground; their footsteps scraped the tar, muffled at times by the lightning, which sounded like a volcano blowing its top again. When he looked back, he finally saw someone real for the first time and broke into a run, thirsty, tired but his life depended on it. He pushed past Mandela Yard with its leaden tourist signs, past a congregation of stray dogs who didn't even bark, past the sometimes packed medicine house and liver shop.

His legs carried him on and on, till he was out of the neighbourhood and close to the highway, where in the distance he made out the suburb of Wynberg by its accumulation of factory buildings. Short of breath, it was a struggle to keep going.

A voice a few feet behind him called, "I'll never let you go Ossei, I'll never let you go."

He trembled, afraid to turn around and look. The voice defying explanation, since no one at Queens knew his name. He had no idea where he found strength, feeling sick in

the stomach but he couldn't stop. For this would be the moment of his death. The voice continued to taunt him, "I'll never let you go Ossei, I'll never let you go."

University Of Cape Town

## Fifteen

### *Home of Muruga*

The immigrant cause had descended upon Ravi like a plague out of the sky and she hadn't bargained for the suddenness and ferocity of it, for twenty-odd years she'd happened along, unaware that in the margins of the city, in its condemned buildings and substations, there existed a subclass of person— the immigrant- who had nothing to do with her everyday life.

Then in early 2000, her whole existence became infested by someone else's cause – a certain Commissioner Hammed's. With a Bugger All in Latin & Literature she hadn't been qualified for much, and all Hammed had needed was someone who could read, write and make some sense of Portuguese, and so by means of balance they had resolved the other's dilemma.

Almost a decade on, listening to the *guru* before her, Ravi was reminded of Hammed, similar in build and voice to the comfortable-looking priest of average height with a clean-shaven head and upper lip, his chin protruding roundly like his belly, the *guru* standing bare-bodied and without shoes (as was custom in the temple) wore a *dhoti* around his waist and across his forehead were three lines of white ash. Whereas Hammed was a fair-skinned Indian, the *guru* ranged at the opposite extreme, even blacker than some of the refugees Ravi knew. For herself, she was somewhere between, certainly closer to Hammed than the *guru* in skin tone. In the past, she would have been ashamed of such thoughts but with all her excursions into the realities of the world, these days she felt less.

His voice was strongly accented and coercive in the silent temple, reminding her most of Hammed, who had the same subdued aura encircled with an authority.

“Please do me this one great favour ma, understand they have to go. The temple is no place for these people and I'm not speaking badly, but really the smell,” - here his voice dropped a note, his tone more concerned.

“You’re imagining things *Guru-ji*,” Ravi said, pointing to the heavy red curtains on the windows and the deities standing up on their shrines, like real gods on thrones. “Everything is still the same.” She drew him aside, shaking her head and giving him her most compassionate look, “Our duty as Hindus is to help others, of all people you must understand this *Guru-ji*.”

An immigrant himself from the south Indian state of Hyderabad, *Guru-ji* had arrived years ago as a malnourished priest in service to Lord Muruga and all his devotees.

“Besides,” she said, “Put them on the streets and who knows how long before the next outbreak of violence, you don’t want the shame of murdered women and children on your head?”

“But that is precisely my point ma. We are incurring the wrath of The Destroyer; the temple is a holy place... not for all sorts of desecrations. Where does it say in the Vedas, home of Muruga is the home of the homeless? Lately, this is a question that interests me a great deal. Muruga have mercy...maybe it’s a matter of days...”

He talked, tucking the *dhoti* tighter around his waist and Ravi could sense impending doom, he was about to make a final stand,

“These refugees they are simply not respecting...stealing from the house of god, *vilces*, *murtis* all gone missing. And drinking the rosewater, eating up *sado*, rice, there’s no respecting for our vigils, simply no respecting. I cannot allow...”

It could hardly be worse, the refugees would be thrown out from the temple’s outbuilding and from here, there was nowhere to bundle them up and convey them. Such a situation wasn’t possible and she couldn’t allow it.

The *Guru* turned around to the sound of the bell, his bald head smooth and shiny like a holy stone, there was a dramatic change in him to the sound, his composure restored to one of worship. “Ma,” he said, “Please do me a great favour, stay for *aarti* and *prasad*.”

The younger gurus carried about trays prepared with milk and three kinds of fruit, as well as the clay lamps infused with oil and camphor. A boy entered, gesturing his hands to greet –someone who was familiar with the temple and all its routines. Ravi on the other hand felt nervous, since even as a child she had never attended temple, along with any religious festival or funeral.

It was typical for her mother to disbelieve, to click her fingers and simply vanish religion, and it had never occurred to the girl Ravi to miss what she didn't have, only as an adult did she realise that along with religion she'd missed culture. From lamps and fireworks, to tying a sari with the pleats in a cascade over her belly, the absence of such things never struck her, it was more her entitlement to them. Since she had the same brown skin, the same black hair. Her face was in their faces too, so she had the same rights.

Now and then she caught the eye of some deity watching her, Ganapati and Ayyappan, Shiva or Parvati. Already a large number of people had entered, straight ahead a group gathered and sat before a shrine, where a garland of marigolds hung across the opening and a large, black stone rose up on the side. On one wall there was a painting of the red Lord Muruga riding a resplendent peacock, his lips parting in a strange and delicate smile.

She sat down with a feeling of looking into a mirror and seeing another kind of truth: there was no question; her mother's disdain for religion laid claim to something higher. Hashmi knew for instance, these deities were assembled on production lines in Indian sweatshops and shipped throughout the world. No more than dummies swathed in silk, adorned with ink and sandalwood paste. That it was preferable to have no god than to pray to plastic. Her mother knew by instinct. Her father had viewed Hashmi's ideas with the mildest interest, as he did the whole system of religion itself, without standing for or against any idea.

At the front of the temple, a fire burns and thickens the air with its smoke. The *gurus* are glimpsed at here and there, some throwing sticks onto the fire, others clanging small, brass cymbals and chanting. Ravi takes a tissue from her pocket, dabs her eyes, the fire glows and sprawls even from the distance. She's immune to the worship seen in those around with eyes closed or swaying from side to side.

Far behind her is another commotion, one *guru* making a move in the direction, annoyed at having to share in the fuss. Worshippers turn around, glancing at his swift and soundless feet; meanwhile, the senior priest raises his voice in the chant and the fire blazes on.

The temple's doors are closed, the air inside giving an edge of discomfort to the room, the procession of gurus at the front are illuminated by the flames, they're silent for a minute or two, stretching their hands to transmute wordless blessings to the assembly. Ravi no longer embarrassed to stare, turns around.

At the back of the temple, causing the bother are mindless refugees who have joined in worship, giving no notice to the *guru* trying to silence them or usher them away into a side room. Some of them are on bended knee, kissing the floor again and again. She's too far away to make out specifics but their expressions are not of fear or disrespect, she guesses at the rapture on their faces. She wants to laugh at the *guru*, who finally puts his hands down defeated.

But those in the front manage to somehow reclaim the service, the refugees at least for the moment remaining on; chants now accompanied by singing and the strums of a distant *sitar*, bodies and voices of the assembly becoming one procession with their resounding claps and foot stamps. How serious it all is, for a ridiculous moment she wishes to be a pigeon, able to swoop down and shit wherever she pleases.

Flushed from the heat, she's feels as red as Lord Muruga. The simplest thing to do is to get up and walk, through the noise of ululations and tongues. The smoke is heavy around as she moves past the assembly to where the foreign languages are being spoken, to the two men, a woman with a still baby on her back and an older woman wrapped in a wrinkled shawl.

The smoke alters their faces in the temple's confines: the men appear ashen, grey as the smoke; the woman and baby are wavy figures. All of them in a line next to each other, rubbing elbows, praying and squinting. The older woman has no presence of mind to remove her shawl and her face is marked with fatigue, her lips seem to kiss the ground longer. Ravi bends, stretches her hand, "you alright?"

The woman looks from the floor and clasps the outstretched hand but she's barely audible and Ravi cannot hear...a mumble about *ensangoma*...and before she realises, her hand is tugged backwards. Something in the woman tells her, she's at the end of her praying days, this from her dropped head and curving spine, her eyes without any of their quickness. What does the woman want to say?

Ravi's presence is lost on the others praying with conviction, making lucid pleas in Shona, the language from far down the Zambezi across the border. But the older woman is different. Her hands are soft and so remote from her face worn out from the long hours and labour. She continues to clasp Ravi's hand and there's no surprise at this from others engrossed in praying. She presumes they're praying for safety, shelter, opportunity. Literal needs.

The woman looks up, her tongue beginning to accelerate, one hand opening upwards asking Lord Muruga himself a question.

But it's the holy mother of God, she's beseeching, "*Santa Maria, Mae de Deus, benedito e o fruto do Vosso ventre, Jesus, Holy Mary, mother of God blessed be the fruit of thy womb Jesus.*"

The words gather around Ravi and she feels their foreboding, the woman praying for an easy passage from this life, for the son she would never again see, for the daughter dying in birth, for all daughters and all sons. Her eyes are wide open.

Each of the refugees prays too, immersed in centres of gravity dropping downward in their motions. Even the still baby slides lower on her mother's back.

Looking at them, Ravi knows she's looking at another country, at another world. But her first consideration is for Goncalves walking the streets among the name-calling crowds. There's so much lawlessness in the city, with policeman on the corners slapping batons into their palms and making everything look worse; the cripples on crutches, the blind beggars and maimed dogs, the Rastafarians with dreadlocks over their necks and arms fighting their way in and out the crowds. People are angrier and she worries for him.

By then the *gurus* are bidding goodbye to those exiting the temple and she can't help but stare at their bright faces then at the brilliant faces of the deities, the brassy surfaces of the shrines with their the trays of nine different *dhals*, the temple's red-metal roof sheltering such sights, as well as the smells of rosewater and incense. In the midst of it, are the refugees still on bended knee and if it were not such a serious situation, she would find it quite comic. An Indian scene straight out of the subcontinent, ambiguous, clichéd and embarrassing in all forms.

Long ago she'd been disinherited of culture, so it was useless to try and be what she was not. Hers was an out-of-order family, where her mother had disregarded tradition and her father was a person vaguely formed. To tell the truth, she was grateful to Hashmi. Since growing up she'd been ashamed of the 'colourfulness and spiciness' of her people who bowed and prayed to cows.

Sitting in her uncle's car once, she'd looked out at the clouds of turmeric and ash dust over *Kavadi*, the trance parade where men pulled wooden chariots and had needles poked through their nipples and gums... What came next?

How she had longed to run away to a white family, to put her head on a white mother's lap and have her hair stroked inside a lounge with linen armchairs, where the walls were painted beige and the sofas had sturdy, oak legs.

Before she realises, the three gurus close the distance and are at her side, *Guru-ji* bends down, almost picking her up by the elbow, "Enough of this performance for today," he says.

The refugees fall silent, frightened by the presence of the holy men and with some force they're pulled to their feet.

*Guru-ji* says to the older woman, "Why you crying? No one's hurting you yet?" With that he nudges her towards outside and the others too are prodded from behind.

"Shush, shush," he waves his hands at the baby on her mother's back,

Ravi tries to listen to his complaints, high-pitched in excitement above the baby who ejects a full range of wails.

"Not allowed to cause such commotions, this is a place of worship and you are only encouraging them ma. You're bringing shame," he says to Ravi.

Right there, she wants to thump him to whack him so hard that he falls onto his portable belly and lay beached like a whale, but she manages to look at him with calm. Hammed had taught her to conceal her anger and laugh last.

Outside, she gains a new perspective on the temple's grounds, which are enormous. The lawn widens in every direction, behind, to her left, out in front. At the furthest perimeter a

river runs into the green, a flashy streak of silver between the rocks whose surfaces are darkened by the sun and between the dull conches of mud on the banks' walls.

Just beyond the river and within her view are the surrounds of Melrose and Abbotsford- she sees the tops of office buildings in their numerous squares, the twin towers of the mall and the many strips of duplexes. But she doesn't recall seeing the river before.

Familiar to her are the neat outbuildings finished in face-brick with white-plastered edging, most of all the three cones protruding from the topmost section of the temple's roof, visible from the bypasses and offramps around. Even in the darkness Ravi is able to recognise these circular buns in their coppery tones. Whenever she drives into Melrose she feels warned by these symbols as if, curves of the earth itself, able to withstand all weathers and acts of defiance.

On this midday afternoon when she's facing a dilemma they seem to mock her, what she needs is to strike the right note with *Guru-ji* and so far it isn't working. *Service to mankind is one argument which ought to go a long way with a priest.* She makes her way, the tempo of the street within earshot, the pump of cars and whistling trucks, machines rolling and grinding, sounds so different from the serene surrounding.

At the outbuildings she's surprised by the *guru's* unmoving stance, his mouth now a tight slit in his face. About fifty refugees occupy a narrow path, a few girls chew gum and some men look at the ground as if searching for grass to nibble on. When last were these people fed? But she has the sense not to make any suggestions.

They have little to say to each other, probably weak without food and not yet adjusted to their plight. She looks at their faces and tries to work out what they're thinking. But instead of the unknown faces in front, she sees familiar signs of Goncalves, his puzzled brow, his curly hair, his eagerness in movements. When did she begin to know that however she denied it, it was no good? Without anyone expecting it, she puts a hand to her mouth and lets out a squeal.

A few around look at her, as if they read what she feels. But how can these specimens of persons read what she, herself, cannot attach words to? She must stop herself, before she slides down into the chaos inside her.

The *guru* is in a position of authority and without him none of the refugees have a choice. He begins to bark out commands, to which the refugees move at a crawl back inside. He has the angry look of a possessed person – a slack body who’s invaded by a demon and toughened up overnight. Right before her eyes, there’s a recurring sequence of refugees carrying boxes and battered suitcases from the outbuilding to the lawn; children trudge shoulder to shoulder with objects wrapped in blankets or their storybooks in plastic, while many women lug heavy baskets between them. There’s a wrecked look about them which makes Ravi wonder for the first time at the scale of the situation.

The *guru* starts up a new round of commands and she cannot help but intervene. Its bizarre, to say the least, that in this place of spirituality and healing, holy men behave no better than brutes! She raises her hand, gesturing for him to stop, “Wait,” her voice falters at the sight of his face so contorted by ill-temper, “Just wait.”

“Not interested in this ma,” he tells her, hiking his *dhoti* up from the ground like he’s afraid of getting it dirty.

“Let me tell you about the poor and this temple *Guru-ji*. This temple built of wood and iron by Tamil men working as washermen in the steam laundry all those years ago.”

The *guru* maintains an anxious silence, then, before she knows it, he walks away with his chest held high.

She hurries after him shouting in a new found voice, determined not to let him go. He advances towards the temple nearing a line of trees, by then the refugees are standing in clusters and whispering to each other. But Ravi doesn’t care what anyone thinks and calls him by name. He’s almost ten metres away. Not too long she’s right up behind, throwing her arms in the air, attempting to grab him by the shoulders and turn him around. She makes contact and there’s confusion on his face. He steps back, peering quickly between the trees, a light sweat noticeable on his neck.

“What is it ma?” his voice sounds thin.

She takes a moment to answer, savouring his discomfort and wishing that it were nightfall that they were alone.

Meanwhile footsteps echo from behind. Ravi turns around; the misplaced anger on her face is plain. The other *gurus* are making up the distance, if they try to jump her she has the guts to come to blows.

What satisfaction it would be to push them all to the ground, to kick their bodies and heads. She barely trusts her voice, “The whites wanted to put the temple’s land up for auction,” she says to *Guru-ji*, now a metre or two away, “All those years ago the washermen wouldn’t allow it. Poor men but strong men who fought against the death of their holy place. Since only the whites were allowed to own land here in Melrose...a white man became the ‘legal owner.’ Wood and iron has served this community. So it’s another thing to remember the sad days *Guru-ji*. Another thing.”

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## Sixteen

### *Procedure for Burying*

State mortuary will keep the body for forty days. That is what they tell him on the phone.

Oh and next time, be sure to have your body number at hand.

Manjate is lying on a mortuary table, so he doesn't think about numbers. And how did they decide on the forty days? It seems to Ossei a strange coincidence with Jesus on the mountainside.

But there's no time for his anger.

At the funeral parlor in Berea, a helpful woman named Petunia advises that while she is happy to assist, he should not expect any special treatment due to the cause of death.

In her line of business she hears them all. Seven thousand is the best she can do and the earliest arrangement in about ten days. Two weeks at the most.

And how would he be paying?

He takes the banknotes from his pocket, spreads them on the counter, emotional at the sight – someone from emergency services had the sense to empty Manjate's pockets while he had just stood there. For the rest, Skumbuzo sent a hardhat around, the crew giving whatever was in wallets and the remainder funded from the site.

She counts the deposit of two thousand, separating hundred rands from fifties and afterwards writing in a blackcover book on the counter.

Another thing she says, as he's about to leave, if you don't have the remaining funds, the body stays with state mortuary.

It's a while before she realises, he doesn't quite understand her. A pauper's funeral, she tells him. He'll be buried in a grave with three or four other bodies at Hiltonia.

Ossei makes his way to Jeppe Police, where he stands for an hour in a queue for refugees. Finally, he's seen to and given a form first of all, to prove his legitimate status where details of name, date of birth, residential address, passport and refugee numbers are needed.

Afterwards there's a cubicle with a policewoman sitting behind a desk wearing the officious beige and brown, almost filling the cubicle's frame. He can't help but imagine her in a drive-through grabbing a double-cheese burger and fries for lunch. Her body disproportionate to the discipline of the uniform and he wonders, how she chases after criminals. But this is not the time or place to judge her, so instead he asks her name.

Sergeant Mabena begins to compile the affidavit,

“Will he be the one taking responsibility, the person to sign in the medical report as collector? Does he have the official name, surname of the deceased, as well as his date of birth?”

Ossei keeps his answers brief. She stops writing, looks at him.

He does not pretend to understand how it had happened, how he'd stood there holding the girder with stiff arms, his feet sticking out a distance over the edge while Manjate fell.

What he remembers is the youth holding his crotch just before, the youth being his disgusting old self. Of course, that cannot go into the report. Why is this line of questioning even necessary?

The police had arrived on the scene and already gone through the ritual of reports.

He interrupts her, “Excuse me officer.”

But someone comes up behind and she turns her attention, smiling at the policeman and handing over a file. Returning to Ossei, her voice is dry. She corrects him, “Its sergeant.”

“Excuse me, sergeant, the cause of death was an accident, the police report was filed on site.”

“Right,” she sighs and begins to go over specifics of the process, “Have you made all possible attempts to contact the family in Mozambique and do you have permission to bury here?”

She grins when he has no answer, “Family names, telephone numbers, an address (worst case scenario) where the body could be shipped to and if so, details of the embalmer.”

Nothing for him to do but come back with these details the next day.

Near the taxi-rank and new malls, Ossei passes a band of loiterers, all wearing winter coats and appearing to have inhaled or injected some substance, they're smiling at an unseen joke.

His impulse too, is to laugh. For the life of him, he can't think why.

Manjate's body by then ice-cold in the morgue and he might stay like that for forty days.

His mind fills with the unfairness of it. So the younger man dies and leaves a mess for him to clean up. That the duties of forms and choices of coffins should devolve to him, the friend who loved him the least.

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## Seventeen

### *Red*

After days of being tucked away in a sickbed, Pat finally returns to the shop. From the moment he sees the envelope, he feels the effects of his illness: a weakness as if he's anemic and a panicky feeling of something being wrong.

A large envelope, the type he's seen doctors pull x-rays from. Papers, pens and ledgers are scattered across his desk, yet the envelope sits there undisturbed, the top section bulges from the contents and creases indent the paper. Pat realises since there's no address or postage stamp, the envelope can not contain any letter or bill.

The room appears shabbier by the files on chairs and the dust on the table, he could trace with his finger. Out of character for Manchulu, who ensures that not even an edge of a stain is left. Pat envisions her black skirts sweeping across the floor, her scarf-wrapped head inspecting this or that, her feather duster in hand checking the dust...out of character indeed.

He tiptoes towards the envelope, sitting in a spot of light which streams in from a side window, he's close enough and lifts it but what's inside is not easily identifiable.

For a moment he wants to sit down, all this anxiety over an oblong of paper, which he holds in both hands with his thumbs spread over the front.

Something like broad elastic bands are bunched together inside, he shakes the envelope from side to side expecting the scratch of elastic on paper. Instead, he hears the small jingle of bells, in no time ripping the envelope open and pulling out collars. The soft leather still flecked with hair; he counts the cats' collars, from one to fifteen.

Moments later he's taking the shortest route, past the office kitchen, straight down to the stalls, here entering the lobby where no one bothers him with a courtesy about his health, he's clearly in a haste going down the stairs.

The first thing he notices is that the air inside the basement is overused, the light from the single bulb a sickly yellow, washing the black walls into grey. Where Pat stands the

window open directly onto the Scope, he walks over and allows air from the outside in, again with that panicky feeling.

The Scope is filled with scrapped cars in bright coats of paint, blues and greens, some stripped of their side mirrors, while others appear bronzed by rust. And between the cars are sunny spots of grass. There's no sign of his cats plunging into the assemblage of metal or seeking out the soft, leather of seats. The Scope is a world of shapes and sizes and for his cats, no site better suited for sheltering.

He turns to the room, not at all as he'd left it with the floor swept clean, the odds and ends of furniture—a folding table and picture frames are stacked neatly against a wall. Across from him, there's empty space and the realisation, maybe something has been done to his cats. It's too difficult to grasp, so he places a hand on the window's ledge and looks across at the emptiness where the cats' litters and bowls ought to be.

What has the miserable girl done? What has she done to his cats? Pat closes his eyes, as if he could close out Ravi poisoning them or drowning them.

First he paces the length of the basement, then searching for clues to the missing cats in the old stationery cupboards and the shelves of casements. Apart from supplies and a roll of sweets, he finds a dusty book there on a shelf, he lifts it and immediately a loose page sails to his feet. More from habit, Pat picks it up:

*I am the bomb in Bombay, watch me explode, bones splitting breaking beneath the awful pressure of the crowd, bags of bones falling down, down, down... I have been so many too-many persons, life unlike syntax allows one more than three, and at last somewhere the striking of a clock...*

In all probability, she had discarded the book as a teenager there. A fiction which has no meaning now, yet he feels the rage of the words. *I am the bomb in Bombay, watch me explode.*

Backing away from the cupboards, his eyes focus on the darkness of the walls and he cannot help but think of exacting his revenge on the girl so full of hate.

He'll clear the basement walls of their black, using a teaspoon, scraping them little by little. So she doesn't notice, at first. When it is all finally done, he'll use his hands. Yes

his hands dipped in paint, bending his back to the bucket again and again. Yes with his hands, he'll cover the walls in blood red.

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## Eighteen

### *Lies in the night*

A number of fires burned across the city in recent days. Debris flew onto the roads. Cars without glasses in their windows were covered in layers of ash and some left without doors. Many like Ossei had gripped wheels and pipes for protection. Finally, some order had been restored and now it was time for him to proceed with the business of death.

At a quarter to eight he stationed himself outside the Goodwill, one of the seven good blocks in a node of Berea identified for straightening up. Eduardo, who drove home the importance of time, was never late but under the circumstances who could blame him.

The sky was light for the hour with a grey veil of smoke just below it, the street confused Ossei, he couldn't see the broken white lines on the tarred surface, the traffic lights seeming unbalanced in their cement holes and at times he lost sight of the pavement so disordered with dumpsters and barriers.

A car hooted. At last it was Eduardo driving his Chevy panel-van, which Ossei gave a quick once over. The same splotchy mustard van with its blind-spot side-mirrors and in the open back a spread of tools, spade and brand-new pickaxe (Ossei could tell by the clean blade and unmarked wooden handle) a torchlight, a knife, rope-pullers. He got in curious about the tools out in the van's back.

Eduardo glanced at him then at the road; the older man had aged in a matter of days. Ossei didn't presume to understand much about southern Africans but he knew Eduardo was a full-blooded *Shangaan* from Gaza in Mozambique, looking very much like the locals from KwaZulu with the same square nose and cheekbones, coarse hair long enough to form into sideburns and his thickset jaw.

He realised it was more his friend's manner than face which, in the short space seemed depleted. For the most part, Eduardo was calm and cautious, yet he had an animated quality in gestures, which were often more alive than his words.

Now they drove in silence along the main road with a few cars behind and formations of emergency services on the roadsides. No one signaled to pull over and Eduardo

handled the wheel like the Chevy were a bike, veering between sirens and shirts crossing the street. The van took to the city's roads; the rattle of tools in the back not so obvious although the engine was gaining speed. The drive did nothing to uplift Eduardo, who appeared to find it impossible to forget the recent events when bricks were flung from buildings and people had sheltered behind their cars. Ossei himself remained confused with all the smoke and ash in the air. He stretched his hand touching the windscreen; half afraid someone would tumble down against it.

They arrive at Pat's Spares, the auto-parts yard where Goncalves has worked since the beginning of the year. Ossei sees no point in it, but he doesn't want to argue with Eduardo who so imagines the mechanic fallen facedown somewhere.

A garage door is rolled over the shop-front, Eduardo instructs him to get out and look. So he walks around the corner, where the yard dips into the stadium's precinct, first he sees the grids of stadium stands semi-erected in the bulldozed earth, the streetlamps are on suggesting these as strange silhouettes and the effect on him is eerie. He feels exposed as the stands are. Far below the precinct, lay Joubert Park and Hillbrow, the city's margins, from where waves of smoke rise on and off.

He walks to the padlocked gate at the back of the yard, considering that he doesn't even know Goncalves well. The man's a decent enough mechanic who'd roomed with Manjate once and had a solid left boot...Beyond that he has no indication.

Ossei wants to retrace his steps...since there's no use amidst the lawlessness to look. The horn of the Chevy intruding on his thoughts, it's distinct yet he feels his earlier confusion surfacing, as if he's not on a road but in a shifting space ... For a crazy second, he imagines scraps of metal in the yard becoming airborne...and he isn't sure to hide. At that instant, noises sound from behind the gate...before he has time to react, the horn blasts once more. He hears footsteps, the false click of the gate as it opens. Ossei turns and runs to the safety of the van.

They are driving five blocks east towards the only destination left– Tower of Babel – and in the dim cabin, Ossei recognises the column of Ponte with its flashing-green banner a

few kilometers away. No people but vehicles, buildings and smoke are in evidence, as if everyone had been evacuated and only cars patrol the streets.

Over the previous days, television news had shown visuals of the riots, reporters were calling it xenophobic violence or genocide and, it had taken twenty-four hours before government had grasped the seriousness of the situation. Now foreigners who could be evacuated were being taken into churches or the abandoned buildings turned into camps.

“There’s no need for this,” he says to Eduardo who eases back into the left lane, allowing an ambulance in a speed to pass. He drives without so much as giving Ossei a second look, his chin and lips out towards the windshield.

On the bluff both men can hear the sirens from New Doornfontein and Hillbrow, an all encompassing wail like a thousand alarms going off at once. They cross from Bez Park - driving into the sirens and away from them at once. Ossei knows they will begin to see things differently from here.

A congregation of double-decker busses goes by in different directions, some bound towards the urban centre, others heading for off-ramps to the north where the streets are without the city’s dust. What strikes Ossei is that the busses are empty in their night’s passage, safe from the gobs of gum-chewing commuters, the deformed faces of miners and midwives done with the rituals of miscarriage. And of course, the up-market peddlers of the flesh living in the margin areas, who board the last busses to the main roads of Oxford and Rivonia. Girls who turn nearsighted motorists on their way home, around.

Ossei himself had felt intimidated steering his way past these girls to Rivonia’s rank. He’d been more than curious but couldn’t express an interest on foot. Girls like these simply wouldn’t do the humiliation of an alleyway and would have thought him quite pathetic.

They park on a black slope – beyond Bez Park, away from the buff and Technikon. At one end Ossei notices a bleak single-storey, the roof of which props up a Pool-Hall sign but no one is entering or exiting and the front of the hall remains dark.

“Comrade,” he offers, attempting to draw the older man from his shell, “You haven’t said a word all night.”

But nothing is said, Eduardo instead gets out as if consumed by a death wish.

“Wait,” Ossei tells him, “Anyone can touch us here.”

Unaffected by Ossei’s discomfort and lounging behind the van, with his eyes gone to another place.

“A man that lives near the river won’t use spit to wash his hands, that’s a saying we have in Twi,” Ossei emphasises the point gripping the edge of the Chevy’s carriage, “So I’m asking, why bring your tools?”

It’s important for Ossei to know what’s happening - he doesn’t like surprises, especially in recent times of his confusion. But maybe Eduardo’s the one who’s losing it – since it’s unusual for him to behave so recklessly.

Amidst the smoke and disorder, the Pool Hall has lost significance. The idea of men pushing balls with sticks into holes seems wrong and he says so much testing Eduardo if he’s there at all.

Eduardo looks at him like he’s talking mumbo-jumbo. Ossei knows, soon those who have rights will smell them out. There’s nothing to do but turn around and leave...If anything happens to Eduardo his conscience couldn’t handle it.

The image of the youth still haunts him: the world had blended into a white sheet, which he’d peeled from the young body under. He’d stepped away, took a moment before turning his head again to what was left of the face, lips liquefied into broken teeth, his eyes open, bleeding holes. Ossei couldn’t see his nose; the bridge of it had sunk right down into the mesh of blood and skin.

He would never forget.

The sky is hazy from the smoke. The area deserted.

He watches for the glue-sniffing boy-whores reeking of meth and cum, the cripples around drumfires who play dice. Now every door stays shut and the street is dead, save the music coming from the Pool Hall, a diffused *kwaito* beat with the chorus of ‘Don’t call me *Kaffir*,’ playing. Not often does he hear this old song, just for a while it uplifts him and he forgets the street.

Meanwhile, Eduardo pulls tools from the back of the van. With a single movement the pickaxe is lifted, his grip firm on the handle which rests on his shoulder, the sheathed

knife he pushes into his belt. Without explaining why he walks, pickaxe dipping over his back.

Ossei shouts and hurries along the edge of the road, “Honest-to-God, what are you doing?” he tries to block Eduardo’s path.

Who in turn raises the wooden handle of the axe when pointing his elbow towards Ponte. “Grab the torch and rope.”

There are shapes at Ponte’s windows moving in then away from the glass. Ossei notices and looks at Eduardo like a scared cat would.

“Being stupid is not like you,” the older man says.

He’s so used to being bossed by him. Even on digs with that tone expressing disappointment, as if Ossei isn’t to be trusted with the simplest job. There’s nothing worse. After a minute he walks to the van and grabs the torch, “It’s too dangerous,” he says – but by then it’s a useless plea.

“Today is Goncalves’s birthday,” Eduardo tells him, adjusting the axe and making stride. Much later Ossei would wonder if this was at all true, or just another lie told in the night.

### *Packing*

Despite everything Goncalves has been through in recent days, nothing prepares him when he enters the flat. Almost as if someone strikes a blow to his gut.

“Thieves,” he whispers.

On the passage floor are smashed pots and drinking glasses, a broken chair, cassettes with the tape pulled out the reel. The flat is in chaos.

The first thing he does is to lift a cassette too precious to have been discarded, which he’d brought along from Mozambique, gripping both ends of the tape, he remembers the *threep-threep* of the whistler in another country, the notes plain as if the cassette were being played.

In the stale and overpowering air, he walks further into the flat opening the window, surprised to find it bare of the curtain, which has been yanked from the rod and discarded beneath the sill. His attention caught by the lights flashing on and off in the heavily barred windows of the block across the street, he can't help but wonder if one of the occupants had clawed their way into his flat. Below on the street, there's an odd tree, a traffic sign, actual people doing things but to him they have become as featureless as the city itself.

He moves into the kitchen where the cupboards have been ransacked, their contents tossed onto the dresser and spilled on the floor. The hotplate stove lay on its face with the plug still attached to the wall and turned on, he smells plastic burning and pulls the plug from the socket, righting the stove, cursing in disbelief at the plastic melted right down into the rings of the plates.

But there's something else outside all of this, a smell which grows stronger. Back to the passage, unsure where the smell comes from or what it is, he listens for the softest sounds, as if he were expecting something like a cat inhaling its last breath.

At Manjate's door he hesitates, opening his palm and flattening it against the wood. Reminders of Manjate are another kind of blow to his flesh, one to leave a mark in his bone. His hands are shaky on the door and when he enters, he wants to scream, become hysterical as a woman would.

Instead, he focuses on the wreckage. Drawers in the dresser are rummaged here too; he walks over, lifting a bright-blue comb where Manjate's hair is still caught in the teeth. The youth had his hair parted in the centre, combing it flat on the sides.

The mattress on the bed is half buried in the debris of jackets and shirts ripped from their hangers, buttercup jacket and fur belt amongst these. Despite himself Goncalves smiles for Manjate had that kind of style.

The mattress shredded in sections with yellow sponge and springs sticking from it and someone had taken the time to deface the bed. A senseless act, as if they'd imagined Manjate in it with his slim body between head and footrest, his hair dark against the polyester of the sheets. Someone wanted to harm him and the message was clear on the wall, *Makwere*, foreigner, *hamba khaya*, go home.

He has no inclination to shut out the words or heed their warning, since people here no longer matter, his main concern is the smell rising from the bed, with one arm he clears the debris, but the smell comes from underneath. Sure enough, under the bed, green flies buzz over a white bit of wrapper. Reaching for the nearest object, he finds a boot, he's about to push the wrapper out from under when he notices the sole of the boot stuck with mud.

For the first time he sits up and envisions Manjate wearing an identical pair, kicking his feet from a hundred feet above, his arms lifting as he falls. How fast did it happen? Was there a moment when he'd laughed or cried in shock?

He knew the youth had worn a helmet that day, secured under his chin but with the impact to the ground, the helmet had sprung loose and rolled, his eyes wide open as though he were still looking at the ground.

He leaves the room with the half-eaten sandwich from under the bed. In the kitchen sweeping smashed glass into a dustpan, mopping the floor and filling two garbage bags with rubbish then setting aside food still safe to eat and ridding the fridge of spoils. After an hour's work he surveys the area, satisfied with the semblance of some order.

Anxious to be done with the flat, he takes the larger boxes to his own room, where he packs them with the souvenirs of Joburg from his mechanic's overalls and safety gloves to spectacles, shoes, maps, a portable radio, as well as the blood-cleaning agents and roots transported with from Mozambique (since he'd feared not having them in this city).

The best he could do is to leave the contents with Eduardo, someone he trusts to flog the goods and use the money for burial costs or if he somehow managed, wiring some funds back to Manjate's mother in Mozambique.

Still, some things are too valuable to lose: the photo on the wall, the newspaper clippings from his glory days piled on the desk and among these, a pair of tog boots stored high-up the wardrobe and hidden under a fluffy, continental pillow, tarnished and cheap, promising him luxury. He was prompted by some whim, some misplaced idea of comfort to buy it.

His room as rummaged as Manjate's and he's afraid of having lost his most prized possession, finally, he reaches behind the wardrobe, plucking the boots in a cloud of dust.

They are black boots with white stripes on the sides, unseen metal caps over the toe cases, he trails their spiked soles over his palms- an old habit, an old enjoyment of the feeling of it on his skin, he slips his hand inside a boot, sliding it to the very front and much to his relief, brings out the roll. There are two rolls wrapped in plastic and tied with shoelace, he's relieved to find the money and it urges him on to finish the job.

A few hours later, the flat is well swept and ordered. And all that he owns in the world is packed in a heap of boxes near the door. Downstairs Eduardo, who didn't have the heart to handle any of Manjate's things, waits in the Chevrolet.

On the floor besides Goncalves there's a kitbag with two changes of clothing, a jacket and pair of running shoes. Besides the shirt on his back, he keeps nothing else. In a small carton besides him on the floor are the boots, keepsakes, the money still wrapped in plastic (from his double-shifts at the shop). At one point he'd considered saving something of his past, as if it could have a different meaning in another time, in another room. But how many men have had that same thought?

From the moment he'd crossed the fence, he'd been walking in a drugged sleep. All his life has been leading up to this day, to this final gesture when he'd move away from life as he'd known it. Something changed for him after Kaserne, something he never would have expected. He no longer has the feeling in his legs, he can not dribble left or right, he can not bounce a ball up from boot to boot or from chest to forehead. His muscles work, his nerves transmit the signal but he has no feeling for it. He lifts the carton of keepsakes and it doesn't hurt to toss it in with the rest.

*Eduardo had found him around midnight in the heart of Ponte under a toppled table, with music in the background still playing. The Ghanaian whom he didn't know that well, had stood by the door, his eyes fixed on him as if his stare alone would force him out of his stupor.*

*Few were left inside the bar; everyone having run to safer places amidst the torching and helicopters in the sky, Goncalves not expecting that anyone would brave the chaos where bottles and switchblades were rampant and people being set alight. He had not expected anyone to think of him as worth saving - the diseased being he was.*

*Then Eduardo had appeared out of the smoke and given him a chance at a second life. How he wished that he had died there instead.*

Luggage is fastened to the van's roof, its carrier so full that the back panel can not be shut properly, Goncalves pushing it as far it will go before securing a rope around.

He's feeling a light-headed rush, for a moment resting his hands on a box and surveying every other box and packet, the two coats rolled into army-styled pillows and tossed into the carton with the empty jars used for storing slips. There is still time, he thinks, time to go back to his life.

Inside the vehicle it's a tight fit for Eduardo where even the passenger seat is loaded with a television set, extension cords plus cables laying on top it, the safety belt strapped over the box, to ensure it doesn't lurch forward on a bump.

He comes round to the driver's side, listening to Eduardo breathing a harsh breath, as if in a panic, thumb and finger brushing his eyes- he's trying to calm himself, soothe his emotions. Eduardo doesn't say a thing, there's no need for it since both men are connected by their disbelief, by the rawness and devastation of loss.

Eduardo looks at him with a face attempting to be brave.

"Take it, take it all," Goncalves says – making a plea more than a statement.

"What about you?"

The answer doesn't matter in the light of Manjate's death; Goncalves knows its rhetoric.

For a second Eduardo hesitates, as if he were on the verge of some consolatory gesture, something older people did, as if it were their place to make things right.

At this Goncalves waves him away, the key turning in the ignition and Eduardo with a parting hand up to the fading light.

## Nineteen

### *Cots*

He stands in the rundown cemetery waiting for the mourners to arrive. Around him hundreds of metal cots are placed on graves. Avalon is the only place in the world where you end up in a cot when you're dead.

He doesn't know why it is done so, but guesses it has something to do with the rocks beneath his feet, creeping over the dry sand and spreading to the cemetery's extensions. It must be hard to bury in the soil here.

This Saturday morning he's come early to oversee the arrangements, his wife waits in the car while the diggers withdraw the last clods of earth with their spades. He inspects the walls of the two-foot hole, bending to his knee and patting the earth which crumbles from the top of one wall down. He rises, dusts his knee and notices the cots nearby, which are rusted and falling to pieces.

The first to arrive is a whiteface, making his way across the clump of graves, tall and ginger-haired with the anxious look of a misplaced person. Like the rest of them he too has aged in a matter of weeks. Maybe it's the dust of the sand but he takes a hanky from his pocket and dabs his eyes. He reaches the graveside, extends both his hands instead of one, "Eduardo," he says, "Eduardo."

For a minute they remain like this, Eduardo unsure when to extract his hand from the palms grasping it. The site manager, Hoskings, has a story to tell, "It's not my fault," he repeats, "It's not my fault."

His voice whistles through the front of his teeth, his nerves making him speak like that. Soon the cemetery will abound with mourners from all over Soweto burying on the same day, since Avalon is the cheapest place for burial in the city, Eduardo favouring him with attention while it's still quiet.

Hoskings' face inclines up seeking what? Forgiveness? Pardon?

But he's not a priest, not even the boy's father. He issues no challenge to the man, who seems small in the accumulation of graves (rumoured to be two-hundred-thousand).

Hoskings falters in speech after talk on the inspector finding twenty-five code-violations on site, faultiness with the rings securing harnesses amongst them. “All is being done,” he says, “All is being done.”

Eduardo pleads with the man to leave before others arrive, others who would make no exception for his remorse.

The road leading to the cemetery is bordered by a line of trees and there’s a hearse driving in from it, wheels rolling over the leaves dropped in black masses down at the front. The hearse slips at a deliberate pace, Eduardo imagining the reason to avoid jiggling the box and body around in the back. The brightest thing in the cemetery is this gleaming hearse whose engine fades as it slows, the driver veering to avoid hitting rock.

He shades his eyes against the glint of the morning and by then Fernaj has already left the car. She’s a few feet behind, wearing a navy African print and a scarf wrapped around her head – which she’d questioned him on the appropriateness of. With each step he watches her skirt billow around her legs, she tries gaining distance on the hearse, the tail of her scarf flapping in the breeze. When he looks at her so determined, so full of life, he forgets his troubles.

Sooner than Eduardo expects, she’s made up ground, this time of year they are into autumn and despite the breeze he’s warm under his clothes, how sweaty Fernaj must be after her purposeful stride.

She’s stretching her hand, touching the hearse which passes between two graves with huge headstones – Eduardo notices since there are few of these around. Her hand never still on the hearse, as she touches and stares after it, behaving as a besotted fan would with a celebrity in a limousine. The cemetery is very quiet and he hears himself breathe, his mood changed by the spectacle of her.

And there is the hearse with four-suited men finally stepping from it; two bringing the coffin, a long, white box out from the back, the foot section comes first into the day.

By then the other undertakers have knocked together a stand with wheels and all four proceed to lift. They stand back, review the job; one checking the coffin angled on the

stand, the assemblage reminding Eduardo of an ambulance gurney with a white sheet pulled over.

“I know what you’re thinking,” she says.

He has the whole ritual of burying before him yet she presumes to know his thoughts. But he doesn’t say a word.

She takes his silence as agreement. “How can we bear it? This is not a proper burial.” Fernaj walks over, places her cheek on his shoulder.

He feels wetness there and his harsh words lump. This is miles from what is done in Quelimane where funeral criers walk alongside coffins through the villages on the skirt of the mountain and not far from the banks of the river. After the crying and burying, the home of the dead man reeks of wood-smoke and coal-grate fires, there’s a slaughtered goat hanging upside down somewhere, bowls of porridge and palm wine flowing.

Fernaj is very agitated at the idea of a closed coffin, “And this?”

But he ignores her and walks to the box laying his hands on top of it, there’s a dent in the wood where one of the handles ought to go and for the first time, he feels like an old man with his wrinkled hands against the stain of wood.

*The young ought to bury the old.* But there’s no time for his private meditation.

Fernaj is issuing orders, dispatching one undertaker to fill a five-litre gallon with water and another to lay out towels.

She comes to him, the grip of her fingers strong on his shoulder, “It’s not our custom.”

When he does not answer her, she speaks louder into his silence, “How will anyone remember him? We shouldn’t allow it.”

His desire is not to hear, since the woman knows what has driven them to seal the box. Meanwhile, there’s another difficulty of Hoskings standing a distance from the grave under the thick cover of a tree with bursts of needles and leaves on the ground around. Despite his attempts to persuade the man, he hasn’t budged. Eduardo is beginning to see the effect the whole episode has had, the earth where Manjate will lay is troubled.

Plastic chairs sprinkled around the graveside and further back a faded strip of canvas provides some shelter for the five-litre gallon on the table and the towels beside it.

Meanwhile, other people have begun burying at other graves, Eduardo turning in his chair to stare at a bereft person bending too low to a coffin and who is being helped away. All around him are muted prayers and hymns, sometimes the noise of a spade.

By then the remaining mourners arrive, the bus he assumes is parked alongside his Chevy in the lot. They push along the path, crewmen, wives even their children and at the head of the procession a clergyman in a sealskin suit with a bulging bible in hand.

Eduardo is surprised by the turnout, speculating on full-occupancy of the bus. His body shifts from Fernaj next to him, he strains almost out of his chair for a better view.

Apart from the cleric, no one is wearing black, the women are wrapped in African dress, bright with the morning sun behind, he notices one or two in sheet-white robes flowing to their ankles and wrists – the Zionists – and there's a man he doesn't recognise as a crewman hobbling along with a stick. Emotion brims in his chest at the sight of so many, he stands and walks to greet, hugging some, commiserating with others.

A little boy sitting in a heap at his mother's feet leans forward and tracks a bright-red car up her stockinged legs. She grabs the car, holds it still on her knee in the midst of greeting another woman across, the boy finally freeing the car trails it along. Mindu the boy's name is Mindu, his face is curious as he bends and swoops the car from his mother into the air back to her leg again...

Eduardo was sure that Manjate had been a good child, that there had been no harm in as a boy playing in the stockpiles of salt stored back in Queilimane...

The cleric is on the verge of beginning the service and motions for everyone to find seats or discreet places to stand in, a hush settling, Eduardo observing the fingers pointing in the direction of Hoskings under the tree.

“What are you talking about?” he asks the foreman Skumbuzo.

“So this man is wandering around here like a family member. Did he ever stop to lift the rubble, or bend to a face in a trench and offer water? And what about the many violations and rotten working conditions?”

There are no more words from the foreman after this. He looks at Hoskings as if he's playing with him, that uncertain pause in a horror film before the knife finds flesh.

“No one’s perfect,” Eduardo says, “And everyone dies. So let the man pay his respects.”

The grouping for the moment at least, takes a cue from the foreman and quiet. Although he wants nothing more than someone, something to blame for the injustice of Manjate’s death, Eduardo’s reaction to Hoskings is skewed by the sharpness of his own words to the youth on that fated day – when he’d lashed out at Manjate for no reason other than his usual impertinence.

A hum of crying and praying from the surrounding graves fades in and out, amidst the cleric’s opening, as if the sound of sadness itself has been summoned. He walks back to his seat with a bowed head, feeling powerless in the reality of the loss, his great, slab of a wife, fidgeting in her seat and sulking at the coffin. He feels himself go red at the unreasonableness of the woman and her traditional ideas, so out of place in the code of the funeral where even the cleric seems to notice, there are other stares of discomfort too, coming from those in the row across. His pulse quickening, he feels a surge of violence, as if he’d whipped out the back of his hand and made her face recoil from the sting...but he’s never struck a woman.

Someone standing behind him misplaces a comforting touch on his neck, cool, light fingers of contact move abruptly from his nape to shoulder, the squeeze strong when it comes. There standing very still is Ossei wearing a veldt hat with a broad ribbon and single feather sticking from it, the buttercup jacket ending in an elasticised band at his waist. Manjate’s clothes.

Eduardo isn’t sure if this is a mark of respect or not...Ossei looking to the coffin then at Eduardo’s upturned face, his eyes smudged with wet. So this is what he does - he looks good in the clothes, fitting him better and with less comedy than Manjate.

By then the graveside is filled with the sound of the cleric’s words bringing finality more than comfort, words he does not want to hear. So he’s pleased to occupy himself with the younger man, seeing what he looks like in grief.

You don’t see a man grab his crotch and the next minute he’s dead. Things like that just don’t happen in real life, this was Ossei’s first reaction to the fall, and though he’d helped

with the funeral arrangements – once the belief of it prevailed– what he'd experienced was more the officialdom of death in forms, permissions and certificates needed.

Lingering behind Eduardo now, he sees the coffin, the streaks of exposed gravesides, the cars filling with people and cemetery patrolmen in the distance waving drivers on. It sinks in with the dust that Manjate really is dead. And nothing he could do would exorcise his death; it was a fact that Ossei would have to live with.

From inside his jacket he pulls out a photograph in a wooden frame, where the youth in his unconventional manner straddles a barrier, behind him the construction site appearing as a stretch of flattened earth. Manjate's fingers gesture into peace signs, his lips part in a lopsided grin and his eyes are rimmed with life.

Meanwhile clods of earth are beginning to fall onto a nearby grave, two men hollow out the sides from the top and another gathers a heap of stones at one end.

The familiar thump of spades is a sound as calming as that of the praying and it gives Ossei the strength to move between chairs. Behind the cleric, though he can't see her, he knows a little girl's face has just lifted, since she's pointing something out in an animated voice. The cleric turning around in mid-speech, no way in hell would he allow it, the girl is hushed and made to retake her place.

Of those present none were closer to Manjate than himself and Eduardo, arriving at the coffin Ossei considers this, while men rearrange themselves to allow entry. The box is several inches smaller than he imagined, like a box for a large child with a green wreath strung in leaves and berries, positioned in the middle. He isn't sure at which end Manjate's head lay. With some misgiving he takes the photograph and places it, at the same time catching sight of Hoskings, his jaw, lips, his whole face slackened. A snake under a tree. That sonofabitch figures he can take chances and come out here...

Remaining at the coffin for too long, Ossei drags his eyes from Hoskings to the box then back to Manjate's expression in life. Soon gatherers would besiege the grave letting their clods of dirt slip or throwing flowers and though he'd known about the shortage of funds, no one informed him in advance of the coffin's size, which somehow diminished Manjate, as if his whole life could be made to fit.

Something horrible grabs at his brain. There had been no tension in Manjate's body when they found him, like a loose rope on the ground, easy to straighten, bend or pull. His neck had snapped, his hands broken at the elbows and both knees were loose in their sockets.

Ossei begins to tremble at the thought of Manjate's legs folded up in the coffin and almost in response to the thought, he hears a tapping noise. Tap tap. His ears ring, the sound deafening him to the cleric's words, its coming from the coffin, like a woodpecker is trapped there inside with Manjate.

Tap tap, Ossei looks around for Eduardo, at that point separating from his wife and rising from the chair, then he looks to a succession of different people who are unmoving in their seats.

Nobody else seems to notice the tapping. Perhaps Ossei not having heard it at all, maybe it's just Manjate's spirit getting the last laugh.

The gatherers are expecting a tribute and silence descends even amongst children and babies. Eduardo winds up for it, staggering between someone's feet, reaching the front, he pauses to compose his thoughts, hoping to speak sensibly,

"Comrades, brothers and sisters," he says, offering the old rhetoric from across the borders – which indeed fits any occasion.

The small, yellow cards in his hands are more to help him focus than for the words, "Thank you everyone for coming today, some of you arriving by foot from Rockville here in Soweto and others by bus from as far as Mamelodi and Tokoza in the east."

There's a murmur across the graveside, the gatherers acknowledging the thanks with an echo of 'eh' or 'ay.'

A look passes between him and the cleric, who's giving him the silent reassurance to go on, *you're doing fine*. While up ahead at the hearse, the undertaker's man slowly slips his gloves on, preparing for the next stage.

Whenever he's nervous Eduardo pauses too long, catching himself he speeds up with a summary of Manjate's life, from his arrival in Joburg to his natural affinity for any tool and his hands made for any job...

From the grunts, there's consensus amongst the men on this point, Eduardo aware that a funeral speech is a bit of a trick, where you flatter the dead without being too obvious about it. "Win the big ticket *baba*," Manjate would say, "Someday *tata ma chance*, take a chance on the *lotto* and we'll open our own contracting firm back home, working on the dams of Cahora Bassa.

"No one had a bigger heart or bigger hopes than Manjate had," he lifts his face and studies those around with sincerity, gaining the impression that death has bonded the men and women here, the young and old, everyone understanding the need for silence and listening in a kind of reverence.

Even Hoskings under the tree resists the stares, his eyes on Eduardo without looking back at who has come up behind.

"If Manjate were here today, I can't think what he'd say, "The young man with a jovial tone, who always had a point, whether one cared to listen or not. Probably he'd ask to take a score of liquor and a woman to share it with, into the afterlife."

This bringing subdued laughter from the crewmen certainly accustomed to Manjate's ways. Eduardo finding he's listening to them laugh, the cleric as well joining in and at least for a moment, sadness dissipates from the air.

Now he's unsure what to say, as if he's speaking too brief and behaving opposite to Manjate would, this in itself detracting from the tribute.

Still, Eduardo's English is worse than his village Portuguese, which shows through his class, and in the slow motions of the cemetery, his gaze falls on Fernaj no longer seated but busy under the canvas. She creates a severe impression, refolding towels and unwrapping soap. Despite her old-fashioned ideas and his earlier annoyance, there's something comical in her sulking mouth, the depth of her feelings betrayed by attention to details, by her business. The raw fact of their childlessness, gives him an altered view of things. Some consolation is that they would never know the pain of burying a child.

The morning shadows are extraordinarily long on the rocks when Eduardo glances at Ossei now standing on the edge, as if he's marginal to the gathering and doesn't belong in this business of death.

The two exchange a partial nod, Eduardo suppressing the urge to run up to him and hug him. How glad he is, Ossei is the one walking away in the shady light.

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## Twenty

### *Shosholoza Express*

Goncalves waits on the crowded platform.

The train will bring him to his final destination where nothing more will be left of this land, which has taught him patience. A long wait before the train will blur into the station and men will carry bags into compartments, a long wait before the train will rush into the blankness of the night.

It's not much of a station without benches for sitting on and with holes in the roof oozing liquid brown. Behind him, there's a wall with charts plotting routes of broken lines and circles for stops, a nonsense language for all he understands of it.

He cannot spot the clock, the great feature of any station, often high up or on a top-level wall, like that of the *Grande Centrale's* in Maputo with its round frame of black iron, stenciled numbers and clock hands as heavy as the iron of the frame.

Policemen keep the time here and a station commander who bursts into view, his stopwatch dangling on a chain from his pocket, he looks at it then at the tracks running separately and a distance from the platform, narrowing and crossing. The commander is standing with an ear to the line, listening for the beat of the wheels, for the propelling tempo of the train.

He signals to the police, who in turn file out to the front and usher the crowd backward, Goncalves inhaling the odours of concrete, urine and the electric burn of the tracks. Above him the autumn sky is grey.

People in the crowd are packed in, touching elbows or standing hip to hip, they're a mixture of men, women and children with compliance on many faces and already signs of tiredness. Deportees conserve warmth under their scarves or wooly hats -one thing Mozambicans can't withstand it's the slightest bit of cold.

Nearby two men sitting on large suitcases like kids would, cup their chins in the palms of their hands. Goncalves in the middle of all this knows he will carry the memory of this day with him for the rest of his life.

One of them has a face pierced with pimples and leans his chin forward, telling how the floods had come from Tete that year washing Moamba's tollgate away and sinking the *bairros*, how he'd moved step by step, at times in shoulder-deep mud between the surfacing land and fallen trees, of the tired air of the border-shelter and the flasks of tea. Now for him to only be deported...

Goncalves twists away, weary of similar situations and stories. Around him are a series of faces clouded from within and magnified by their hopelessness, persons from every side of the border about to be deported simply to return the next day. He derives a feeling of how desperate and cheap they all are - the only way to put an end, would be wiping Mozambique out. Grief pumps these thoughts, his grief and the contamination he can not wash from his skin.

Everyone waits for the train, craning their necks and standing almost on top of each other - then a motion of maroon and beige streams onto the tracks. Gazes stop short of the policemen on the platform, trying to keep order. But the wheels rumble above their shouts and Goncalves imagines a great lever being pulled somewhere as the train finally groans and stops.

Someone bumps him from behind and the book in his trouser pocket presses his ass cheek, he sweeps a hand to it while pushing forward.

The book he'd hoped to forget has caught him, the green paper with its web pattern, the dots on the jacket speckled like innumerable pores, the identity book giving him another man's right to things...and the memory of inside the minibus where the diseased body had fallen on him...

*Take the book, throw it onto the tracks,* says his inner voice.

Anything you want to be you can be. That's the greatest lie of all told in the Joburg night, believed by the multitudes in the vastness of Mozambique on every street corner, on every porch.

He feels the pressure of the crowd trampling onwards, the numbers marching one, two and three to the train with its windows shaped in small rectangles, like the portholes of a slave ship. Men, women and children are squeezing three to a seat, after pushing cases up

above or lashing belts around those unable to close, some mothers give children pillows and blankets. In seventeen hours or so, the deportees will behold the sights of Mozambique from these small windows, when the train will track through the landscape of mountains – the humps of stone appearing to shift under the sun. Then everything shameful will be left behind.

He climbs the tiered step with a hand on the rail, the train is a relic from bygone days without any of the modernity of steel luggage carriers or the brown, barfing bags tucked in slots, the seats themselves are plastic instead of the deep-armchairs you expect on a long journey and Goncalves is certain how difficult it must be to jump out these windows.

No one reads the paper or carries a book in their lap. No one glances at a watch. The police along the aisles call for silence and after a pause convey instructions on purchasing food and permission to use the toilet.

Goncalves couldn't care about the needs of his body nor the woman next to him, hugging a creased bag to her chest and chewing gum. The wet clacking sound as she's about to blow a bubble forces him to look at her, the pink gum being pulled over her tongue. A tough specimen of a woman he couldn't imagine intimacy with, the gum rounding the corners of her mouth, before the bubble is pushed into the air. Manjate would have a good time, for what she's worth...

The doors will close soon and he senses an unusual relief across compartments, where deportees are resigned to a deeper thing, a yearning for the solitude of motion now, a rumbling space in which to verify private thoughts.

When the horn is finally blown, Goncalves slides further down in his seat, his wits dull to the sprawling lights of the city and he wonders if he were missed at all in the Hornby or even at the shop, if the Indian woman thought of him walking amongst the stalls, where everyday he'd strip cars of their essential parts. In the surge of customers and payments, her smile was scarcely seen, yet he knew that she was kind. He realises, she has always existed for him outside his realm, outside the realm of a marginal person who would not dare to set his sights so high. That and he has never been one to kiss the ring finger.

Ravi runs to the top of the stairs, feeling witless and breathless. She is not really sure how it happened –whatever it is inside her which will not let him go. The platform is packed with bodies, some men are jumping from the concrete right onto the train, as if they're almost too late.

Just in time, the story of Goncalves' whereabouts had slipped to her through the Development Agency and she'd followed the briefest sparkle of information like a diamond hunter. All she wants is to touch his face, the corners of his eyes, the lines of his mouth, a face which does not belong amongst her kind and their rituals. She wants to take possession of him until there are no more boundaries. Until now she had lacked the courage and behaved as a frightened animal, always in flight.

A line of mostly men glance her way, their jaws set in motion at the sight of the mismatched woman, pushing past hips and elbows. She stops, taps a man who does not know the stranger in the photo.

When the horn sounds she walks faster and faster, her hands trailing the surface of the train, her eyes searching window to window. By then the platform is empty of bodies and for a moment she catches the briefest spot of light on the concrete. The doors shut. She runs in the direction of the station commander, who's depositing a watch into his pocket. Her face a stretching mask as she shouts, and it seems her actions produce an automatic movement of a flag being raised, the wheels of the train balancing on the track are about to gather speed:

She hears the turbulence of the engine, the train pulling off... What would Goncalves say to her sudden convictions? Possibly laugh at her or think her as impossible as her father.

She turns to the station stairs with the rumble of the train behind her now and in spite of herself, longing for home. Tomorrow, she'll free the cats from the great store, Ravi envisions her father on bended knee, his cats licking his hands and feet... their scratches he'll easily bear. And the emotion she feels for him is startling.

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