

We Belong to the Trees

MPXKEL001

Keletso Mopai

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DECLARATION

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

Signature: K.P Mopai

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We Belong to the Trees

Stories

by

Keletso Mopai

Abstract

Set in the mid 90s on the backdrop of South Africa's new found democracy, the ten stories explore the murder of a security guard at a farm in the Afrikaner town of Tzaneen, Limpopo. The aftermath exposes power dynamics between white bosses and Black workers in the area. Told from different perspectives and voices – young, adult, Black and white characters – each story provides accounts surrounding the murder. They reflect conflicts that arise, and as such relationships are tested; some break, others repair, while some are lost forever.

In the past years since 1994, there have been several deaths of farm workers in Tzaneen. The stories are also an attempt to discuss the implications of the violence against the working class in the farming industry. At its core, *We Belong to the Trees* highlights the tropical regions of Limpopo as the ordinary navigate Post-Apartheid South Africa. It implores one to think about issues such as land-restitution, violence, racism, poverty, crime, and greed.

The main concern as a writer is to reflect my surroundings, discuss and dissect through storytelling. The work encompasses my fears and concerns as a South African.

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On the Mulberry Tree

Solly woke just in time to his brother's cooking. He tried to enjoy the food, even when the rice tasted like wet paper in his mouth and the mince too salty, he chewed, rolled the food in every corner of his mouth like it was the best dish he'd ever tasted. Sometimes, when he was done eating, he'd lick his fingers in Maluka's presence to persuade him into cooking more, perhaps he'd get better at it and wouldn't have to depend on Cola to feed them, he thought.

Cola, Maluka's girlfriend, cooked like she braided hair – the pap rigid. The sudden thought of her left a nauseating feeling in Solly's stomach as he finished eating.

He walked out of the house to the metal dish on the veranda, leaves tickled the floor by his feet as he rinsed his plate, but the water was cold, and the fat clung to the plastic. He left it in the caking foam, grabbed his brown suitcase he'd left in the mud hut, which used to be his mother's knitting place. She'd spread her legs and spent hours on end; sunlight would sneak through the wall into the mild air and twinkled around her as she made plastic mats and bags she sold in Tzaneen town.

He headed out. The morning sun cuddled his cheeks, and he whistled to himself, playfully kicked the soil with his buccaneer shoes. His only uncle bought him the pair four months ago along with the suitcase, before then he used to carry books with his hands. He hadn't minded since older boys at school flauntingly held theirs – pencils and rubber in their white shirts' pockets like boutonnières.

He passed his friend' Pretty's house without calling for her as he sometimes did as he knew she'd already left. He greeted her mother who was pacing towards the opposite direction, an old shopping bag in her right hand carrying a folded jacket and a red umbrella

on the other. “Hello, Solly,” she returned his greeting, barely looking, seemingly in a rush to work.

Then the ritualistic sound stirred his small ears. Cola’s brother, Fanta, was beating his drum. Boom, boom, boom, boom, boom, boom! It went. Although his customers were still with their families, some on their way to work, pretended as if they weren’t alcoholics. Boom, boom, boom ... boom, boom, boom ... boom, boom, boom! The drum became even thunderous as he inched past.

Just as he were to take the corner from Fanta and Cola’s house, he looked back at his and caught his uncle’s white Mercedes – spluttering dust and swerving to the gate. His cheeks rose, and he ran back to open the gate, the suitcase hit his thighs and knees, but he didn’t feel it.

Uncle parked his vehicle near the wire fence hedged by the bougainvillea, and when he got out, he patted Solly on the head, and hugged him. But the embrace felt empty, and his arm around his shoulders – sloppy. Other times he’d pull and hug, pat him on the shoulder before reaching into his wallet and whipping out some rand notes.

As the two walked towards the main hut – the khaki rondavel with the wooden door – Solly looked at his uncle. He was a man of average height with a beer belly that didn’t suit his fancy traditional attire – the decorative shirt tucked into his invisible belt.

He sniffed him. Uncle smelled of an infectious perfume and something else he couldn’t quite grasp and probably never blew by his nostrils before. Perhaps that’s how rich people smelled like, he thought to himself. His brother smelled of cigarettes, while his girlfriend smelled of the snuff she put in her nose and on good days the one floral fragrance he liked on her. His mother, as he remembered her, smelled of sweat, and his father beer, always.

“Where’s your brother?” Uncle asked.

“Sleeping. He came home very tired this morning,”

“Oh, he is working nights this week?”

“Ee.”

“And you, won’t you be late for school?”

“Nothing to worry about. The teachers will be late, even the principal.”

Uncle let out a waterless laugh, so joyless and rushed. He then released him from the hug, pitiful as it was, and said, “I have to speak to him, go inside and call him for me, my boy.”

In the bedroom, Maluka was already on his feet and rubbing his eyes, his toes wrestled in his slippery sandals. “How long has he been here?”

“He just arrived,” Solly replied. There was a relief on Maluka’s face.

Outside, under the bronzed mango leaves, Solly watched from a close distance as Maluka bent his knee for Uncle, clasping his hands in a greeting. Across the fence, an old woman passed by carrying firewood on her head, “Ntawo!” she hailed, and his bother replied to her greeting.

“*Mchana*,” Solly overheard his uncle say.

“Yes, Uncle,” replied Maluka.

His uncle placed his car keys in his pocket and said: “It is time,”

“Time for what?” his brother asked. However, his uncle didn’t need to answer the question as Maluka’s demeanour quickly changed. He took a step back, shaking his head.

Uncle passed him an envelope then. Solly looked at the package, sizing it with his eyes. He watched as Maluka hesitantly felt the package with his hands, and there was sudden streak of sweat on his brother’s forehead.

“How will you do it?” Maluka asked. But not before glancing at Solly, who now pretended to be admiring the sky, and for a moment his eyes whirled and was taken by its

beauty. He thought of his friend Pretty, whom he chased the clouds on their way back home from school; they'd ran and pointed: "Look, they are following us!"

Maluka cleared his throat, and Solly knew he was chasing him away and he moved towards the mud hut. From the distance, his brother's behaviour continued to rouse his attention because only a madman would bicker with a rich man.

But soon, Maluka and Uncle seemed to come to an agreement. They continued talking in very low voices as if they didn't want him or the ghosts his uncle may have come with to hear them.

Cola was the one that mentioned ghosts to him, and he wished she hadn't. Two weeks ago, they laid a grass-mat on the veranda, cicadas and crickets sang into the faint darkness whilst waiting for Maluka to return from his day shift. She asked him, lying beside him, "That man I saw outside the gate this afternoon, what did he want?"

"What man?"

"The one in the white car,"

"Oh, you mean Uncle?"

"He's your uncle? What did he want?" The tone to which she asked startled him.

Before this, he was never afraid of Cola. He didn't find her odd like her siblings who carried walking sticks when they could walk very well and had thick dreadlocks that looked heavy for their heads.

"He wanted to give me pocket money," Solly had replied.

"Why?"

"What do you mean why? He sometimes gives me money when I need it. Do you know he's the wealthiest man in his township? I never have to ask him for anything, he just gives me because he wants to,"

"Why?"

“Why? Why what, Cola? He’s my uncle! Don’t uncles give away cash? They do, they do! My friends sometimes receive money from their uncles too. Didn’t you get money from your uncles when you were a child? If you didn’t, maybe they were poor and didn’t have anything to give you!”

Cola spat on the ground. She always did that for no apparent reason. “Your uncle is not a good man,” she said, a grim conviction in her voice. “There are angry ghosts all around him.”

Solly ignored his stomach quivering from what she’d said. “You see ghosts?” laughing, mostly to hide his discomfort. He added, “You know why people call your family names? You are all crazy!”

She didn’t say anything more, only spat on the same place, like she was accreting her saliva for something important.

Solly now walked around his brother and uncle. Uncle flew to his car and drove out without saying goodbye to him. His brother stood in the mango shade for a while before walking back to the house with the envelope. Strange, he thought.

In the afternoon, his best friend Pretty stopped by afterschool, and she found him on the mulberry tree behind the rondavel, looking into Cola’s yard. The ground was blue-black with berry juice, and she plucked some, staining her fingernails. She looked up the tree and considered joining him.

Solly watched Cola’s house and thought over the many ways he could break her relationship with his brother. What if he started a rumour that she didn’t bath and smelled of rotten eggs or told his brother that he’d heard Cola was cursed, and everything she touched turned into ash. Or even better – his brother cheating with another girl. He would inform Cola that he saw him kissing the girl with his own eyes.

He bit into some litchis, thinking, as the seeds dropped off the tree like hail stones. Pretty asked him to come down the tree but he was too high in the leaves and enjoying the view. “It’s too slippery, I can’t make it all the way there!”

“Sure, you can! Hold on to the branch, tight.”

She aimed, and swung her legs up two times, and whoosh – she finally tugged the stem with her feet, her dungaree dress blew over her lips revealing a black panty, but she was too proud of herself to care.

“Now, just find the best branch, and then the next, and so and so.”

When she found balance, he applauded her. “See, it’s not hard!”

As Pretty went up she bragged. “We saw the Magic Man today at school, you missed him!”

“What?” Solly wanted to cry. It’d been over a month waiting for the famous Magic Man to come to their school, and he somehow decided to show when he was absent.

She continued, “He breathed fire, changed a bandana into biscuits, rescued a pre-schooler from a trunk!” she gasped, having lunged further, reaching his sitting. “He, he even made a boy from standard two disappear!”

“Wow,” he said quietly that she didn’t hear the ache his voice. He couldn’t believe he missed it all. He missed it, all because of his uncle’s visit.

“Ahh Solly, don’t be sad. I heard Ma’am say he will come back.”

“It’s okay.” He tried to seem unperturbed, but it wasn’t convincing. “I didn’t want to see his silly tricks anyway. My brother told me it’s not even real. If it were, he wouldn’t play his magic for children,”

“He also threw sweets at us, I caught nine, nine! They were so-”

“Shhh...” he saw Maluka, who didn’t like it when he climbed trees, especially the mulberry, ever since he fell years ago and twisted his arm. But that didn’t stop their father who threw his head into a wall and proceeded to wallop a mulberry stick onto his back.

“What is that thing he’s pulling?” Pretty whispered. She then answered herself, “It’s a goat. A dog? No, no it’s a goat,”

“I told you to keep quiet,”

“Sorry.”

Instead of Pretty, they should have named her Parrot, he thought to himself. Their class teacher once asked her why her parents named her Pretty. “Because I am pretty,” she’d replied. “Are you?” Their teacher had sniggered, and the class laughed. But Solly thought she was indeed pretty when he looked at her, but since then it seemed his friend no longer believed it herself.

A man holding a long rope entered the gate after Maluka, followed by a cow. A moment later Cola arrived holding a bucket of liquid on top of her head. “That’s marula beer,” murmured Pretty. “Why didn’t you tell me your brother is getting married?”

“What? He’s not getting married,”

“Yes, he is. It looks like it. If he wasn’t, there wouldn’t be a cow and a goat in your yard.” Solly was stumped, since no one said anything to him about a wedding, or anything for that matter.

Eyes went back to Cola’s house, and her brother Fanta was now pounding the drum even louder and dancing to his own beat, all alone. This upset him. Pretty was right after all, because never had he seen Fanta dancing to his own music and drinking his own beer before. He was celebrating his sister.

He shared with Pretty that he believed Cola was using her looks, and her scones, and her stews to make him like her when he should be wary of her. Pretty agreed, especially since

she'd heard older girls next door to her house say that Cola was a "witch" who used love potions on their boyfriends to want her. She suggested that the olden days when ashy and ugly elderly women were torched alive and accused of witchcraft – were behind them. Witches now hid inside makeup and curvy bodies, and the prettiest ones like Cola were the most wicked of them all. Pretty also warned him: "Watch out for her, your brother might fall into her traps."

When Maluka left with the cow herder, Solly and Pretty stayed on the tree feeling unseen and mighty. They watched as Fanta stopped his drumming to wash his head with bar soap, the water dripped down his skinny face, chest, and bony arms.

Cola soon returned home to plait a small girl's hair – bending, stretching, laughing, and munching food in between. Solly noticed how she used the left hand to eat, how she covered her mouth as she giggled. He was fascinated. From the pink braids that fell onto her shoulders, to the avocado face mask she wore.

When Cola was done braiding, the small girl hobbled from her house with a sparkling forehead and eyes bulged out.

Later around five o'clock, Solly walked into the bedroom wearing a hangdog face. He found his brother preparing for night shift for his security job in one of the orange farms in Tzaneen. He stood before him and asked, "When?"

"Tomorrow," Maluka replied. He was disappointed. "It's not what you think. I was going to tell you."

"What did Uncle want in the morning?" Solly asked instead and ignored the lie he'd told him.

"Nothing,"

"Really?"

Maluka grasped a belt from the middle drawer in the wardrobe and tied it around his trousers. Solly lingered as if he was performing some miraculous work. He thought for someone who was soon to get married, his brother didn't seem happy.

He remembered the time their late parents were getting married. They were the most jovial he'd ever seen them. He could remember the broad smile plastered on his mother's face as she walked to greet his father's side of the family – dressed in an orange and black Lobedu attire with white *takkies*, yellow make-up shimmering on her yellow face, colourful bangles on her wrists – blinding everyone in the sun.

“Will he also come to your wedding?”

“Who?”

“Uncle.”

“Yes, maybe.”

“Cola doesn't like Uncle, she said he-”

“I must go, okay? I'm getting late,” he interrupted. “Oh, she told me she made chicken stew, too bad I won't be here to eat with you, eh?”

When he looked over to the sash window curtain, he saw Cola drawing near the house, and the fallen yellow bougainvillea delivered a vicarious illusion. His brother then passingly rubbed his head before leaving.

The sun retreated into a balmy orange, and it draped the couple when they shared a deep kiss. Solly watched as Cola giggled when his bother whispered into her ear and her head slumped like a new-born baby. Before Maluka walked away to hitch-hike to work, he lifted his hand and Solly had no choice but locate his teeth.

When dusk was certain and the hadada-ibis and chickens rested their throats, Solly and Cola watched the seven o'clock Sotho news while they ate supper. The stew tantalized Solly's tongue, but the pap was hard as always.

"Are you enjoying?" Cola asked him, eyeing the plate as he ate.

Solly considered this strange. It was almost as if she was waiting for a reaction, as if... she poisoned the meal. He stopped to think, slid the ball of pap into his cheeks before he decided to use his teeth and swallow. Because why poison him? She had nothing to gain from his deadness, he concluded.

"It's sweet. Did you put sugar in the soup?"

Cola chuckled, "Don't be silly, I am just a good cook."

Solly thought of his mother's cooking and wondered if it were any better than Cola's. But he couldn't remember the feel of her hands or how her food felt in his mouth, and if he liked it. But the memory of her seated in front of the firewood by the seared bricks behind the mud-hut, sooty sweat on her neck, her toned arm succouring her waist as she pounded the pots, and the distinctive charbroil smell of porridge – stayed with him forever.

Cola turned down the volume from the television when they heard a loud knock at the door. "It's me!" It was her brother, Fanta. "Come to the house, my friends want to see you, our beautiful bride!" he sounded drunk. They both stood up at once, and she opened the door. Fanta fell on his buttocks and whimpered.

"I'm with a child,"

"Come with him. Let's go and celebrate!"

She leaned in and grabbed his arm, and Solly walked around and grabbed the other. He expected Fanta to be light, but his body was heavy.

"You know, people in this village looked down on our parents, for years! They looked down on us and me," Fanta rambled as they staggered to the gate. "Leave me, I can walk on

my own!" but neither of them listened and continued dragging him. "They look down on us, but they never, ever deny medicine from us. Have they ever refused medicine from us? When their husbands sleep with other women. When they want jobs. Even when their babies are dying. Why? Why *suster*?"

Solly whiffed his shirt; it reeked of smoke, of which he strangely found comforting when it tingled his nostrils. "They will all come to the wedding, dance with us, drink with us, and eat with us!" Solly thought about the order and reversed it in his head: Eat, drink, and then dance. "They will all pretend to be happy for you. But we know they hate us. They hate me. Why is that *suster*?"

Solly always regarded Cola and her siblings as scammers masquerading as healers, but their long client list said otherwise. He thought Cola wasn't going to answer her brother's besotted questions, but she did. "They fear us, *boet*. It's all fear. I would fear us too if I was them."

They dumped Fanta by the kitchen door where his drum was seated. The veranda had a big crack in the middle, and it appeared the floor used to be a room which was then demolished.

Solly admired the drum. It was massive. From a distance, up there on the mulberry, it looked more like a toy. Now that he saw it up close, he knew it wasn't something to play with. It was personal. Something that belonged to Fanta and only Fanta.

Around him were men and women, old and new, covered, and barefoot, ululating, blowing whistles, and jiggling their drunken bellies. The women's skirts whirled along with the mirrors around their waists. He listened to their crisp laughter and chatters. He knew Fanta made good marula beer, his late father once mentioned between sips, so good that by morning all the ladies who drank with him swept him dry.

“You came to drink too, boy?” It was an old woman, her eyes barely open, her saggy belly halved in two inside her fitted polo shirt.

“No, no beer for him,” responded Cola on his behalf, grasping his hand.

“You call this beer? This is the gods' milk. Boys need milk to be strong!” she chortled amusingly and pursed her thinly furrowed lips onto the tin mug. Solly’s eyes travelled back to Fanta, who was now sleeping on a frayed grass-mat, his legs spread apart.

The oldest sister, Coca, paced around the yard picking up dirty dishes. Her mind and legs seemed to focus only on the task. She was quite different from her siblings, too dedicated to her ancestral duty that she barely had personality. Once, while on the mulberry, he saw her running outside like she was being chased by an animal, arms in the air, wide, screaming, clapping, and then she fell to the ground, and her body heaved as Fanta tried to hold her down.

Cola took out a tiny yellow container from her pockets, pinched the dust inside, looked up at the stars, and softly spread the snuff into her nose like cinnamon onto dough. She let it bathe in her internal nares before she held his hand again, and they left.

She stayed silent as they strolled back to his house and looked to be thinking hard. He didn’t speak either because he was thinking too – he wondered what she was thinking about. Perhaps she was rethinking the whole marriage business. Perhaps she saw it too, that she wasn't a good match for his brother.

When they entered the house, however, she opened her mouth: “I am sorry, about what I said to you the other day, about your uncle.”

He didn’t expect her to speak or apologise. “Why are you sorry? Were you lying?”

She relieved his hand and took out a handkerchief from her pocket and wheezed; the drug in her nose was at work. “No, I wasn’t lying. There are some things about my spirituality that are hard to translate to people, especially children,”

“I’m not a child, I’m twelve,”

She ignored the remark. “I regret the way I said that to you. I must have scared you, and for that I’m truly, truly sorry, Solly. I notice you’ve been very uncomfortable around me since then, but I assure you I would never hurt you, or your brother,” she coughed onto her handkerchief twice, and then added, “My gift is to heal people, not hurt them. Can you please trust me?”

A thought came to him. “He was here in the morning.”

She flinched. “Who?”

“My uncle. He and but’Maluka had an argument.”

“What about?”

“I only heard one thing, something about a mission he didn’t want to do.”

Cola shook her head. “It’s nothing good. That, I am sure,” she said, turning up the television.

It was early in the morning the next day when Solly found Cola seated alone under the mango tree that he realised his brother didn't return home from his night shift. Fanta's music started to play at her house – a distant sound and then a full and loud echo.

Coca and her cousins arrived shortly to prepare the meat. Cola showed them where to light the fire for the main meal, where to find a table to peel the vegetables, and how much flour to use for scones.

Soon, relatives who travelled far arrived at her homestead, men began drinking and form circles around the yard, old women complained about not being served, children chased each other around the house, and Maluka was still nowhere to be found.

For a moment, Solly was hopeful that perhaps his brother finally changed his mind about Cola, however, when he looked at her, he only wanted to bury all the sadness she was feeling.

“He will come, Cola. He wouldn't miss it, he loves you,” he assured her. They were now in the bedroom alone. She was standing – facing the window, her braids tied into a ponytail. She turned slowly to look at him, her brows were drawn, and the pink lipstick supplemented her colourful hair and brown skin tone, but her eyes were brimming with tears.

She did not tell Solly that she knew something terrible had happened to Maluka and hence he was not coming. How could she have explained his dead eyes, the coldness of his touch, and his body: a shrouded spirit?

Besides, Solly wouldn't have believed her, even so that Maluka was standing right beside her.

The Scarf

Sunette turns away from her snoring husband. Her eyes shut when her gums begin aching, and she swallows the blood in her mouth. When she opens her eyes again, faint light enters the bedroom amidst the soft whistles of fireflies outside the window and the overnight sprinkler. She tosses and pushes her backside into her husband's, but he doesn't react.

He apologised after he blew her face. In an hour she will see the scars and know which way to turn the next time he raises his fist.

She gazes at the wall. Near the door is their wedding photograph. She's happy, her cheeks puffy, and she's hopeful like the sun on her cleavage. She now recalls how her father joked in his speech about how *stout* she'd been as a child, and that she liked to party *sterek!* Sunette regards the picture and wonders how she's gotten here. Sure, she still likes a good time, not as much as she used to, she reckons, since her father had stressed on the word *sterek* with his toothless gums to her guests' amusement. Now she is much older, of course, she is no longer that girl.

She notices new things in the photograph, like the undone knitting at the bottom of her white dress that she didn't seem to mind then – the white thread hanging by her knee. She scrutinises the tattered pantyhose at her ankles, and the black leathered gloves that look bigger than her hands.

The picture was taken at her parents' backyard almost twenty-three years ago. So much colour, she notices. The green of her mother's vegetable patch, the brightness of the lawn, the indigo blue of her husband's suit, the red buttons on her mother's dress, the white of her teeth and hair tie, the hibiscus on the fence under the tall conifer, the peach paint of the

neighbour's house, the red flowers before her. They all whirl in her eyes and she feels her body falling.

Sunette's day would go as it often does. She wakes at dawn, prepares her son for school, makes her husband breakfast, clean the house, bake if she finds time, take a long bath, visit her friend Coenie, and then wait for the day to end.

Her husband surprises her when he leaves the bed before her. He mumbles something about the house sale. She doesn't say anything, her teeth ache.

She rinses her mouth in the ensuite bathroom. In the mirror, she tends the bruise on her brow with some setting powder. She looks for other bruises around her upper body but this time it isn't bad, only the scratch on her left arm. She picks up her white gown on the floor and ties it loosely around her waist.

Her son doesn't give her trouble when she wakes him like he did the day before. She can tell he's heard the beating last night. "Ma," he utters just when she's to leave him to shower. "Will you drive me today?"

"I will ask Pa," she responds. "He has things to do this morning, so he might not be able to take you."

"I like it better when you drive." She nods and closes the bathroom door. She's a learner driver, why would he like her driving better? It makes her feel like the child, a fragile thing that needs lies to feel good. Her friend Coenie does the same: "You look so gorgeous Sunette, your skin is brighter, what are you using?" Or "Maybe just one more slice, you can literally eat anything and stay thin." The one that annoyed her most was when she said, "Is that a sunset you are painting? Marelle has some competition!"

Marelle, the town's most beautiful and a talented painter. She was glad when she fled town, and she never asked after her.

Her husband allows her to use his Datsun since her Nissan has a flat tyre. "I will be back by nine, I have to drop some' by Coenie's," she tells him walking to the car.

"Ma," says her son showing her a shirt with colourful markings and drawings on it. "It's for Kevin's birthday party. I made my classmates sign it."

"That's so nice of you, Nico." She honks the horn at the gate security, who opens the gate for them.

The drive is short to Nico's school. He kisses her on the cheek and tugs his backpack as he strolls to class.

Tzaneen is convenient for her. Her son's school is one of the best in the province and she can hop into her car or walk to her friend's house. Now her husband wants to take that away, talking about selling their only home. She hopes no one buys it. She's planned to die in that house. She's made a home ever since she moved in years ago with a hopeful of decorating ideas and then bearing their child in it. Oh, she adores Nicolas, he's a mixture of her own father and her husband. She sees her father's glare and mannerisms and it takes her back home in the Free State.

She hasn't visited her mother since her father died. She means to but she and her mother have never been close. Her father was the bridge, imperfect as it was, she loved him dearly. When he passed, she and her mother didn't know what to do with the wreck between them.

She parks the car on Coenie's grass next to the conifer and with her she takes the scones she baked yesterday. Nico loved them compared to the chocolate muffins she made last weekend. "Coenie!" she calls before reaching her front door. She opens and finds her friend washing dishes.

When Coenie sees the basket, she smiles. "Oh Sunette, you shouldn't have,"

"I wanted to," she says, placing the scones on the counter.

Coenie dries her hands with the apron she's wearing. "I thought we were meeting later,"

“Ja, I know. I just dropped Nico at school and thought I should stop by.”

She looks around the kitchen and an intense fear overcomes her, which she only shows with hardened cheeks. She doesn't mean to. However, she considers Coenie another version of her if she was unmarried. Coenie seems hopeless, and she doesn't hide it. She leaves her poverty lying around for all to see. Like why the cracked glasses are still on full view? Then the smell of foggers in the air, the dislocated windowpanes, and that shabby curtain!

“You won't believe who called me last night. At first, I thought it was you!” says Coenie.

“Who called you?”

“Marelle Van Vuuren!”

“No!”

“She tells me she will be returning to Tzaneen, but she is worried that everybody hates her.” Who's everybody? From what she remembers everyone loved her. “It was strange. I told her it was all in her head-”

“They divorced. She and her husband, they've been divorced for a while,” she informs Coenie, opening the fridge to look: a rotting tomato and a bowl of dry spaghetti.

“She called you too? I mean you were closer to her than I was,”

Not friends, Sunette thought to herself. “You know how my husband is friends with everyone, including her junkie ex-husband,” she says, and her friend lets out an uncomfortable laugh.

Sunette has expressed to her husband that she was no fan of the Vuurens. When she heard Marelle left town, she was relieved, mostly because she saw how her husband looked at her whenever they visited. Even now, the ghost of Marelle still haunts her home. Just last night, she passingly mentioned how unfortunate it was that Jaco, Marelle's ex-husband, was still single. She meant no harm, truly, and yet her husband's mood changed. Without meaning

to rouse his temper, she asked him, laughing, if the two of them ever slept together. “That's absurd. Jaco is *my* friend; he's *my* broer. Why would you think such a thing!”

Instantly, she was mortified. How foolish to be envious and insecure about a woman who was not even there. And so, when he then slapped her on the cheek before pounding on her, she blamed herself.

“Anyway, I should be going,” Sunette says now before reaching into her purse and placing a hundred rand note on the counter. Coenie shakes her head; she always does.

It is nine o'clock when she gets home, and she goes straight to *vuurkamer*, and removes the painting on the wall. She's always wanted to do that. Besides, it is only a flower, a simple red rose, it didn't suit the room. When Marelle gifted it to her on her 40th birthday three years ago, she had liked it, and for a while she wanted to love it, but love never came. And what's the point of displaying something for all to see, and you don't love it?

As she puts the painting away, the elderly woman from the backroom knocks, carrying a washing basket. “Oh Madam,” she giggles, “I didn't know you were back,” she says, placing the basket by the door, then making an anguished sound when she lifts her waist. “Hei, old age!” She giggles again.

Sunette left the laundry outside last night; she completely forgot. She'd meant to remove the clothes before bedtime but then her husband pinned her to their bed, and she couldn't move. “Before I forget again,” she mumbles, walking to the kitchen, and under the keys bowl she retrieves two letters. “Here, these came in for you a few days ago.”

“Ah,” the old woman says. She drags her feet and clasps the letters, bending her knees in respect. Sunette always finds this embarrassing since the woman is much older than her. She once asked her husband if they should let the woman go home to stay with her family, but then they discovered she had nowhere else to go. She'd lived on the farm since she was a teenage girl, way before Sunette's husband inherited the farm from his grandfather who'd

been the old woman's boss. Sunette now watches her from the window as she staggers back to her room – her walk emulating a penguin's.

Her husband enters then carrying a crate of eggs. He places them on the kitchen table, and as he is walking away, he stops and stares at the wall across him. “What's that?” he asks her, treading.

“Oh, you know Nico had that project at school; this is his painting,”

“I know, but what happened to the other one?”

She ambles towards the bathroom, purposely so to avoid the uncomfortable conversation. “I removed it. I wanted a change.”

“Mmm,” her husband says, following her. “Is it because it's Marelie's? I thought we resolved this.”

She enters the bathroom and runs her bath. He takes off his shirt, changing into another. She looks at his hair; she wants to run her hands through it. He used to like it when she did that.

Dammit Coenie! she curses to herself. If Coenie hadn't mentioned Marelie, perhaps the painting would mean nothing and what happened between she and her husband last night would remain in the past. But now, she can't stop thinking about Marelie.

She believes her husband would love Marelie. They would make a powerful couple. Both were born into wealth, both grew up in Tzaneen, and both know how to make her jealous.

She and her husband would have never met if it wasn't for her father who used to work at the Viljoen farms in transportation. From his background she thought she was below him, and yet as soon as they were introduced, she wanted him.

“We might stay here longer than I thought. No one is making a good offer,” he says. She still doesn't understand why he'd want them to move. All their friends are within

Tzaneen, Nico's too and it was hard for him to make friends. She doesn't say this, but her husband adds, "Moving will be best for us. The bloody shits are on my neck with the land politics. I don't want to risk it. Everyone wants to sell; I am not the only one."

She's once heard him mention something about that in one of his angry rants. That a family in one of the nearby areas claim that they own the land they are living on. All bluff, she had regarded the claim despite the rage that pulsed in his eyelids. The land was theirs. They have papers to prove it, and no one can just take it away, surely? She's never seen her husband so restless about anything. He's a confident man. Confident enough to flirt with other women in her presence and blame her for being envious.

She wants to discuss the decision to move and the land issue as this may be her only chance, next time he might be in a foul mood, but her bath is full. She quickly closes the tap, and he goes back to the farm.

She caresses the bubbles and slowly lies down in the scorching water. The steam engulfs the room, and she could see Marelie gawking at her in the whiteness; her red hair is darker, her face appears glowing amidst the mist.

What would Marelie make of her if she was truly in the bathroom? They are different, grew differently, she'd defend herself. Where she comes from one does not leave a marriage just because their husband hits them black and blue. On top of that her parents were married for fifty years, so were her grandparents. Divorce is not an option. Of course, she's considered it, of course, multiple times, in this very bathtub with tears running down her sweaty chest.

When Sunette is done bathing, she saunters around naked, enjoying this freedom before her son returns. She opens her closet and stands there for a while. Not only is Marelie in her bed, her bathroom, but she's also in her closet; that ridiculous scarf she once forgot on one of her visits. She thought of returning it, but something made her keep it. She'd smell it at times, and when Marelie disappeared, she wore it.

She untangles the scarf from the hanger and ties it around her neck. Soon enough shame and irritation come, and she throws it back on the hanger.

Later, when she'd done with her chores, she closes the windows in the house to limit the mosquitoes outside from entering. When she walks to her bedroom window, she sees the old woman now seated on her *stoep* laughing to herself at the contents of her letters. And just then, the security guard that resides next to the woman's room, arrives and Sunette watches his bouncy walk to his room.

This makes her go down memory lane. A few years ago, she did something out of character. It had been a terrible week for her as she'd hid herself in the house for no one to see the bruises her husband left on her face. That weekend, she needed to make something, to feel herself again.

She asked the security guard, Maluka, to drive her to the mall to buy baking ingredients. She always was friendly with him, liked his gentle voice and how he carried himself. His face was nice to look at, too, especially his eyes, they looked at her with the kind of empathy that no one else on the farm ever offered her.

She stroked Maluka's thighs as he drove her to the mall. He'd seemed baffled by the act that he intersected into the other lane, almost hitting another car. She smirked and removed her hand.

Once her shopping was done, they loaded the groceries in the boot, and headed back to the farm in silence. Three roads away, she touched Maluka again, this time at the back of his neck, which quivered him instantly. He stopped the car by the side of the road and asked her, "Why?"

"Why?" she'd giggled nervously. "You didn't like that?" He didn't answer, only watched her. "What, you have a lady, Maluka?"

He looked away, ashamed, like a learner being questioned by his teacher. She slowly untied her seat belt, leaned in, and kissed him on the mouth. “Madam,” he pursed his lips.

“Please, don’t,” she hissed. His lips felt rough and yet soft. She lifted a leg and sat on his lap. She then took off her blouse and placed his hands on her bosom.

“Madam,” he tried again, but it was futile as she only went further – unbuckling his trousers and slipping his cock under her skirt.

It lasted four minutes. When it was done, they both dressed and he drove straight to the farm, never speaking of it.

Sunette has now made up her mind. To ease into what she’s about to act on, she calls her mother. She scratches the beige wall with her nails whilst the phone rings in her ear.

“Hello?” her mother’s voice comes, but she sounds rather busy.

“Ma, it's me.”

“Sunette?” She could hear her voice rise with elation. “Oh, sweetie, hoe gaan dit met jou? Is everything okay?”

“Everything is good, Ma. Are you? How's the flu?”

Her mother tells her how the cough ravaged her for more than two weeks that she had to see her doctor. But nothing can keep her mother down for too long. During the years, her mother has been constantly sick. Diabetes, arthritis, and three leg surgeries. She’s survived all of it, even outlived her father who barely had a cough that lasted a week.

Her mother then diverts, “I just remembered this morning that I was around your age when we moved into this house. Only two bedrooms but we all loved it! You remember? Now I think it’s too big.”

Sunette reads between her mother’s words. “Are you saying you're lonely?”

Lonely, she thinks about the word she used. Her mother lives alone while she is with her husband and child, and yet she sometimes feels like the loneliest woman.

“Of course, I miss your father. But you know what I find odd? It doesn't feel like he isn't here. You, I can't find you anywhere in this house. It's like you were never here.”

Sunette sighs. Her mother's comment saddens her. By twenty-one she was married. She's lived in Tzaneen longer than she'd lived with her parents.

“Shoo, shoo!” her mother exclaims suddenly and sounds distant. She comes back, “Can we talk another time, this big bird just entered the kitchen!”

Sunette drops the call and is annoyed with herself that she didn't even get to discuss the reason behind the call in the first place. She'd meant to slowly slide the topic in. Marital problems have never been a topic they touched.

She reaches for her phone book. Marelie's number is on the second page. She presses the buttons anxiously. The last time she saw Marelie was on her birthday. She'd worn a brown dress that did not work for her petite figure and skin tone and yet she still looked beautiful, she'd thought. She can't remember their last conversation, perhaps another pretentious discussion about their lives as wives and mothers.

Marelie answers after five rings. “Hi, it's me; Sunette.” A sharp silence follows. Perhaps her old friend was caught off guard.

“Sunette?” Marelie sounds softer and calmer than she remembers her.

“It's been a while, sorry for not checking in. But when I heard you left, I, I was too surprised, and to be honest, a little hurt.”

“Hurt?”

Sunette realises that since she picked up her call Marelie has said only two words. “Ja, I thought we'd become sisters you and I, because of our husbands' close relationship. And I thought wow, I meant nothing to you.”

“Sunette,” Marelie breathes into her ear, “At the time I needed to get away.”

She knew Marelie and Jaco were having a hard time, her husband once mentioned. But she didn't know it was so difficult for her to even skip town. “Trust me, it wasn't an easy decision. But I'll be returning, I need to be a more present mother to Kevin who's growing faster than the speed of light.” So, it is true, Sunette frowns. But her son and Marelie's son have become close, and she knows the boy will be thrilled to have his mother around.

The two women continue as such, talking about their children and it is as if they never stopped talking. Sunette listens for hints of sadness in Marelie's voice, but there is none, only anticipation.

“Hey, I need to ask you,” she decides to take a different route, sickened by this false display of their relationship. Frankly, she despises Marelie. She's loathed her for years. She never talks about other women, and in the years that Marelie lived in Tzaneen, she's discussed her lengthily with anyone with an ear. “Remember the scarf you used to wear often? The creamy one? I never got it back to you.” She pauses and her jaw hardens, and she lets it. “I found it on my bed, and I thought that was very strange.”

Sunette knows what she's asking, and she feels no fear like she did with her husband. But she needs to confront this. The scarf is the reason she's become obsessed with Marelie in the first place. The day she found it, she'd asked her husband, and he said he thought it belonged to her, rubbished the idea that Marelie was ever in their bed, let alone their bedroom. She's since made her conclusions without his help, but one could never be certain.

“A scarf?”

“Yes. You loved that scarf. I am sure you looked for it.”

“Oh, uhm, I must have lost it somehow.”

Sunette isn't pleased by the little Marelie has given her. Somehow the scarf flew from her small neck and ended up on her bed? "Don't worry, you will get it when you come back, I hope it is still your taste," she hangs up.

She takes in a deep breath and remains at the phone, her hands quivering. From the conversation, she realises Marelie is human with her own fears. She heard the anxiety in her voice, which makes the situation more hurtful. All the time Marelie came to her house in or without her presence, she didn't think she had it in her to sleep with her husband.

When she called her mother, she'd wanted to ask how she dealt with her father's flings before he died. During the call with Marelie, she remembered: her mother did nothing. She rather complained to her friends in her father's absence.

Sunette emulated her mother all these years. She's also done nothing, even when her husband used his feet to keep her at nothingness. *Nothing* has always been safer.

She checks the time; it is four o'clock. Her son will only return later from his friend's birthday party. She waits for her husband to return to the house to confront him about the three-year old scarf.

This time, he'd have to kill her.

The Secret

Sherry's mother wisps smoke from her lips, the white phone cord outstretched, and the coils tightened. She must finish cooking and her friend needs her. "I cannot believe it. I cannot believe it!" she keeps repeating on the phone.

Sherry lingers at the door by the living room area. She listens, trying to discern the conversation. What she has figured so far is that the person on the line with her mother is a woman, crying frenziedly, and that they're close. This narrows down to several women since her mother has tons of friends.

"Of course, of course. You may come here. Ja, I understand, see you soon," says her mother, Coenie.

Sherry asks her: "Who was that Ma?"

Coenie doesn't answer and still holds onto the phone with her left while the right clamps the cigarette.

"Ma!"

Coenie jerks, knocking her knee against the oven door. "Sherry, don't do that again!"

"Who were you talking to?"

"Oh," Coenie exhales, the oats simmer and she close the pan with pang. "That was Nico's mother." She grabs the blue rag on the oven handle but does nothing with it. "They had, erm, an accident at their house last night."

"An accident? What kind of accident?"

"I don't understand myself of what occurred really, she, she was crying the entire time."

Sherry tries to picture Nico's mother, but the image doesn't fit and feels forced in her head since she's always so blissful whenever she's visiting. She, her mother, and other friends would laugh and laugh until they ran out of things to laugh about while they smoked, played board games, and chatted freely in the sitting room.

She observes her mother, who's mind is clearly transfixed by the phone call. She is now staring at the curtain. "Ma! It's burning!"

"Oh, for heaven sakes!" Coenie moves the pot to an unheated plate and groans when her fingers burn.

Sherry rolls her tongue in her mouth, stirring the hunger in her buccal. She takes the stool facing the stove. Her mother slides the bowl of oats on the table towards her. "Spoon, please." She lets the steam dissipate before she begins eating, but grows impatient and digs in, blowing her cool breath onto the spoon. Her mother seems to drift off again, but this time with activity – she roughly wipes the table with the rag, eyes distant.

Once she's done eating, Sherry goes to her room for her stereo. Walking back into the kitchen, she finds her mother now squeezing oranges into a flask. She goes to the front door when she hears a car door closing outside. The woman opens their iron gate – lifting the latch and hooking it in a hurry. Even with the unflattering scarf tied around her face and her slight limp, she knows it's Nico's mother.

Usually, she'd come to their house carrying a small basket of *soetkoekies*, or a foil dish, or a sack filled with grocery items, but this time she has nothing on her, as if bringing something was never traditional but a simple spur of the moment.

The woman treads down the flagstones and greets her, she returns her greeting with a smile. When she looks at her face, her mother's friend shifts her seemingly lugubrious eyes. Still, Sherry saw, she just couldn't figure what the look in her eyes really meant; shame, horror, gloom, or all at once?

Nico's mother briefly rings the bell at the door and walks into the house. Just one look at Nico's mother and her mother shakes her head. They sit in the living room, and Nico's mother tightens the scarf around her neck.

Sherry decides to sit outside on the long swing chair beside her mother's flower pots, and the sun warms her swaying feet. A painted lady flies over the overgrown lawn, resting on the conifer by the fence. Before her feet, lay rocks thronged with ants, big and small, and they crawl with urgency, consumed by their movement and missions for the day.

When she and her mother first arrived at the house, she used to enjoy bothering the ants, chasing, and crushing their little bodies, but now she looks at the insects with disinterest. Some of them make way onto the *stoep*, of which dust has now made home.

She eavesdrops as the two women talk inside the house. She leaves her chair, and it waves on its own when one asks the other: "You feel sorry for him?"

The other woman takes her time to answer the question asked. Having thought about it, she responds, "Nee, what I feel at most, I think, is sadness. I feel sad for the boy, not him. Never him."

"Did you love him?"

"My husband?"

"No, the guard."

Nico's mother murmurs a curse. "I barely knew him. I liked him though, I did. But now it doesn't matter, does it?"

Sherry's left eye peers through the door when her mother says: "It matters. It is all that will matter to everyone. No one can know that's how you really feel. For now, fake it, make it seem like those tears are for your husband going to jail and not for the dead Black boy."

Coenie clasps an unlit cigarette with her lips. She lifts a lighter and sucks her teeth. Sherry sucks her own – imitating her mother, remembering her grandmother who was also a

smoker. “Shirlene *my kind*, go and get me a cigarette in my *kamer*, will you!” her grandmother would say, then lob herself on her favourite garden chair and hummed dreamily as she blew smoke.

Sherry eyes her mother’s friend when the scarf suddenly falls to her shoulders and doesn’t refold it. That’s when she sees the greenness on her pale cheek and to the tip of her neck, like a map revealing itself. She flinches, removing her eyes, and undergoes a second-hand shame. The bruises looked private. She invaded what was meant to be hidden.

Coenie adds, “If the people in this town find out that you ‘liked’ him, they will say your husband shot him out of rage, and that he had every right. Hate comes first before logic.”

“But he nearly killed me! Thanks to that poor boy I am alive. Thanks to him I am alive. I will move mountains before that happens!”

“Ja, you can’t let him spin it around. When the news gets out, everyone in this town will take sides, believe me. Everyone we know won’t care if your husband hit you. All they will hear is that you had an affair with a Black man.”

“Once.”

“What was that?”

“It happened once, three years ago, and I hated myself for it. But since then, never.”

“Is that the truth?”

“That’s the truth, on Pa’s grave! But because the boy broke our door and came to my defence whilst the *bliksem* hounded me, he thought we were in love. But I know my husband, and *his obsession*, he has been yearning to shoot someone with one of his guns *for years!*”

“Do you think he meant to, erm-”

“Kill him?”

“Ja?”

“With all my heart. Oh, with all my heart. The boy was not a person, just like I wasn’t whenever he did all that he did. If it wasn’t him, it was going to be me.” She shook her head, “I will live with this, this guilt, for the rest of my life!”

Sherry, kneeling, lifts her limbs off the floor and quietly dusts her palms and knees. She makes sense of what she’s heard but all she concludes is that someone was shot dead. That’s terrible enough, and so she walks back to her chair.

Her mind goes to her classmate Nico. She wonders if he knew the deceased on first name basis, and a shiver enters her body. She pauses the swing for it to subside, the gentle breeze blows her curly hair, and the painted lady flies around in the dizzying sun – landing on the grass. She presses play on her stereo and continues, just as life after every death.

Later, Sherry lays on the sofa while her mother makes spaghetti dinner. It’s all they’ve been eating since the week before. They are broke, and she knows it. She doesn’t mention it though, not the unfixed lock on their back door, not the dirty floors, and not even lunch money for school. Eating leftovers, when just four years ago they lived well in her grandmother’s house but then she died of liver failure.

“Can I go to the mall tomorrow?” she asks her mother. They are finally alone, no friends coming with tears to cry on her shoulder. Nico’s mother left her house with dry, bloated eyelids, wiped her nose with a tissue as she got back into her car. And just a week ago, her other friend came to the house to grieve her dead dog, like their house offered her something soothing.

“The mall? What for?” her mother asks, “who will you go with?”

“A friend; we are just going to walk around, look at stuff.”

“Fine,” Coenie gives in, picking spices in the food cabinet. “Fine,” she repeats and closes the cabinet door with her foot, guarding the spices with her chest. She dumps them on the countertop, “as long as you come home by five.”

“Ma!”

“That’s final, Sherry,”

“No, look!”

They watch the TV screen. Nico’s house is surrounded. There is a large group of people gathered outside the farmhouse, arguing and chanting.

“Oh my God, oh my God!” her mother gasps. “I must go. She can’t be alone.”

“Can I come?”

Coenie doesn’t answer, only drags her flipflops to change into proper clothes.

Sherry follows her mother to her Cressida parked by the gate. The inside is too warm from being in the sun the whole afternoon, and the heat makes her queasy.

As they drive, the speedbump on their street dims her eyes, she opens the window. Her mother doesn’t seem to mind, she fuels her speed after the second bump. She’s always been a fast driver, no matter where they’re headed, no matter where they were. Just outside their town of Tzaneen, in the mountainous road of Magoebaskloof, her mother would overtake and steer the car like she’s racing Michael Schumacher. Sherry would hold her breath throughout the forest hills until she saw sunset at the end. But she has come to like her driving, especially when she’s late for school.

She looks at her mother as she drives; her yellow hair wafts revealing her flat cheeks. Sherry knows she looks little like her. Ever since that fateful day several years ago when came home from school with tears streaming down her cheeks, she’s known.

A girl at school had called her a *kaffir*, with *kaffir* hair, and she had cried to her mother. Coenie, bewildered, said to her: “Sherry, you are mixed, with a Black father.” Knowing the

question that would follow, her mother had added, “He died.” Sherry remembers how she received the information, like an ugly dress she had no choice but wear.

Coenie now says to her, “We’ll have to use the other gate. I don’t think there will be a crowd there.”

Cool air distils the car, but the sun slaps her face. She grabs her red sunglasses in the cabinet. “What happened with Nico’s father?”

Her mother tries to put the matter simple: “He was taken by the police.”

“That’s bad.”

“It is. People do bad things all the time.”

Sherry agrees and looks out the window.

They find Nico’s mother lying down in her bedroom, half of the bed vacant like she is waiting for her husband to return and take his place. When her mother enters, Sherry lingers by the door, viewing the scene. Her mother sits on the bed but then changes her mind and lies straight. Sherry closes the door.

She walks into the sitting room and sees Nico seated across at the dining table, sketching on a white paper. He pays no attention to her, he never does. At school, even in her presence, he seems to make sure to ignore her.

The house is soundless but outside the farm people are brimming with anger, waiting. Waiting for anyone in the house to tell them what happened, where it happened, how it happened, and why. Legitimate questions, Sherry thinks to herself, because she is wondering the same, especially the where. Did it happen where she is seated now? In the kitchen? In one of the bedrooms? Her eyes skim the house, and they land on the kudu horns and heads on the living room wall. They are sharp and quite unpleasant, their dead eyes watching her.

Nico utters: “Is this your first time?”

She spins and asks mindlessly, “Huh?”

“Seeing dead animals?”

“Oh, ja.”

“My father’s prized possessions.”

She can’t tell if he’s mocking his father or the situation. That all of it is some dark, twisted joke. But given the circumstances, she is instead horrified. The coldness in Nico’s tone confounds her, but she says nothing, fearful of the man himself, even in his absence. She never really knew his father, only remembers his big white beard.

She walks towards the sitting area. She looks at Nico’s face more than the drawing in front of him. What was he thinking? “Did you know the person who died?” He nods and tells her he was their security guard, but she already knew that. “Were you close?”

“Nee,” he says, “but I liked him. I liked him a lot.”

She realises those were the same words his mother had used when she spoke about the deceased with her mother. It seems the guard was a *likeable* person.

Nico blows his breath at the pencil sketch and tilts it sideways. He says he can’t remember his eyes, and that makes it difficult to figure his face. “What about the picture they showed on television?” she suggests.

“Old picture. He changed since then.”

“Eyes don’t change.”

“Ja, they do.”

She shrugs, succumbing to the realisation that perhaps he knows better as the artist. “What will you do with it, once it’s done?”

He looks up at her for the first time, it seems he hasn’t thought that far. “I don’t know. I just wanted to remember how he looked like.” He continues with his art piece, and she stands by his chair, meeting the man on the page whose death has their town on standstill.

A door bolts in the house, and her mother appears and asks them if they were hungry, her arms are folded as if shielding herself from a cold. But the house is unbecomingly warm, nothing in it indicates death had occurred. Her mother heads to the kitchen, and after a while, Nico's mother joins them.

They eat at the dining table, words not passing from their lips, only food down their growling stomachs. The flaming crowd outside soon disappears into the night, but they know they will return tomorrow, with the same questions, and even more wrath.

Sherry waits by the restaurant entrance at the mall looking around as people passed by. Soon, he appears, dressed in blue jeans and a red shirt. They struggle before they could hug, both awkward, despite that this will be their third date.

They pick a table and order. Sherry makes another comparison just like the other meetings, and she realises she has his eyes and lips.

He asks her how she was, and she says, "Good," while swinging her legs underneath the table. He asks if she'd told her mother about their dates, and she shakes her head.

One afternoon, when Sherry was heading home after school, a man called her over, standing beside a school bus. She had hesitated, looked sideways at her school mates who were going their separate ways. But the man was in the school premises, and she thought perhaps he needed directions.

However, as she treaded, she recognized him. It was the same man she'd seen in her mother's photographs, enveloped, and stashed at the bottom of her wardrobe. She'd looked at one picture in particular, a thousand times. It wasn't her mother's black dress or her long legs that made her engrossed by the picture – it was him. It was his relaxed pose, his arm embracing her mother, his teeth-full smile, oval brown eyes, his coarse hair, oversized jeans, and the black leather jacket he wore so stylishly.

The man who stood in front of her looked just like the man in the picture, except his hair was shorter. She knew with absolute certainty like knowing your own eyes and lips, that the man was her father.

“But you know she will find out eventually,” her father says now, but doesn’t seem worried, only curious.

She’d thought about it, countless times. She believes it is better the that her mother thinks her lie continues. “Who knows what other lies she’d told me,” she says to her father who defends her mother, that perhaps by telling her he was dead she was trying to protect her. “It wasn’t her fault I wasn’t present.”

“Argh, I’m hungry.” Sherry cheekily lifts the menu, blocking her face. However, she then asks: “you said she only sent you pictures of me, right?”

“Correct. About four years ago, I believe.”

“Then how did you know what school I went to?”

He leans back. “I didn’t. I didn’t even know where she lived now. I was only there to fetch some children from your school. She’d sent me two pictures, no words, just your name written at the back of each photo.”

That sounded like her mother, intentional and direct. “Does your wife and kids know about me? I never asked.”

“Erm, It’s complicated.”

“I see. Is it because I am mixed?”

He shakes his head. “No, no, no. It’s not that, it’s just, how I ended things with your mother. I am not proud.” He hadn’t wanted her at the time, she’d figured. The first time she learnt the word abortion was in class. It sounded so adult.

Her father adds, “You don’t give your mother enough credit, you know. Amongst her sisters she was the “troublesome” and carefree one, bold enough to date me. Her mother

wasn't happy. She almost chased her out of the house when she discovered she was pregnant. Your mother was down for a long, long time, and I didn't know how to solve our situation. I mean we knew the risks, but we loved each other."

"That's quite romantic."

"No, not romantic." He looks down at his menu, his eyes fixed in one place. Sherry notices he and her mother have that in common, where they drift into space, cogitating to themselves whenever they're uncomfortable. Her father continues, "I know I was coward. I left her alone to deal with it. Again, I apologise."

Sherry looks back at the menu saying nothing to what her father has shared, because it's what she has imagined. Why else would he want to meet with her if not because of guilt?

When their orders come, she scrutinises his face like she's done previously. Nico had been right, she confirms. Eyes do change. Since in her mother's photographs her father's eyes were lively, young, and seemed to be full of life. However, as she analyses him now, his eyes are deeply sad and browner. So no, she cannot tell her mother she knows he isn't dead. Her father is a different man now, and clearly wants nothing to do with his old life.

She recalls the day they first met. She travelled the road home from school with only fury for her mother. She'd wanted to confront her. By the time she got to the house her anger was incredibly vile, and she knew what to do with it. She will pretend.

"Tell me, aside keeping secrets from your mother, how are things at home?" he asks, finally eating his food.

She likes that he mocks her, makes her appreciate that he isn't dull, something she's far from. Maybe she takes after him. "Same thing every day," she responds. "Oh, except Ma's friend's husband shot a man to death."

"Jesus. What?"

"Ma is all shaken by it. The man worked for the friend; it was even in the news!"

“Oh,” her says, chewing. “I can’t imagine.” He wipes his mouth.

Sherry licks her lips and then drinks her punch. He then narrates to her how he met her mother. She saw him having a smoke at the back of his former boss’s house from her bedroom. She came down and asked to try. “A pretty girl with a lovely laughter, I cannot forget!” She was seventeen and he nineteen at the time.

“Was that how she started smoking?” she asks him.

“Ah huh!”

“That’s bad. Ouma died from too much smoking. I am scared she might end up like her.”

“She won’t,” he says with a smirk.

When their date ends, her father gives her a long hug before they separate, and she heads straight home, the night near.

She is glad to find her mother dozing off on her chair, seemingly waiting for her. “Ma,” she calls. Her mother opens her eyes, and she whispers: “You are a good mom.”

Although dazed by the compliment, Coenie forms a smile. “Thank you, my sweet Sherry. You must be hungry. I made spaghetti.”

Guilt stirs in Sherry’s mouth. “Dankie,” she mumbles.

Her mother then excuses herself for a smoke. Sherry watches her as she eats, forcing space in her stomach. She recalls what her father said about how they met. She giggles.

The Wife

She knew, before Modajo ran to the house, that he was dead. How it happened was what she wanted to know. Modajo rambled, too focused on theatrics; things that had little to do with the death itself. And so, Cola decided she no longer cared. He was dead and nothing would change that.

“I'm sorry Cola, you are too young to be widow,” Modajo said now.

Cola wanted to correct her. Technically, she was not Maluka's wife. He died hours before their traditional ceremony. So, what was she? A fiancé to a dead man.

Modajo found her at a wrong time. She was looking for Solly, Maluka's little brother, whom she lost sight of before her neighbour screamed her name to tell her the news.

“I know these things are complicated, but can I refer you to my pastor? He will be very helpful. He's helped me with a lot of losses in my life.”

Cola couldn't believe it. She thought surely this must be an insult. She didn't know Modajo very well, only knew about her husband; the things he did in the dark she shouldn't be too concerned about her loss, she should rather focus on not ending up an early widow herself.

“Thank you,” Cola scoffed.

Modajo stiffened her lips with displeasure and rose from the floor she was sitting on. “I loved that boy. He was the one who helped me find a job in town. After everything he's been through, losing both his parents,” she made sounds with her round lips. “Hai, It's not fair! Please, if you need help with his burial, send for me.”

The burial. As in bury his body. How would she do it? How do you bury someone you can see with your own eyes?

Cola hissed as Modajo walked out the gate. “A pastor? The audacity!”

She hurried to check in the mud hut at Maluka’s place, perhaps Solly was in there.

“Solly, Solly!”

“Be gentle with him,” said Maluka, tailing her.

“Stop following me. I will call for you,” she said, and he instantly disappeared. She sighed, feeling remorseful about the tone she used. However, she believed she knew more about death than he did.

The hut was empty. Maybe Solly went out to play, she thought. She imagined every worst scenario; a stranger, a drunkard, kids on the streets – informing him about his beloved brother's death. Her heart wrenched. She had to find him.

She went back to her house to fetch proper shoes to wear not the white takkies she was wearing, the red dust would finish their white in minutes. Everything and everyone who had come to what was supposed to be her ceremony had scattered. The veranda was now dirty plates, mugs, plastic, and bottles. What was meant to be a celebration turned into a humiliation. “Where is Maluka?” her guests had asked her as they looked at their watches.

She trusted him. She trusted him enough to not die. Why would he allow something as final as death to end them? Bile rose in her throat, and it burned like acid.

Flies were gathered around the left-over meat she'd saved in a bucket. She closed it tight, put it in the freezer and went out to look for Solly in the streets.

“No, we haven't seen him,” said two boys on the road playing with a puppy, one shrieked when it clenched his trousers with its sharp teeth.

“Ah, I don't know. Why don't you ask Pretty?” said one girl licking chili dust on her fingers from the chips she was eating.

“Modajo's daughter?” Cola asked her.

“I saw them playing together earlier,”

“Okay, thank you.” And on she went. The sky made a loud rumble, but the sun was still out. She paced herself, rain wouldn't catch her.

She saw the girl, Pretty, at a distance, alone; she was walking home towards her. She called out her name, and they met at her gate. “Sesi Cola, is it true?” Pretty asked first and stepped closer. “I heard, I heard Solly's brother was shot. Is it true?” The news spread already. The girl looked frightened.

Cola nodded, avoiding her sad eyes. “It's true. It's true.” Pretty's lips creased, and she started sobbing. “Don't cry, it's okay, okay? Have you seen Solly?”

The girl wiped the tears with her soiled hands. “No, I haven't seen him.” Then revisiting her memory, she added, “Last I saw him, he was with his uncle at his place... at your wedding,”

“His uncle?”

“The one with the big stomach.” She didn't know Solly's uncle had come. “Maybe he left with him. He didn't tell me anything,” she continued crying. Cola gently brushed her back. “Sesi Cola,”

“Yes?”

“Who shot him?”

Cola sighed. She didn't know the full details, only what the girl's mother had told her. That it was the farmer he worked for in Tzaneen. Modajo's story had sounded like one from a film, she was yet to hear the real story.

“I don't know what happened,” she mumbled, cuddling Pretty with her bosom.

Night arrived and Cola was brought home. It was her brother, Fanta, who insisted. She didn't want to sleep home but at Maluka's place.

“You were roaming a dead man's house, you know better than that!” he reprimanded her, a kind of ice-on-the-face awakening she needed because she was never going to leave. She was going to wait for Solly to come home and cry on her shoulder. Cry together. She couldn't grieve without knowing where he was.

“I don't know where he went. I looked. I looked and looked!”

“You know how boys are. He will come back,”

“He's twelve! Where could he have gone without anyone noticing?”

Her sister, Coca, walked into the kitchen then and said: “Take her to the room,”

“Coca, not now. Not now!”

“Now!” her sister muttered.

She looked at her brother to back her, but he said nothing.

In the washing room, her sister tore her ceremony attire like a sack of mielies. Her fiancé had spent his last bit of money for the dress. For the first time since she found out – she let the tears fall. Modajo was right – she was a widow.

Her sister stripped her off her underwear and thrashed her with warm water before scrubbing. Once done, she then smeared oils and herbs on her; Devil's Claw and castor oil were always her favourites. “You know you need the cleanse. You need to become new again,” Coca mumbled.

It was a cruel thing to do, Cola thought to herself as she stood there naked before her sister. She had performed this washing herself on two women before. One screamed the entire time and the other stood still as stone – shocked. She hadn't felt a thing for either of them. Now she recognized how callous she'd been to her clients.

Her sister paused and looked at her. “Why are you crying?”

“I don't know, I don't know. I'm confused,”

“What confuses you?”

“Everything. It doesn't feel real,”

“He visited already?”

“Yes, earlier,”

“What did he want?”

“His brother,”

“No.” Coca shook her head and continued.

“No?”

“What would he want from Solly? He's a boy.” Coca smeared her body with more herbs, pressing them in, from her toes to her neck; her skin was now used to the tenderness.

“Be grateful he was kind enough to come see you. You know some spirits are not that generous.” Her sister wrapped a white cloth around her stomach, leaving her chest.

“Remember that man who came to us last year, the one who almost went mad because his late wife wouldn't speak to him?”

Cola saw what her sister was trying to do, and she couldn't accept it. She furiously wiped away her snot. “I wasn't this angry about Baba dying, and I loved him so much. Why is this different?”

“Baba died peacefully in his bed; Maluka was killed. But forget when or how it happened. It has happened.” Coca pointed a finger at her belly. “And what will you do about that?”

She felt her pregnancy with her fingers. No shift, no sorrow, only silence.

She was sick to attend Maluka's memorial. Bedridden at home, a bucket of vomit reeking the place like spoiled porridge.

Fanta was the one to inform her that Maluka's little brother came back in the morning, wearing a tailored suit and a navy-blue shirt. "He was with his uncle," he said. "He told me he was well. He didn't have time to tell you he'll be staying with him."

Cola made to sit up, but she fell on her back and then puked some more. "How did it go?" she asked him after drying her mouth.

"Everyone cried,"

"Mmm," she tried to sit again. "Why hasn't Solly come to see me?"

Fanta shook his head. "Leave the boy, he's with his family!"

"His family? Maluka was his family!" she got up from the bed, but she was dizzy and held on to Fanta's arm.

"Let it go, Cola. Focus on getting better."

She lifted her neck to subside her heavy head and Fanta dapped the sweat off her face. She had words for him but a force so overwhelming kicked in, and she collapsed into his arms.

She was in the bush. Her brother was laughing now while beating three big drums at once. She spotted her sister dancing in the middle of a cheering crowd – she raised her arms and twirled in circles.

Cola felt restrained as she moved towards the group. Her knees dragged but she pushed. Everyone ignored her crawling and focused on her sister and Fanta's music; they all seemed mesmerised. She continued as Fanta's drums called for her.

One person seemed to notice her now, but her vision became cloudy when the man stopped clapping and aimed towards her.

"Baba," she mumbled when the elderly man stood before her. Her back gave up, and she stayed on her knees.

"My little Cola," he said.

“Why am I here?”

Her father chuckled to himself and found a spot on the ground. She gazed at him beside her. “You have always been naïve,” he mumbled. He looked older than the last time he'd visited her. She noticed more wrinkles under his eyes and grey hair at the edges. She waited for him to indulge her further, but his eyes squinted – watching her sister and then her brother.

“Baba...”

“Why can't you be more like them?”

This wasn't the first time he asked her. On several visits he'd critiqued her lack of interest in the family's traditional medicine practice compared to her siblings, and each time she chose to disregard the questions. She knew it wasn't only about his legacy. He also hadn't wanted her to be with any man like her sister as he saw it as a distraction.

“I lost him,” she said, waiting for comfort, make her feel anything less than a failure.

“You did.”

“What do I do now? Who will love me?”

“Your family loves you. He was not your family. The same way his family loves him and not you,”

“You're wrong Baba, you're wrong! Mma wasn't your family at first, but she became one.”

Her father raised and bent his knees. “This is the naivety I was talking about. My dear daughter, if his family wanted him to be with you, he'd be with you.”

Cola's neck tightened. She was heated, her rage beat in her chest, and her brother's music stopped.

She woke in Coca's medicine room. The air was wet and her throat hard. The cow dung floor was newly re-done, and the room still had its scent. Her sister was mumbling words – a song they used to sing as children – as she arranged the ointments beside her.

“You are awake.”

Cola was still hot, her hair drenched with sweat. She attempted wiping her forehead, but her arms were too weak.

“Who was it?” Coca asked her.

“Baba,”

“Of course,” her sister said – disappointed. “It is never Mma. It seems she's angry at us. I've called and called-”

“Coca, tell me. I'm going to lose the baby too, am I not?”

“Mmm...” Coca broke the dry shrubs for her *imphepho*. “I don't know. They might let you keep her.”

“How do you know it's a girl?”

“Same way I knew you were pregnant before I saw your belly.” Her sister got up from the floor and grabbed a box of matches. “Lie there, let your body rest. I will ask them on your behalf,”

“Maybe It's just fever. It will go away.”

“Fever,” Coca laughed. “No wonder I've always been better at this job than you. You are a terrible liar. You lie to yourself too much. Healing is facing the truth, sesi!”

“What truth? Tell me since you know everything, including my own body!”

Coca resumed her singing, avoiding her apparent fury. Just then, Fanta knocked and came in the room. “How is she?” he enquired.

“Let her tell you.”

Cola slowly turned her neck to look at him. “They are punishing me for getting pregnant,” she joked and coughed. “But you, you sleep with plenty women all over the village, yet they don't give you any fuss about it.”

Fanta didn't find her teasing funny. He was worried about her, and he had news.

“What is it?” she asked when she saw the preoccupied look on his face.

“There are police parked outside. They want to speak with you,”

“Police? Why?”

“It's about Maluka. Should I let them in?”

Her sister stood up to place her utensils away, she then grabbed the bucket with her vomit and left the room.

A man and a woman entered shortly. They wore formal clothing and had seemingly attended Maluka's memorial. “Good afternoon,” said the man. Fanta came with two chairs for the guests, and they sat down and introduced themselves. Cola didn't respond to their greeting.

“You don't look well ma'am. Apologies, but it is important,”

“She's able to speak,” said Fanta who now stood by the door.

“We understand you were dating Maluka,” the woman started after the pleasantries were exchanged between them, the incredibly hot weather and how much more bitter the tap water had gotten in the past days.

Cola forced her mouth to open and answered, “Yes,”

“How long were you together?”

“About, seven years,”

“That's a long time. Did he ever say anything troubling about his work as a security guard?”

Cola tried to think but couldn't come up with anything. "He only complained about the night shifts. He didn't enjoy them since he had to spend the night there, leaving his small brother home,"

"I see," said the male officer. "Did he carry any weapons to work?"

"Aowa, there was no need."

The officers looked at each other. "You know he was shot by his employer?"

Cola coughed and then answered, "I heard." She sneezed on the side and then gazed up at the thatched roof. "I was confused since he never complained about him."

The male officer leaned forward. "His employer, the farmer, says the gun he used was Maluka's. He claims self-defence."

Cola turned her body to face them. "That is not true. Maluka had no gun. Where would he have gotten a gun? He couldn't hurt a fly!" she went back to their last interaction before he left for his night shift. He was happy. They were happy. She added, "It's obvious, the farmer wants to shift blame. And if it's true, that he had a gun, then I knew nothing about Maluka." The officers listened, waiting for her to say more. "I knew Maluka more than my own family," she stated and oddly faced the other way.

Fanta spoke then, "You may come back another time. As you can see, my sister is still processing everything that's happened."

The officers agreed. They stood up and wished her well.

The funeral took place on a Sunday. On that day, Cola woke up at dawn to speak to Maluka. Normally, the spirits sought and ruffled her until she acknowledged their presence, but since she'd chased him away the last time he'd tried to make contact she had to do the begging.

She missed him. In the past few days, she was too consumed by anger to let herself yearn for him. But last night was different. She had a dream they were lying under a mango tree so big it touched both fences on each side of the yard – a glowing sunset behind the leaves. Maluka kissed her on the neck and ears, then her belly and pelvis, and she wet herself. When she woke up, her inner thighs were slimy and sweaty.

She recalled how they started. Maluka knew even then that she wasn't just any girl. She was peculiar, and people like her were not well received in their village. It was on the afternoon he visited her sister, Coca, to come and release his mother's spirit from their house the morning she was discovered dead. He explained to them he didn't know anybody else who dealt with the non-living other than the family.

Cola accompanied her sister, and what was thought to be an empathetic gesture from a neighbour turned into a love affair neither of them saw coming.

"You have your mother's eyes," she'd said to Maluka as they walked home from another outing together, having been dating for eight months.

"Her eyes? I guess I do. Solly looks more like her though."

"Ee, but you have the eyes," she'd said, scanning his face. "I saw her last night," she told him.

"What?"

She held his forefingers, caressing them gently. "Don't be afraid, I've seen the worst things no one could live with, but your mother was only beautiful."

He asked if his mother said anything to her. "Ah-ah, but her spirit was good. They normally just appear, and then leave."

"Where do they go?"

She'd laughed. "What do you mean by where? They are all here, with us. Its only their bodies you can't see."

Cola now asked her family for some privacy as she called. Smoke darkened her room. Her sister never believed her gift, dimmed it impossible. Speak to the ancestors with *imphepho*, yes, but see the dead? Madness. Her brother was sceptical at first until the morning their father died, when he caught her speaking to him in the kitchen – he'd just closed their father's eyes in the bedroom.

Cola bribed her fiancé with some cigarettes and a can of beer. But still, he did not appear nor respond. She clapped her hands loudly and demanded, spilling more foaming beer on the floor. “Your unborn is here too, my love. She is getting big in my belly. You would deny her?” she tried another tactic. A knock came through just then. “Not now!”

“It's me, Solly,” said the timid voice.

She quickly opened the door. The boy stood straight wearing a white shirt and a blue pullover, clearly new. His hair was now shaven when it had been a sized afro the last time she saw him. They looked at each other, waiting for the other to act. Cola threw her arms around him. “I'm so sorry. I'm sorry!”

Solly's arms remained beside him. “It's alright, Cola,”

“No, It's not.” She released him and observed him closely. He seemed different from when she saw him last – drinking water from the tall tap near a mulberry tree and plashing his face. “What happened to your brother will never be okay.”

“My uncle and aunt said he's in a better place now.” She wanted to say something about that but thought the subject of death was too complex to share with a grieving twelve-year-old. “They would like to see you,” he added.

Cola had assumed the minute his relatives hijacked Maluka's place that she would be casted aside like they'd seemed to have done since arriving in the village. Her sudden ailment had made things easier for her to accept that she'd been discarded like dog shit.

When she arrived at the house, she was called to the kitchen. She was to help with cooking the afternoon meal for the funeral guests. No one spoke to her or asked her anything. They'd only needed her hands.

Her neighbour, Modajo, had a better role than her. During the service she was to speak on behalf of the neighbourhood while her pastor was to deliver a sermon. "I was told you were unwell," said Modajo after bragging about her speech to be narrated in front of tens of people who were coming for the send-off.

"I was. But I am better now,"

"You know, I was just thinking the other day, about the two of you. He was a good boy, he didn't run around with other girls, he only wanted you, loyal to the bone! Oh, that boy had a heart. And you, look how pretty you are, I am sure other men tried, but it was only him you wanted. He didn't have money or useless things like jewellery, and you loved him. That is rare these days, my dear."

Cola thought Modajo's compliments had nothing to do with her or Maluka, but rather an inner judgment she was passing about her husband whose penis had been to places she could only imagine. Nonetheless, Cola accepted the words: "You've always been so kind to me. Thank you."

Modajo touched her arm, and she continued chopping carrots.

At the burial site, Maluka's relatives threw dust before the white coffin went down, and Cola shrieked to her knees in front of the funeral attendants; her sister ran to pull her away.

When they reached home, she was still inconsolable. Coca took off her shoes and laid her on her bed. "Mma," she mumbled as her sister pulled a blanket.

"Mma?"

"I saw her,"

"You saw our mother? When?"

“At the cemetery. That was why I screamed. It’s been so long since she died!”

Her sister sucked in her lips. “Was she good?”

She nodded. “She is done with this world, Coca. She’s gone.”

“And Maluka?”

Cola snugly cuddled her belly, and then said nothing.

Esther's Dilemma

We haven't always had comfort, my husband and I. Instead, we had ideas, and God. All the comfort we have acquired we owe it to the Almighty's blessings.

These past weeks, however, I have been questioning everything including God's love. Ever since that poor boy was murdered, I haven't been able to catch sleep. I ask myself, tossing and turning on my bed, if it could have been prevented.

"Esther," my husband mumbles. "Please, for the love of God, close your eyes and sleep!"

"Does my breathing disturb you?"

He sighs, bringing the comforter to his ears. What time is it anyway? I look up and squint my eyes at the clock on the wall. It's three o'clock midnight; the witch's hour, my mother used to say.

"Let me check on the kids," I say, my husband doesn't respond.

I find my gown on the armchair beside our bed, and I grab a flashlight. The hallway is dark, the fridge in the kitchen is louder than usual. It is always at night that I notice how massive my house is. The dead silence makes me anxious.

I open the boys' room and find them sleeping. My son on his bed, and Solly on the floor. The last time I woke him up to go back on the bed he didn't last long. That's what habit does to our bodies – it refuses change.

I leave them like that. When I walk down the stairs back to my bedroom – the torch falls out of my hands. A male figure is standing at the end of the hallway, and off he goes

when our faces meet. I follow him to the kitchen, then the living room. At the front door, he twists the knob slowly and then disappears.

“Esther, Esther...”

“Mmm,” My vision is blurry and green, it appears mouldy everywhere in the bedroom. I see a black dog's face which changes into my husband's. “What's wrong with you? Were you having a bad dream?” he asks, his face much clearer but bewildered. I look up at the clock, it is three o'clock on the dot. “You kept crying in your sleep,” he adds rubbing my shoulder.

In the morning, I'm reluctant to engage the day. My limbs ache, and my head is throbbing. I make the kids breakfast before school and pack their lunches.

Solly seems to have settled in since moving in with us despite the horrible thing that happened to his brother, though I feel he's pretending. Just yesterday, I found him alone at the back of the house staring at the spinach so intensely I thought he'd raze my garden.

“Bye, Aunty, bye Uncle,” he says, grabbing his backpack and running after his cousin.

My husband looks at me and shakes his head.

“What?”

“If it's guilt you still feel, we can do something about it.”

“No,” I say, moving away quickly.

Solly's brother wasn't supposed to die. I wonder why God allowed such a thing to happen. I ponder, walking up the church steps from my car. The Ladies Church Counsel should be able to offer the comfort I am looking for this afternoon.

I find some of the ladies setting the chairs in the hall and chatting. When they notice me, some smile, and others frown, but this is expected. Money has been my face in this church since I joined three years ago. At first, I didn't enjoy it, especially the pastor. He's

quite tiresome to listen to and has this patriarchal way of addressing the women characters in the bible. I thought of moving to another church but that was before I joined the Ladies Counsel. It seemed I could finally ease my sorrows.

The smiles from half of the ladies often mean that after the session they will accompany me to my car, their tones will change and their voices will sink, and they'll ask me for some cash. I will open my bag and hand them whatever they need. It's a job my husband and I have been called to do in this world, and we honour it.

The frowns from the other half are those who despise me for having borrowed them money in the first place now that they cannot pay it back. Small change I deal with while my husband borrows people all over the township thousands and thousands of rands, nonetheless they hate us just the same.

During the session I am unable to focus. I cannot digest any of the ladies' words since God is clearly ignoring my rage. "Mrs. Baloyi, do you have anything to add to what we've discussed this afternoon?" says the pastor's wife with her authoritative voice.

I scratch my throat and speak. "I have an internal dilemma that I've been battling with." They all look at me, and I realise I am seated when I should be standing when addressing the group. I know some of them are already thinking I look down on them, too good to stand on my feet. I lift my big behind, placing my handbag on the chair. "Ladies, I am sure you've heard about what happened to my husband's nephew, there in Tzaneen."

One asks, "The one who was killed in the farms?"

"That very one. I can't seem to come to terms with his death. By reading the bible, I usually find the reason behind the things that happen to all of us, but I'm struggling to see through this one,"

"Like what?" asks another woman, who I wasn't aware was among us until she opened her mouth. She is seated in the third row wearing a black *doek* and an oversized black dress,

never been her colour. She's still mourning her husband who died two months ago. Words do not come, and I don't respond to her question as I don't understand it.

She tries again, "You said you usually see the reason behind the terrible things that happen in your life. So, I am wondering what those things could be?"

The pastor's wife interjects, "Oh, I believe what Mrs. Baloyi was saying is in the Bible, that everything happens for a reason. It's written there in-"

"Mrs. Baloyi, could you kindly answer the question?" The woman violently interrupts the pastor's wife. I see the trap she lays for me. I've been made aware by my husband that she blames us for her husband's passing. Somehow, we are responsible for every unspeakable thing that has happened to her family. It wasn't my fault that her husband was a money laundering thief and my husband made sure he paid his debt. It also wasn't our fault that he died of stroke due to being broke and broken.

I proudly defend myself, "I know what you're trying to do. But while we are here let me ask you, if every man who stole from my family was to die today, will it be my fault?"

The chair screeches first but the ladies hold her back. "You murderer!" she throws spit in the air, kicks her legs in my direction. "You and your evil husband have blood on your hands, and you hide them behind this church!"

Her outburst shocks me. We are both grieving. Why is she the only one causing a scene?

The session ends sooner than planned. The pastor's wife didn't even get to share her sermon. She is a good narrator, sometimes I wonder why she doesn't preach to the congregation on Sundays. I offer my regrets because truly I am sorry for that woman's tantrum. This church isn't a place for godless behaviour.

“I apologise, she's clearly having a hard time,” I say to the pastor’s wife who accepts and calls me aside. Our footsteps match with each clack on the marble floor as we go into her office.

The room is much bigger than it looks on the outside. It is spacious and well ventilated too. There’s a microwave, a fridge, kettle, toaster, and other useful utensils fit for her. She offers me the bigger maroon chair while she takes the small yellow chair reserved for guests.

“Ma'am, again, I am sorry for your loss. I didn't know you and the deceased were close. I would have accompanied you to the funeral.”

“Everything happened so fast. His small brother, who's living with us now, is doing better than I am.”

“Oh, that is very kind of you for taking him in. He is lucky.”

“God called me. My spirit could never refuse a poor orphan.”

She smiles, reaching for my hands. “I wanted to talk to you about a different matter. I don't know if you’ve noticed,” she pauses, and then shifts, “Do you need a drink?”

“Oh, a glass of water would be good actually.”

She clacks her way to the fridge, pours ice and the water. She hands it to me and continues. “Mrs. Baloyi, I am quite ill. I haven't been well for a while.”

I look closely, and I cannot find the illness. She looks buttery and her make up shimmery, but I offer my sympathies anyway. “Would you please help me with the medical expenses? It’s been difficult...” she says this solemnly, and I watch her neck as she speaks, the words are difficult too, and I pity her. Still, I cannot ignore the glaring lie. This is a skill I've acquired since my husband and I started our business. We can see through our clients. Every single one of them is a liar. But it's not their fault. They need the money. They just spray a repellent on the reason as to why they want the money because the real reason terrifies them.

I take a gulp of the water before asking, “How much will you need?”

“Forty-five thousand.”

I do not flinch, another skill I've mastered. “When will you need it?”

“I will come to your house tomorrow to arrange that, if that's fine with you.”

She's clearly thought this through. She knew how and when, and I admire it. I do not like impulsive borrowers; they are reckless with our money. Men mostly, but the women plan in advance. Look at the pastor's wife. She grew up poor like me and she knew she had to marry someone promising. What is more promising in this God forsaken place than being a pastor's wife?

“Please, never hesitate to ask. I'm here to help,” I say, brushing her hand. My husband refuses to say these words after clients made their requests known. He tells me it wouldn't change anything. That each of our customers are desperate and do not care what we say to them before or after the loan is made.

The pastor's wife is glad to walk me out of her office. She caresses my arm and then waves me to the car.

On the road, I see the angry woman walking home, she seems even angrier than she'd been when she threw her feet at me. I offer her a lift, and her eyes flare at me and continues walking.

Several minibuses go past me carrying people from town, others transporting children home from school, while the remaining blare their horns for passengers. My husband owns five minibuses and I do not care to know which ones.

At the four-way, east leads to Ga-Modjadji, where Solly and his brother lived, while west leads to Tzaneen town, and I take the south road to my mother's house.

It was at the intersection that the angry woman's late husband threatened to beat my husband with a belt. The two men threw *fuck you's* and *voetsek's* at each other. Her husband

then got out his vehicle to show mine that he was man of action. When my husband was to meet him with his fists, I grasped his arm and stopped him. But the woman will never tell that part of the story. She was there too in the passenger seat, hurling insults at our car – helping her husband dig a hole for himself.

I continue driving straight, passing the shoe sewers at the roadside, the chicken nests neatly stacked on top of one another, then the three women selling tomatoes, avocados, bananas, mangoes, and spinach. I pass the small bridge leading to a lake. The narrow road going uphill to a secluded village; my husband once opened a supermarket there a few years ago, but the business crumbled within three months when we discovered that the villagers were stealing from him.

I pass the Blue Estate we built four years ago, so vast and sumptuous, yet no one lives there now since former residents claimed that ghosts lurked their rooms at night and slapped them in the face.

Half of our businesses have been affected by lies or betrayal, but the loans remain because people will not stop asking for money.

I find my mother watering the lawn and playing jazz in the house. She smiles when she sees me. “Esther!” She throws away the hose and dries her hands with her dress. “Etle,” she says, wobbling with her long legs to the back door.

The house is airy, windows open wide and the fan winding the small living-room. I look around. I never truly feel home here. It's as if I didn't grow up within these walls. Two bedrooms, and a kitchen. My mother loves this house so much that she's refused, vehemently, to let me upgrade it. “Why would I need a bigger house? All our memories are here,” she would say.

Memories she speaks of are hunger and long agony. When I see the next room, I remember how the kitchen-unit once fell on me and I almost lost my legs. The old fridge that

left water on the floor every two hours, and she had to dry it when she arrived from work since I was on a wheelchair because of the kitchen-unit which she since threw away. I eye my former bedroom. How much I cried in it and begged God to relieve me from the chair.

“How is my grandson doing?” she asks me as we sit. She strokes the sofa with her fingers. I bought it for her a while ago.

“He's doing better at school, and he's no longer as lonely.”

“Oh, because of the child living with you.”

“Yes, that reminds me, why I am here.” She leans back into her seat, her stature towering the sofa, resting her arms on the wood. “Mma, since you used to work at the Viljoen Farm, where the boy’s brother was killed-” Before I could finish my sentence, my mother stands, shaking her body.

“I know where this is going, and I will not have it!”

“It’s important, Mma. I want to sue the farmer for the murder he committed. It's the right thing to do,”

“Sue? The white people?” she cackles. “I don't want any part in it!”

Countless nights I waited for Mma to come home from work and each time she came back she was worse than before. Unreasonable hours, petty salaries, and horrible working conditions. Yet she's refusing to help.

“Mma, that boy was killed for nothing. For nothing! If we prove that what happened wasn't an accident as the farmer claims-”

“This is why you’ve come here? To wield me into your money schemes?”

“Money schemes? Mma, I'm trying to help!”

“Help who, Esther? He's dead and may his soul rest in peace!”

I didn't think she would refuse. She's my mother and should want to help me, shouldn't she? I bow my head, and with my mouth to the floor, I say to her: "You have always been a coward, you never took risks, and that's why we were poor!"

The fan is the only thing making a sound now. Clearly my words wound her. I lift my head to look at her and she absurdly places her hands on her waist, and then leaves the room. I do the same.

Late at night at my house, dusk threatens. I know the dreams will not spare me. I wait for my husband to finish showering before we could turn off the light. He comes in, smelling of cocoa butter. He pokes his big belly into mine and kisses me on my brows. He's feeling giddy while I am miserable.

The last time I felt this way was when a large snake somehow slithered its way into the clump of pawpaw trees and into my pavement. I screamed, and the snake was beaten down with bricks by anyone with hands. Before sleep, I'd felt guilty. I felt responsible for the snake's brutal murder.

"What is it now?" My husband asks me, seeing I am not in a kissing mood.

"Nothing."

He climbs off me and puts on his pyjama bottoms. He exhales before making one of his senseless suggestions. "I know it's because of my nephew's death. I told you, I can make calls, and we will sort that man in seconds."

"Murder cannot undo murder," I say. He shrugs, switches the light off and gets into bed. "You know, sometimes... no, always, I wonder how I am married to you,"

"Maybe it's because we are the same, my dear."

"But I've never killed anyone."

He laughs at me, teasingly. I change position, and he rubs my buttocks like sport before falling asleep. I shut my eyes and wish for the best.

In the morning, I decide to take the kids to school. Last night was better, no strange figures in my head, and yet I feel nothing has lifted off my body. The kids find me waiting for them outside, the car engine running. My son gets in the front beside me. “Go to the back and sit with your cousin,” I say to him.

“Oh, sorry.”

“I shouldn't remind you every time,”

“Sorry, Mama.”

I reverse the car to leave, and pang! A shrill comes from the back of the Land Rover. We all jolt forward and then get out of the car. “Tjeses!” I cry out, hands on my head.

“Is it, dead?” Solly asks, ambling anxiously towards the skinny black cat lying in front of us – blood oozing out its belly.

My son says, “Mama, it's dead,”

“Yes, yes, I can see that. Go back in the house and call your father. I don't have time for this. We're late.”

My husband places the deceased in a refuse bag. Once we exit the gate, we watch as he cleans the blood away.

Before we could take the road, I say to the kids, “Bow your head, and let's pray.”

“Mama?”

“I said bow your head. Lord, forgive us for all our trespasses and for, the cat's death, may its soul rest in peace. Amen.”

Driving out of Lenyenye, my son exclaims, “Mama look!” he points at a man wearing long black pants that sweep the ground as he runs after a pig; he trips and falls, finds his feet again and resumes chasing. Small raindrops suddenly coat the windows, but they don't last.

We soon pass the abandoned scrapyard, the school for the mentally-handicapped, the hospital, several farms, and houses, and there – their school.

I park outside the gate and open my purse for their lunch money. “Now go, I will see you later.” Solly lunges awkwardly and hugs me before running after his cousin.

I drive away and stop at the traffic lights, thinking about what I am about to do. The plan was to go straight home, but since I am in town, I take the road down. I end up outside the farm where Solly’s brother was murdered.

I park at a distance and watch for a while. I see trucks entering the main gate and leave. I look on as life resumes. How could this be? How is this just? He was such a light. Every time he visited my house, Maluka brought only smiles and yet his life meant nothing to the people behind the orange trees.

A woman appears, the farmer’s wife. She has yellow hair and she’s thick on the chest. She is talking to one of the farm workers at the main gate. I’ve seen her on TV. She was surrounded as her husband was whisked away by police after he killed and then called it an accident. I watched her more than her husband. Something about her intrigued me. Perhaps it was how much she avoided the cameras.

She’s walking away now, and I wonder if she is disgusted by her husband as I am. And should I go ahead with the lawsuit, will she think I am a horrible woman? Will she hate me?

I leave the evil place when I sense vomit coming. I decide to go shopping and then the spa; my body is tense.

When I return home, I find a white car parked outside. I hear laughter, up there on the balcony. I see the pastor’s wife, seated with my husband. I enter the house and throw my handbag on the couch and head up to the balcony.

“Mrs. Baloyi, your husband was just telling me about his forgotten dream of becoming a pastor.”

He lied to her. Maybe he was trying to make conversation, still I am not happy since I was the one who actually wanted to preach when I started walking again. My spirituality was awoken by my ability to touch the ground.

“Oh, is it? You never told me that, *Lovie*,” I say, grasping the chair beside him.

“I would have been good at it, don’t you think?”

“Not better than the Mrs’ here,” I try to flatter her, touching her leg. But her demeanour changes. She doesn’t seem pleased at my mention of her preaching. Is she embarrassed?

She mumbles, “My husband doesn’t know. But I am thinking of starting my own church.”

I’m stumped. Of all the things I thought of since she asked me for money, this was the last thing I expected. “But why? What’s wrong with your husband’s church?” I ask her. My husband appears amused by what she said.

“Isn’t it obvious? That church doesn’t belong in our world. The system is very old.”

“This is why you want the loan? To start a church? I’m sorry, my husband and I have invested hundreds in your husband’s church because we see its potential to grow. We cannot help you.”

She looks at my husband, and then at me. It seems my words mean nothing to her, and only his matter. She lied that she was sick in order to enter my home and ask my husband to throw money into a silly project that is likely to fail. Sure, she has talent, but she won’t succeed.

When it finally dawns on her that my husband values my opinion, she nods slowly. “I see. Well, thank you for your time.” I do not see her out, my husband does.

Soon, my mother arrives, on foot. She’s sweating and puffing. She could have called, and I would have gone to fetch her. Either way, I am glad. I’ve felt terrible about what I said to her at the house yesterday. “Mma,” I say, hugging her.

She gazes at me with her diminishing eyes. "I need to talk,"

"What is it?" We are on the porch, the boys are back home from school and wrestling each other around the yard, their voices loud. I offer my mother a glass of water, but she declines, eager to tell me the reason behind her journey to my house.

"Esther," she begins, "I know you will do it, and you will win because of all your money," she says this while looking at my house. I sense judgement from her. I've always felt it ever since I married my husband. She never said anything, but I knew she wasn't happy about our relationship. Since living here, I can count the number of times my mother has visited. "You've always gotten your way without my help," she adds. "But before you do anything, ngwanaka, I want you to see it from my view." She places her hand between her breasts. "He was someone I took care of as a child-"

"I know that Mma, I know all that. But that is not-"

"What will it make me if I support this mission of yours? You see a killer, and I see a child who made a mistake. He didn't mean it, Esther. He couldn't have, I knew him!"

As I listen to her plead for the murderer, I realise that my mother is gullible. She hasn't moved on from the past either. In her head, the farmer is still running around in nappies she dressed him in, but he's a full-grown man who knew how to hold a gun and kill.

Still, I hear her, because for her to walk all the way from her house then she surely loved him. But I will not falter. I will sue the farmer and his wife to their very last penny. And if God hears me, justice will prevail.

A Witness

Nkane, nkane; Nkane. Nkane, nkane; Nkane. There was the girl. She was quite tall for a girl her age. That's what everyone said. *Taallll*, they would emphasise, "High with the trees and the clouds". Girl was sixteen when she arrived at the farm with nothing but the red cotton cloth she was wearing. She shared how she lost her parents somewhere in the early 1920s.

Like the rest of them, she never complained. In fact, she would have rather collapsed right there in the heat than say anything about the farming duties. She would sling the hoe so high as if she came with it into the world. To say she was a beauty would be a lie. The girl had a large round face and ears which didn't work well for a girl, and she knew that. Her colour, much like the slap of red mud, reddened with no help from sweat, and her hair turned orangish from the sun.

"When will the missionary come?" asked Lerole, seated on the blue metallic chair in the kitchen, Granny's right leg on his lap as he cut her oddly shaped toenails.

"Not yet," said Granny, and she went back to her story.

As time passed, the girl got thinner than what her body was meant to be. It wasn't hunger. You see, she was consumed by loneliness. Unlike the other girls on the farm, she had no life to return to once she dumped her shovels and sacks. The others had children and husbands back home, lovers and homely duties. The day would come to end, and she wished someone would see her. Notice her. But every set of eyes she came across turned blurry with the sight of her face.

Until one day a missionary came to the farm with Meneer Viljoen, the farmer. The missionary didn't tower everyone like the girl, but he was considerably tall, much taller than the average man who came and left the farmlands.

When the girl first saw him, she was ignited. Someone unusual like her for a change. Except there was the issue with the tongue. The missionary said things she didn't understand. She nodded like the rest of the farm workers as he preached the gospel.

He carried a yellow book, which he read from and kissed at the end of every delivery. Eccentric, she thought whenever he gathered them around under the mulberry tree with commands from Meneer Viljoen. But still, she knew he saw her. Whenever the missionary preached, he looked at her. She tried to look away but each time his eyes returned, she was his focal point, and she couldn't shake him.

Granny took back her right foot and raised the other, and then continued.

Sadly, the missionary didn't stay long. He spoke the Lord's word for thirteen days in a row and then left. The girl would ask Meneer Viljoen if the missionary was ever going to return to the farm, and the others found this maddening since they regarded the missionary an irritant. He spoke about a God they did not know or care for, in a language they did not know or care for. They believed the missionary, much like the farmer, didn't see them as people but rather buffoons to feed words from his silly yellow book. And wasn't he not too whiny for a man his age? The sun was hot, the chair was unsteady, the water was bitter, the food was salty, good riddance! They spoke.

However, one late afternoon in winter, the missionary returned, but he was not alone. He brought another girl with him, blacker than the first girl and absolutely beautiful. It poured on the farmlands for days after her arrival, more like the first girl's tears because now she was never going to learn the Layman's language or be the missionary's focus ever again.

New Girl was the missionary's translator. Not only did she know the missionary's language, but she cooked the food he liked, and she was on everyone's lips.

First Girl was impressed. When she got the chance to talk to the new girl, she knew she could never attain her level of English or beauty, and so she took it upon herself to befriend her.

Their friendship blossomed. They started sharing things they did not tell the others: New Girl wasn't from the country but rather Zimbabwe where she'd met the missionary at a hospital he was treated for Syphilis. First Girl was no orphan, she ran away from home because her mother was a lunatic who poisoned her twin sister. The missionary noticed this fondness between the two girls and grew envious of their relationship.

"If I remember correctly, this is where they plotted against him, right Granny?" asked Lerole.

"Right."

New Girl convinced Meneer Viljoen to hire her as his maid, and she and First Girl spread all that they knew about the missionary, including the reason he fled his home country in the first place. He was nothing but a rapist and a thief, even Viljoen couldn't control this ugly rumour. New Girl stayed on the farm, the missionary was relieved of his duties, and First Girl was no longer lonely.

"Whatever happened to the first girl? She was your best friend and yet you only speak of her with the idea of rescuing her from loneliness," said Lerole.

"Eish, it's itching," Granny said, not answering his question.

He placed the nail cutter on the wooden table and scratched her foot. He knew that was the end of the story. He stood and poured water into the steel kettle for tea. As it boiled on the stove, he considered the old woman, who was now cutting her fingernails. He wondered why she told half-truths in all her stories. Like the time she narrated a story about the lonely old

woman who was accused of witchcraft but turned out to be deaf. She couldn't have been a witch, her accusers concluded. But then what happened to the people she was suspected of killing? Who killed them? He'd pondered the night she told him the story.

He went outside to look at the stars as he often did. But the stars did not blink at him. He was confounded by events of the past few months, and his only friend on the farm wanted to leave him for the big city. He was overwhelmed. Why wasn't it easy to just up and leave? But he couldn't leave an old woman by herself on the farm.

Ever since the murder in the main house, he worried about their safety. They always knew about the guns in that house, but none of them or the farm workers thought someday it was going to be one of them at the end of the rifle.

When the kettle whistled, he stood to go back to the kitchen but then he noticed something eerie. The door beside theirs unbolted and opened slowly on its own. He walked towards it to close but a gust of wind shut it on his face. The door was supposed to be locked, perhaps Mrs. Viljoen, the farmer's wife, had forgotten. Her husband was in prison and the last time he saw her in the backrooms was months ago.

The door opening and closing on him left a shuddering feeling in his gut as he trotted back to his door. Wasn't it terrible enough that the room's former tenant died so tragically and left everyone with fear, now strange things kept happening.

"Granny," he uttered as he poured the hot water into the tin mugs. "What do you know about ghosts?"

"Ghosts?" she shuffled her feet on the cement floor and eyed the wall. Across her was the ghastly photograph of Jesus on the cross, blood dripping onto his face. "Why are you asking? Is it because of the sounds on the roof again?" In the weeks since their neighbour's death, he kept hearing footsteps on their roof, especially at midnight when he was on the verge of sleeping. When he told Granny, she said it was only mice.

He dumped two teabags in Granny's cup like she preferred and put one in his. He retrieved the sugar from the small kitchen counter where folds of newspapers hid the old metal. "I have a feeling Maluka's spirit is still here."

Granny sighed at what he said. She'd liked their neighbour since he was quieter than him, she always told him. "You know nothing about spirits, Lerole. Only a troubled spirit will still lurk around this world. Maluka was pure as the sea."

Lerole handed her the cup and sipped from his. He considered what she said. He wanted to contest but speaking ill of the dead was not in his nature. Besides, none of them truly knew the deceased. Perhaps that's what made him so angelic.

Granny blew breath onto her cup, sipped, and cleared her throat gleefully. He knew she had one more story before bed.

Nkane, nkane; Nkane. Nkane, nkane; Nkane. He was a merchant. But back then such words were not in the people's vocabulary. And so, whenever he showed up with his goods, everyone winced because a crook they thought he was.

The merchant was not from the area. He travelled miles on foot just to get to the farms. The farm workers found that suspect, there must've been people where he lived that he could've sold to than taking the long, dusty roads to their lifeless farmlands.

Whenever he arrived, the merchant was drenched in sweat, his shirt clung to his skin. He didn't wear the kind of clothes the farm workers wore, only the smell of him was theirs. He looked like them, spoke like them and yet, he was not one of them.

Fortunately for the merchant, Meneer Viljoen, the farmer, took liking of him since he sent him out of town to get him things he couldn't purchase in Tzaneen.

"I don't think you've told me this one before," Lerole said, cuddling the cup with his large hands. "A Black merchant?"

"I haven't, I just remembered it."

Anyway, the merchant and the farmer became close before the workers' very eyes. They barely interacted with their boss as much as he did. What was so special about the merchant? The farmer seemed to respect his crafty words and excessive use of long sentences.

Regardless of the fondness Meneer Viljoen had for the merchant, taking him in, renting him his back house, and giving him supervisory role of his orange farm, the merchant did not spare Meneer Viljoen from his long tongue.

He started gossiping with some of the male workers, and shared how much he loathed the old white man, along with his children and grandchildren. How did the former landowners allow such an unworthy man to take from them, he'd lamented.

Yes, the merchant wanted the farm. It did not belong to Meneer Viljoen in the first place. It was their land; "Our land", he informed his new friends. They nodded, grimaced at their own foolery for kowtowing to the "white bastard".

Of course, Meneer Viljoen soon heard of the discussions. But he didn't know it was the merchant who started them until the night he bedded the first girl.

"First Girl?" asked Lerole.

"Let me finish, don't interrupt again."

At that time First Girl was embittered. She became very unhappy when New Girl started seeing the merchant. But New Girl was in love and planned to marry the merchant. The female workers wondered what she saw in him. He was not charming, and he was a crook. But New Girl *saw* him. Like she'd done with First Girl, she dug deep and got to know things about him that no one else knew.

He was not just a merchant. His family was torn apart by the arrival of the whites. They took over his home and ransacked his grandfather's chiefdom. He was no longer a grandson

of a chief, what was left of his home he sold for a living. The clothes, the jewellery, ornaments, shoes, etc.

In First Girl's defence, she was in love with New Girl and saw her relationship with the merchant as unforgivable. Sadly, New Girl couldn't love her the same way she did.

When First Girl told Meneer Viljoen that it was all the merchant's plans, she knew it would hurt New Girl. However, she had no idea how much damage she was going to cause.

The merchant was killed by the farmer in his bungalow. Everyone heard him scream for his life. But cry not, the merchant made Meneer Viljoen's life miserable, so much that the farmer became mad. Literally. He claimed the merchant was a ghost.

Lerole was captivated by the story. "The merchant was your boyfriend?"

"That is what I said, isn't it? Or weren't you listening?"

"I am sorry, I didn't know you lost someone."

Granny chuckled. "Someone, you say. You think I've gotten this old without losing people along the way? I loved him, but he wasn't the end of my life."

"And so, what happened?"

"What do you mean?"

"You insinuated that your friend was the cause of his death. What happened to her?"

"Oh, she fled. I never heard from her ever again." Granny stood and stretched her back. She placed her now empty cup on the table and then staggered to the bedroom.

Lerole remained in the kitchen and listened to the night. The story about the merchant left him in deep thoughts. His dead neighbour was murdered in the same house the merchant was killed, allegedly by Meneer Viljoen's grandson – his boss.

What were the odds? But he was not going to become a number. If he was to die young, it wasn't going to happen on the farm.

Lerole woke early for work the next day. He left Granny asleep, and grabbed his sack and closed the door. He glanced at the next door, which was now open wide. He ignored it.

At a distance he spotted his friend walking towards the cow kraals. The sun glowed on his face, and he set long footsteps.

He didn't think his friend was going to show up as he'd mentioned leaving for Johannesburg in the afternoon. "Heita da!" he hailed. When he got to the kraal, he noticed something different about his friend; his eyelids were blown up and his left eye blackened.

"What happened to you?"

His friend looked away. "Ah, some idiots attacked me last night."

Lerole knew from his tone that he was lying but didn't probe.

At lunch, they decided to visit his friend's brother's office, the trucks monitor, who informed them that half of the workers did not turn up. They were still on strike for his neighbour's murder.

"How long are they going to milk that cow?" Lerole asked. Truly, he didn't understand the logic anymore. Yes, they were angry, every one of them was when they heard about Maluka's death. But it was weeks since it happened. The dead moved on, couldn't they?

"You asked that like someone who doesn't know their rights," said his friend. "Me, when it hits three o'clock, I will be in a taxi to Joburg. Viljoen's wife will have to draw my face because she sees it ever again!" They laughed at his joke. "Maybe I will meet a good girl there and marry her."

The brother made fun of him: "You are only sixteen, and what do you know about girls?" He shook his head. "You couldn't even keep the one you had. Look at your face!"

Lerole gazed at his friend's swellings again. He couldn't believe a girl did that to him, no wonder he'd lied about it. Apparently, his girlfriend didn't take the news well. She accused him of leaving her for "sluts" in Johannesburg.

Afterwork, Lerole headed to his room. He was starving, and he knew Granny prepared a good dinner for the two of them. He found his neighbour's door still open, but he heard shuffling sounds inside.

A lady emerged. He'd never seen her before. "Hello," she uttered when he stared at her.

"Er-" he didn't know what to say.

"I came to fetch Maluka's things," she said.

Her fiancé she told him. He didn't know the deceased was engaged to marry. He couldn't imagine that something so swift happened to two people who wanted to start their lives together. She appeared somewhat lost at whatever she was doing in the room. He dumbled his sack by the door and went inside.

The walls didn't look much different from his, only that it was a single room and much smaller in size. Bed, table, plastic chair, primus-stove, a big bucket of water, a washing basket, and a dishwasher. His neighbour lived like someone who didn't wish to make a home on the farm, Lerole thought to himself.

The lady exhaled. When she shifted to the bed, he realised she was pregnant. He quickly lunged and lifted the bag for her.

"Oh, I can carry it."

"No," he said, glancing at her belly.

She looked down as if unaware of her own state. "Ah," she mumbled. She was on the verge of leaving, she said. But then she found something that left her feeling nauseated. She pointed at the direction of the bed, and he saw the plate of rotten food. He sucked in saliva and grabbed the plate to throw it away.

"None of his relatives thought of coming here," she said. "They all just wanted to bury him and move on. Heh, they don't know that not all the dead move on!"

Lerole dumped the plate in the big rubbish bin outside and went back to the room. He observed the lady closely. Despite her grief she was radiant. He wanted to ask her what she meant by what she said before he went out, but he knew, and asking would've insulted his own intelligence.

She started to leave, and he was worried. He decided to accompany her to the bus station, and she was very thankful on their way there.

She walked fast, something that was common amongst village women, he noticed; they always had something to do. She looked at him at uncomfortable moments and he felt the need to say something. He didn't know what she believed about her fiancé's death. If she took what they said in the news with a pinch of salt, or if she was gullible like everyone else.

"The old woman is your grandmother?" she asked him.

"You met her? No, she is my guardian." He told everyone that without much context, while Granny told them he was her nephew. The lady only nodded to his response and started humming to herself.

"You know, when Granny wants to tell me something, usually about her past, she tells me a story in third person,"

"Oh, but why doesn't she just say it?"

He shrugged. "Sometimes, the past is traumatizing to talk about, don't you think?"

"Hmm, I cannot relate. The past is the past, and we can't change it."

He thought about what she said while they walked up the steep road. "Well in that case, should I tell you a story? It will be over by the time we reach the station."

She looked up the empty road and seemed to think over his proposition. "Go on," she said.

"When I say nkane, nkane you say, nkane; that's how Granny starts her stories."

The lady closed her eyes briefly and then scratched her elbow. He took that as a permission.

Nkane, nkane; Nkane. Nkane, nkane; Nkane. When he was born, they said Lerole was going to be blind for the rest of his life. The witch doctors his father took him to said it was for his own good, that the gods did not make mistakes.

But the man was not happy about his son's faulty eyesight. He took him to a different kind of doctor, a white one in the hospital. With few drops of this medicine, the doctor said, your son's sight will return. Lerole's father couldn't believe it. A few drops from a bottle were all it took.

The doctor did not lie. His son's eyes seemed to open with each passing week. For Lerole, it was a whole new world. Do you remember where you were and what you were doing when you saw the colour green for the first time? Wasn't it beautiful? But for him, it was much more. It was life!

Anyway, his older sister screamed when she saw her dead pig lying on the green grass he was playing with. He didn't see the pig, he saw colour. He didn't notice the pig decaying beside him.

It didn't take long for Lerole's father to notice how strange he was. At least that's what he told his close family whenever they visited. The boy lacked empathy, his father worried.

The last straw for Lerole's father was when he walked on his sister's blood and proceeded to stomp his little legs all over the house. Fearful of their father's reaction, his sister had taken a pill for her pregnancy and had an abortion in the toilet before Lerole found her in a river of her own blood – clutching to the toilet seat before taking her last breath.

“That is very sad. I'm sorry,” said the lady. Lerole ignored and continued.

One day, Lerole's father decided that he could no longer raise him. He was too much for one parent whose other child died from a deadly abortion. And so, he left him at the farm he worked, never to be seen again.

Lerole was taken in by a woman who sympathized with his story, and she raised him as her own. She didn't see anything odd about him, he was just a boy who was abandoned. But Lerole knew he was strange since his father said so.

For a long time, he hated himself for not seeing the world like everyone else. He grew up turning his face away from danger or pain, and he did well. The money he made on the farm he gave to the old woman, some he saved for the day he decides to leave the farm and see the country.

A week after his seventeenth birthday, the old woman sent him to her boss, the farmer's wife, to send letters on her behalf as she often did. She always looked forward to writing and reading letters from long lost friends and Lerole knew it was important for her and went straight ahead to the boss's house.

When he reached the front door, he first noticed the broken glass on the floor, and he hunched to pick some of the pieces – the door was shattered.

Suddenly, he heard people inside the house fighting, hurling ugly accusations at each other. A marital quarrel, it sounded from where he stood.

He then looked in and that's when he saw the wife holding a gun and aimed at the opposite direction – her hands trembling.

Lerole recoiled in fear, and soon loud shots were fired: pha, pha, pha, pha, pha, pha! Six bullets, he counted. Who was shot he only heard minutes later.

The lady stopped walking to look at him. "Who else have you told this story?"

"No one."

"Why are you telling me?"

He peered into her eyes, and said, “You said the past is the past.”

She shook her head and grasped the bag from him. “Thank you.” She then hurried and left him behind.

He returned to the farm later to hear news of his boss’s return from prison. He was granted bail; Granny said somewhat upset. “It’s not fair,” she kept saying.

That night, she had no stories for him. The world was unfair, and no story was to make her forget that.

He decided to take a walk around the farm with the hope that he’d peek at his boss. It was weeks since he’d been away, and he wanted to see what a man from prison looked like.

But that didn’t happen. The main house was as quiet as it was the day before. He did, however, see the wife and her son as they arrived home in her car. He waved at them and Mrs. Viljoen returned it. He suspected she was unhappy about the news of her husband’s return, but one couldn’t be sure. He’s heard the farmer physically abused her. How true the stories were, only Granny knew.

Lerole slept well for the first time in weeks without hearing strange sounds on the roof. He dreamt of a life full of colour, beauty, and happy faces. He dreamt of his sister, alive, along with her child. His father was there, and he too was full of laughter.

He woke without meaning to. He thought about his friend, the exciting life he was about to take on in the city. He couldn’t help but feel envious. His friend was right, there was no life on the farm. Only work and death.

He got off the bed and peered through the curtain, scanning the yard. It was faintly dark, and the washing line swayed in the wind. He then spotted the farmer’s Datsun flashing lights at a distance. That was expected as his boss woke early on the weekends before his arrest. What was odd was the sound that came next.

There was a rough scuffle outside the car, but he couldn't see clearly. He tiptoed to the kitchen window where he saw two masked men struggling with the farmer. They grabbed him and forced him into another vehicle he couldn't recognise.

Lerole jumped to Granny's bed and tried to wake her. "Granny, Granny, Granny..." He panicked and ran back to the window. And there, he saw the pickup truck flying at high speed out of the farm.

When Granny asked him what happened, he was too befuddled to speak. When he finally did, she told him: "Keep this between us. You saw nothing. Nothing!"

That was the story they told everyone when then sun arrived. They acted surprised when they heard from the farmer's wife that her husband was missing. They added on speculations and made-up stories about his disappearance. The most prominent rumour was that his disappearance was because of the murder he committed. Someone was clearly enraged and wanted revenge.

The entire week, Lerole was unable to rest. At night it was no longer footsteps on the roof but images of his boss and the two masked men. He knew from what he saw that the farmer was good as dead, too.

While everyone on the farm consumed themselves with gossip, he packed his bags. Not only did he witness his sister's death, his neighbour' murder, and now his boss's kidnapping. What was next?

Granny insisted on accompanying him to the taxi rank. She reassured him that she was going to be just fine. She left her home country alone without family and she made it thus far.

"You will write, won't you?"

He nodded and brushed her arms. "I will write a million letters and you will get sick of me."

She giggled. The taxi driver honked his horn for him to get in the minibus as he was the last passenger; everyone in the bus looked at him with vexation on their faces.

He put his bag by the door and then hugged Granny. She placed two hundred rand notes into his shirt pocket and mumbled: "Go well, my boy." She attempted to close the door, but all her strength was gone. He grabbed the handle instead and slid the door in one go.

He didn't look back as the taxi drove away. He knew he'd change his mind.

Welcome to Lenyenye

It was nothing like I had ever seen before. There it was, arms limp and very dead. It was my first time seeing a dead body, and ever since I have made sure to keep away from that house.

You'd think the universe would warn you before setting your eyes on the dead amongst us, but the day began and went like most days, well before then. Nothing signalled such a gruesome sight. No black birds flew over my head, no agitating feeling in the gut, none of that.

My friends and I were all barefoot and the plastic bags we were holding were yet to slice our palms as we collected beer bottles around the township. Our road began at the entrance into Lenyenye, our destination – a shebeen, where we were going to fill our bellies proud.

The pine trees on each side of the tarred road gave us a grand entrance. The leaves swayed as the wind blew. Several people appeared in front of us as we reached the main road. Girls older than us stood by the roadside and hitched to town, while old men staggered holding their jerseys. On the right, the *Total* filling station appeared even rusty in the faded red and white colours, the potholes at the exit gave it away.

There! a bottle at the corner. I grasped it and put it in my green bag. One of my friends saw two more by the taxi rank; he crossed the road to get them.

There were four of us. We were all eager to taste the juicy, salted chips we were about to devour at the shebeen, where we were to exchange the bottles for money.

We reached the first four-way intersection now. We could have taken the main road - straight to the shebeen, but to get more bottles we had to go around the township, hence we chose Ramalema Street.

The street had identical houses, from the wire fences, the asbestos roofs, the beige paints, and to the trees all over the yards that produced the sweetest mangoes in the summer. I liked the sabres, the tip felt like you are licking an ice cream cone. Most of the houses had red steel doors and red polished *stoeps* that guzzled too much polish. I always shined my mother's *stoep* twice a week which always left my knees itchy and red.

Like every other house in the township, at the corner of every yard on the long Ramalema street – a toilet and a shower. My sister and her friends used to go house-to-house taking showers and touching each other.

We kept right until the curve at the far end, reaching the first end of Lenyenye by the high school building where my sister started the year before. “Damnit!” one of my friends exclaimed; there was a group of seemingly angry people up the road.

“Let’s take Lesedi Street,” another suggested.

And I said, “But it will take us way longer to get to the shebeen.”

“Those kids were allowed to pass, let’s go!”

“What are they doing?” I asked.

“Can’t you see it’s a protest?”

“For what? Water?”

“No.”

“Lights?”

“No!”

“Land?”

“Yes.”

“It’s always either of those three,” I said. The protesters didn’t mind us, all they wanted was a piece of land. “They won’t get what they are fighting for,” I added when the noise was now faint in the background.

“They might. Remember that strike a while ago for the security guy who was killed by a white man in town?”

“My mother said they only sent the killer to jail because of pressure. She said the ANC wanted to impress us.” I turned my head and looked back at the protesters. It looked like they were starting a fire in the middle of the road, some stomping and clapping.

More houses appeared, not much different from those we’ve passed, although the lawns were dry. They used to be a nourished green when we all used to irrigate our lawns until our fingers burned. At home I used to drink more than six glasses of water a day, eating water, bathing in big tubs full of water.

We then passed the Zion Christian Church on the right; the bright yellow and green painted building, the horrid ugliness of it all. My next door neighbours sought God there. They wore badges and hats, and how dedicated they always looked, like God’s soldiers.

There! four bottles by the church’s brick fence; one of my friends grasped them before I could.

The road got ragged as we went, cars that passed by drove very diligently. Bigger houses with tiled roofs and ceilings started to appear down the road. Beautiful, clean yards, even without water somehow their lawns were green.

Someone tapped me on the back. “What?”

He pointed at one of us who seemed to be having some sort of stomach-ache. “He wants to go home,”

“Then let him go,” I said, continuing my walk. But then I stopped and looked back. He was bent over, his hands on his knees. “Is he going to vomit? We are too far to go back home, we should go on.” I felt bad, but I wanted my Fanta and chips.

“He just needs to drink water!”

“Where will we get water!”

He now lied down on the pavement by the side of the road. I went closer. He looked really sick like the time my sister refused to eat even though hunger showed all over her face shrivelled like paper.

The sun was suddenly burning my bald head and I felt like jumping into a dam. I nudged the sick one with my feet. “Come on man. We can’t stay here. Let’s go.” I heard snuffles. “Should we carry you?” He still wouldn’t answer. I walked over to his head, and another friend grabbed his legs and we rested him under an avocado shade.

One of us went to the first gate but paused when he caught the dog sign. “Thobela! hello!” he yelled instead as he shook the handle. A short girl dressed in a yellow top and long jeans came out. She asked when she saw our friend: “What’s wrong with him?”

“He needs water, please,” I said. She didn’t ask further, she went back into her house and soon she returned with a jag of water, which our sick friend gulped. She then retrieved it and went back inside, locking the gate.

“You should go on,” our friend said after burping.

“No, we are not leaving you,”

“I will be fine. I am getting better, see...” he got up like a pastor just performed a miraculous prayer on him. My eyes and brain must have exaggerated the whole thing. I thought he was going to die on us.

The street got noisy as more cars passed playing music, and groups of boys bigger than us started asking what was in our plastic bags. We ignored and agreed to continue, and the other one walked home in the opposite direction.

We were three now. The bottles clicked and clacked between our feet as we passed the pharmacy and the pub next to it. The pub was the most famous spot in the township. Celebrities performed there, and tens travelled from far to groove.

Then the rondavels after the three-way; they were the first hotel rooms in the township. Just like the pub, thousands of rands were made every month. The owner was a Shebeen Queen in Johannesburg. She died apparently by her own son who wanted more money from funeral policies.

We passed Love Life Community Centre and the Mamphela Ramphele building next to it. Dr Mamphela was the most famous person who ever lived in Lenyenyé, against her will. She was exiled in Lenyenyé during Apartheid. Perhaps not a great story to tell.

We took left at another three-way. Nothing of relevance located around there. We then passed a tavern; there was loud chatter as men gambled and women sang. Once, two teenage boys, both dressed in white, were found dead at the back of the tavern. My mother, ever so fearful, said to me: "You see how dangerous beer is?"

We passed Lenyenyé Stadium alongside the tennis and netball court. It was there that my only uncle was hailed for his soccer skills. Street blocks used to compete against each other, and always, always, my uncle's team won. The games brought joy and anguish, we celebrated and wept, chaos roared, matches were fixed, bribery and fights, ears got lost, lips got bitten, legs got broken. And he was unlucky, my dear uncle, since he wasn't chosen to go national. A pity, really, such talent going to waste.

When we saw a white tent in the middle of the road we decided to cut through to Apollo Street; we had to respect the wed or the dead.

Then the big Marula tree, next to it a car wash. We found an old woman seated alone under the tree. We noticed the round silver dish beside her. To our astonishment, when we looked in, we saw a colony of insects huddled together, their shiny and reddish bodies swirling. The woman wasn't entertaining us nor did she look at our amazed faces.

She grasped a long blade of grass and injected it into a hole in the mound in front of her. She waited before taking the grass out of the hole, and I saw a trail of the termites clasped to the blade. We watched when she placed her fingers at the top of the blade, and with her other hand – she swiftly slid the termites into the dish. I thought they'd bitten her but her hands appeared fine, only wrinkled and muddy.

"What are you going to do with them?" I asked her, and that's when she looked at us. She replied, "Fry. I'm going to eat them."

We left her with her termites and went right – away from the taxi rank until we saw our destination.

We arrived at the shebeen, but I was too hungry to stand straight. There were tables scattered around the yard. Crinkly men were seated together, younger men played cards on the long rectangle table.

"Thirty," announced the shebeen owner in his deep voice, not counting our bottles one by one like other times. He just looked at them once and told us the money he was to pay us in exchange. It felt like a day light robbery.

"Ah, I thought we will get maybe fifty rand," a friend said. The sweat on my back itched. The other friend was burnt out and was seated on one of the benches, uninterested in the negotiations.

"Thirty-five, final offer. If you don't want it—"

“No, thirty-five is good,” I said. My friend stung me on the back so hard my eyes watered. I looked at him and his eyes turned darker and meaner. But I had already accepted the offer, there was nothing he could have done.

With the money we bought *vetkoeks*, a litre of *Schweppes*, *atchaar*, chips and we ate at the tables. I knew what they both thought at that moment. The reward wasn't satisfying since that was our biggest bottle collection yet, but what was done was done.

I spotted my uncle rummaging his pockets at the counter. He staggered as if to fall but didn't. He was now counting money in his palm when I licked my fingers and stood up without saying anything to my friends. I didn't trust the shebeen man after what he pulled, might have taken advantage of Uncle's drunkenness, and charged him more.

“You,” Uncle mumbled when I stood beside him, and gazed hazily at me. “What, what are you doing here? Does your mother know you, you drink?”

“I am not here for beer.” I glanced at the shebeen man, who shifted to attend another customer. Uncle opened the beer bottle with his teeth and took a sip. “You are very drunk,” I told him.

“It's the weekend.”

I held his arm, but he pushed me away; eyes swam onto us. “Uncle...”

“Go, go, go away.” He sat on a bench beside two old men who might as well slumped to the floor and slept it off. “Take, take,” he mumbled, and gave me some coins. I didn't go to him for money like I usually did but I took the coins anyway. “Go to my car and get... my cigarettes,” he added, handing me his car keys. “Go, go.”

Defeated, I walked away to look for his truck but not before dropping the coins on my friends' table. “Take it,” I said.

The angry one looked at the coins. “That is not even ten,”

The other defended me, “It is more than five rand.”

But he was too proud. He bit into his *vetkoek* and dipped it into the atchaar container – the oil shimmered on his round cheeks.

I found my uncle's Isuzu parked near the wire fence. Beer bottle caps and cigarette buds were scattered all over the parking. I opened the door. The car reeked of weed. I looked around and found a cigarette pack in the front cabinet beside the packet of condoms and his ID book.

I opened it, and I analysed the small photograph. His head was shaven, and he looked younger and slimmer; it seemed to be around his football days.

On the next page I found a fifty rand and a yellow *Chappies* gum wrapper. I slid the money into my pocket and blew off the wrapper with my breath.

I found pocketknives at the bottom of the drawer, and I grabbed one, opened and closed, opened, and closed, opened, and closed until I got tired. I put it back, glanced up the windshield, and saw my friends still seated where I left them.

“Eish!” my head bumped against the roof as I tried to leave. It was like someone took a broomstick and knocked my forehead with it, reminded me of my class teacher who hit me on my head with a duster the day before. I put the cigarettes in my pockets and shut the door.

The sudden wind outside wafted my shirt as I walked between Uncle's car and the Mitsubishi parked next to it. A blue plastic ruffled at the back of Uncle's vehicle, and I noticed the bloody stain on it.

I got a closer look, climbing onto the wheel. From where I stood it looked like a big chunk of beef from the butchery wrapped sloppily.

“We are leaving!” my friends called out for me, and I climbed down. They walked towards the exit where I was. The angry one strolled past, holding what looked like our food leftovers. I was not in the spirits of going back home with an angry person, so I said to the other one, “I am staying. I will leave with Uncle.”

“Ah, okay. I will see you tomorrow then.”

With the money I found in the car I bought chocolates for my sister and placed them in my back pockets.

Late at night when we arrived at my uncle’s place. I went straight to the toilet while he and his friend – a school bus driver who joined us at the shebeen – continued drinking in the living room. I was amazed that Uncle hadn’t passed out yet.

The toilet floor was sticky with pee, and I left the door open and quickly washed up when I was done. I was worried my mother was looking for me, I needed to return home.

When I approached the house to tell uncle about my departure, I saw him and the friend outside, but they were not alone. There were bright lights blinking from a car, and another man was standing next to it.

I walked into the house and so did Uncle and his friend, but they were occupied as they carried something heavy with them. When the friend saw me in the kitchen watching them, he pointed with his eyes to the direction of Uncle’s bedroom.

As I entered the room though, I realised the thing they were dragging across the floor now was the meat I saw earlier at the back of Uncle’s truck. I almost screamed when I saw very pale, hairy arms where Uncle was holding.

“Hurry up, hurry up!” said the man outside. My legs started shaking and I didn’t move. Once they laid the body in the middle of the room, Uncle’s friend’s eyes flared up and he quickly marched – pushed me into the bedroom and shut the door on me.

I turned cold and my body couldn’t stop quivering. I went and checked if the windows were closed. Through the curtain, I peeked at the man outside pacing around the veranda. I squinted my eyes, but it was dark outside, it was only his massive stomach I saw, and the lights from his car then stopped flashing.

I sat at the edge of the bed and looked around. I'd never been in my uncle's bedroom before, and I was startled by its neatness. It was the opposite of his car which had papers all over and smelled like a shebeen. The room looked to belong to someone else, someone I was never going to know.

The walls were full of pictures of his friends, football stars, half-naked female celebrities, and to my surprise – a photograph of him and my mother when they were kids. They were wearing khaki school uniform with dirty white socks, standing in front of a red car. Uncle's head was bald like mine, and my mother's short hair looked even dirtier; she had a long smile on her face, and uncle looked tickled – his lips parted in a manner of laughing. I thought of my sister and imagined the woman and man we were going to be years to come. Was I going to turn out like uncle? Someone that kept dead bodies in his trunk?

I realised that my hands had been on my lap for a while now, unmoving. I started hearing sounds from the living room, a drilling sort of noise. It kept going and going and going and going for what felt like hours. It lasted till my feet went numb.

They were finally done. I heard Uncle mumbling something and his friend laughing. Their voices trailed outside, and I went back to the window. I watched them load every piece like groceries at the back of the big man's car.

When they entered and exited the house again, I tiptoed to the back door and ran. I continued running, and climbed onto a brick fence, landed my feet on a mewling cat in somebody's yard – dropping the chocolates.

I kept running and hopping more walls and gates and into the street.

I ran until I saw my mother's house.

The Return

Kevin's mother travelled to Tzaneen to witness the mayhem herself. She said to his father on the phone that she felt as if she was in exile hearing terrible news about her country. She was not in another country, but another town in Mpumalanga.

She arrived as quietly as the day she left, at midnight, while he was asleep. In the morning, he finds her sleeping in the spare bedroom still in her brown leather boots, white-dotted dress, and denim jacket. He watches her for a while, listening to her soft snore, and he brushes her auburn hair.

She blinks, feeling his presence, and he stops. "Kev,"

"Ma."

She takes his hand, placing it on her cheek. "Oh, you are cold,"

"Ja." He giggles.

She pulls him in for a hug; she smells of deep sleep. He closes his eyes, wishing she was here all the time. His father calls but he figures where they are. He opens the door, pauses, seeing he interrupted a moment. However, he seems to be in a hurry. "Môre," he mumbles.

"Môre," his mother responds.

"I'm going over there," he indicates with his thumb to the east, as if 'there' is the kitchen. "Sunette just called me."

"Viljoen's wife? What about?"

His father glances at him and doesn't reply. He then signals with his head for her to step outside, the information need not be shared around him. His mother reads the message,

hesitant, dreading what she's about to hear. Kevin lies down where she was sleeping, imagining the worst possible scenario.

Just beside the old *spieëlkas*, he sees her white fluffy slippers. They've always been there, and when the housekeeper, Modajo, cleans the room, she doesn't move them. If she did, then it would mean his mother was no longer a part of the family.

During his visits to her house in Mpumalanga, he'd steal items which he hides in his bedroom. The blue raincoat he kept last winter is now in his closet, and the pink coloured lip balm he found in her bathroom is now in one of his drawers along with the eyebrow pencil and her old magazines. He can't tell anyone, or they might take what is left of her.

He tries to listen to his parents' conversation outside, and the image appears to him now, the night he and his father returned home and found his mother gone. She'd packed half of what belonged to her into suitcases. She left, and he still blames himself for it.

She now walks back into the room to grab her handbag, mumbling: "Stay here with Modajo, okay?" He nods and doesn't ask. He can tell from the look on her face that it is bad.

Kevin goes to the kitchen and Modajo offers to make him a sandwich. "Nee, I can do it." She feigns a smile and opens the tap to fill a bucket. The drumming of the water into the bucket and her humming sounds doesn't distract him from the task. She observes him as he butters the bread, and he can feel her eyes waiting for him to fail.

Because she used to cut his bread rectangularly into four portions when he was younger, he now cuts the bread just once in the middle. Another way of letting her know he's almost in his teens, no need for four when two can fill him up just the same. Besides, somebody in the house needs to show her she doesn't have to do everything. She cooks, she mops, does the laundry, she irons, does the dishes, trims the lawn, and takes out the trash. His father insists, especially since his mother left.

She asks him, closing the tap, "Why didn't you go?"

“Where?”

“You didn’t hear? Nico’s father is missing. I heard your parents talking-”

“Missing? Like kidnapped?”

She seems to think over the word he used, but she nods. She then says in a gossipy tone: “I think it’s because of what happened to the security guard.”

Of course, the two are linked, he thinks. But how could a grown man go missing? He doesn’t believe her. She must have misheard.

Since the security guard’s murder at the Viljoens’ house, Kevin started feeling uneasy around Modajo. What if she collapses from all the work that she does, and everyone blames his family for it. They take his father to jail, leaving him all alone in the house. What if she steals from them and his father shouts at her like he did two or three weeks ago, and the police arrest him, take him to jail, leaving him all alone. Next thing his family is in the news and everyone would see him as that word, *racist*. He hears it a lot now, and wonders if it applies to him, too. If the Viljoens are called racist all over the media for the murder of their employee, what about his?

“Or maybe he just ran away,” he says to Modajo. She shrugs, no longer invested in the matter; she pulls the bucket out of the sink.

When he’s done eating, Kevin grabs his bike in the garage and rides to his friend, Nico’s house. There is little sunlight on the streets because of the trees that overshadow the narrow roads; the shades send a cold through his arms and cheeks. Dogs bark at him, and he paddles faster.

There, his eyes meet Nico’s who is seated at the front door blocking entry. He hasn’t seen Nico since his father shot and killed a man. The news had sent shockwaves all over Tzaneen. It was rumoured that the guard was shot several times in the chest right in Viljoen’s living room, over what, no one knows.

“Hey buddy,” he says. The guilt he feels for avoiding Nico slows his walk, treading like he would bite. “Is it true?” he asks. Nico’s arms are folded on his lap. He gazes idly at him, and then looks away. “We missed you at school. I missed you, so much,” Kevin offers, sitting beside his friend, and leaving no space between them.

Inside the house, his father raises his voice: “This is an attack on all farmers, a foray if you will! While we are here talking, those bastards are out to kill us!”

They’ve called everyone they know in town and nearby areas and told them that Viljoen is missing and proclaimed dead. A family friend, an old man, speaks, “Let’s not jump the gun until we find him!”

And what follows are mumbles and disagreements too disorderly to hear. Nico finally admits to him: “I missed you too.”

Kevin notices his friend’s dry lips then. “Have you eaten breakfast?”

Nico shakes his head and seems irritated by the question. They sit quietly, and Kevin goes back to when things were good. When they played video games and rode their bicycles all over the farm. He wants them to be good. He knows he can do anything for him. He wants to shield Nico from a world where people killed each other.

Just as he’s to say something to him, he jolts to his feet sensing a tickle on his back; he finds his classmate, Sherry, laughing hysterically, her mouth wide open. “You should see your face!”

“Not funny. Not funny!”

What is she doing here, anyway? he asks himself. But Nico doesn’t seem surprised by her presence, even though he doesn’t like Sherry very much. In fact, he once shared in secret, something he was not meant to: “Sherry has a black father. I heard Ma say that her black father ran away, and luckily for her she looks white, with flaxen hair. Did you know she isn’t white?”

“They are coming out. Move,” Sherry says to them now. “We are going to look for your father,” she adds, looking down at Nico.

“Where?” Kevin asks her. Nico shakes his head.

Everywhere, she says. One of the farm workers said she saw a white pickup speeding out the farm early this morning. When he asks where they are going to look, she raises her shoulders. She doesn’t know what she’s saying, Kevin concludes.

“I am not going,” Nico mumbles flatly.

“Is jou Pa,” Kevin reminds him.

Nico mutters under his slothful breath: “He shot my friend.”

Kevin’s confused. If his own father went missing, he’d search for him. “Nico, he was not your friend,” he informs him, frustrated by his delusion. He then steps aside when the adults start coming out of the house. When his mother notices him, her face shrinks.

“Ma,” he murmurs only to himself. He realises that Nico’s house signifies her betrayal. It has been three years, and yet it still haunts them both.

He has tried to forget but every time he sees her, it tags along like a clingy ghost. He can still smell the meat, the smoke, the humid air. He can recall the distant music, the laughter, the chatter. He sees Nico’s kitchen, the corridor, and the bathroom door, where he had stood quietly. He sees the glossy blackness of her shoe –It was the first thing he noticed through the narrow slit – dangling by the bathroom sink. She’d sounded as if she was sobbing, and it seemed from his standing that someone had pinned her against the wall.

Panicked, he’d opened the door wider, found Nico’s father kissing her on the mouth, his hand between her legs, thrusting. The door creak had startled the two in the room, they’d looked at each other, staggered by the interruption into something intimate and yet so horrifying for him.

Kevin still doesn't understand. How could it have been his mother with his friend's father, fondling each other like lovers? Even though he never mentioned the incident to anyone, his mother couldn't bear the shame. And he wished everyday he hadn't wanted to pee at that time, hadn't drunk anything that day, instead shook his head when Nico's mother asked in her squeaky voice: "Do you want some Kool-Aid, Kevin?"

Does she love him? he asks himself now when his mother leads the search instead of Nico's mother who is said to be too weak and heavy at heart to join them. He shakes the foolish thought away.

She loves him? Was that why she'd left? He recalls how his father drank himself to sleep every night following her disappearance. Like a film of unending gloom, a month after she left, they received a piece of paper. His mother wanted a divorce, and him.

She lost the case, the court sided with his father. Heartbroken man, heartless woman – the judge believed that with all her heart. His father believed it. He believed it. But time has allowed them to look past misgivings.

It has been twenty days since his friend's father went missing. Nico hasn't returned to school, and Kevin has accepted he might never return at all. Everything is the same in class except for Nico's vacant seat.

There are new speculations as to what could have happened. The media blames the court, for having granted Nico's father bail after committing a murder. One man claims that he saw him at the airport in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Others claim he left by shipment, someone smuggled him across sea and that he's in Australia living with extended family.

Nico's mother remains mum, ever since the murder occurred and then her husband's disappearance, she refuses to speak. Even when people suggested that she was having an affair with the dead security guard, she said nothing.

Kevin is in the car with his parents on their way home from his school when his father says: “He was trying to rob them. Why would a good man like Viljoen just shoot him? He shot at animals. The boy must have behaved like one!”

Kevin is seated at the back, his parents in the front. He tries to live in the moment. His family is as it was before his mother left. If he says something, they might realise how close they’ve become. One of them could have gone to pick him up from school but they both did, with teeth, as they waited for him at the gate.

They continue to talk about the Viljoens, and he drifts away, bored by the subject. It’s as if they know it too, that once they stop talking about them, they will have to look at themselves, at what they are doing and what it means.

“Let’s pass by the *Spar*. I want to get some buns. You want anything, Kev?” asks his mother. She tries again when he doesn’t respond. “We are stopping by the mall, you want anything?”

“No, dankie.”

The topic soon shifts to his older cousin who was admitted at Van Velden Hospital two weeks ago. Kevin wasn’t aware that he was back in the country.

He doesn’t know much, only what he’s heard, that he’d left South Africa years ago because of his father’s sister, who didn’t like that he was gay.

“He looked terrible, like a mummified reptile,” says his father, who visited his cousin yesterday.

“Don’t start, he’s your nephew,” his mother mumbles.

“Oh, it’s now that he’s sick that he remembers we’re family.”

They are at the traffic lights, and his father continues. That while his cousin was travelling the world, they buried his father, his great grandmother and that he missed his

sister's big wedding. "No calls, no letters, zilch! Now he wants us at his bed side, now he loves his mother!"

"Stop it, not in front of Kev," his mother says.

His father looks at him in the mirror, and then chuckles mockingly. "You know, the funny thing, *he* reminds me of my nephew when he was his age," he says in a lower voice like it's a dirty thing to say.

"What do you mean?" his mother asks, and his father doesn't respond, only takes the curve, and closes his window. She sneaks a glance at him in the back. He pretends not to hear or see.

When they arrive at Tzaneen Shopping Centre, they remove their seat belts simultaneously. Outside, his mother holds his hand like she used to when he was younger. He lets her because to her time is constant. To her, it is three years ago and he's nine years old. Who says what happened between then and now wasn't just a dream? Perhaps the film is over, and everyone has returned to normality.

The mall is full. There are endless queues, toddlers cry for things their parents can't afford. Kevin and his mother are still holding hands when his father excuses himself to go to the loo. He doesn't want to let go but neither does he want to wet his pants. "Pa, wait for me!" he decides and follows him, leaving his mother to pay for the groceries.

They separate at the toilets, where he almost doesn't make it – pulling out. Relief calms every inch of his body as he releases the pee. Someone in the next stall starts singing. He doesn't know the song well, but he's heard it several times during the protests for the security guard's murder. The person keeps singing until he hears the toilet flush. The man's voice doesn't invoke the same sorrow as it did in the crowd. His sounds chirpy, whistling to himself.

When Kevin is done, he finds his father wiping his hands with a tissue. The singing man comes out, still whistling as he cleans his hands. He grins at him in the mirror when he notices his stare. Kevin walks over to another tap to clean up. He wants to ask the meaning behind the song, but he can't.

Outside, they find his mother waiting at the end of the passage with a filled trolley. She is still Ma, he reminds himself.

Back in the car, his parents resume talking about the Viljoens. Kevin munches the last bits of liquorish. "She is adamant, I have tried to change her mind.," says his father driving.

"Argh, I feel so sorry for her. I don't blame her."

His father disagrees. He's beginning to doubt Nico's mother and if she ever loved her husband. "Why would she leave when her husband is missing?"

His mother argues that perhaps Viljoen isn't missing, that he simply left.

"I guess you would know a thing or two about that," his father says snidely.

Nico interrupts then, "Nico is leaving?"

His mother turns her head. "Erm, we don't know that. They are still thinking. It's not final, okay?"

His father informs them that someone wants the farm, claiming that Nico's great grandfather stole it from their family a long time ago. His mother doesn't say anything, she seems to have taken offence to what he said about her past.

At home, they grab the grocery bags and into the house. In the evening, they eat chicken pizza, then Kevin and his mother watch a movie together.

Later, Kevin wakes up at midnight to get himself a glass of water. He passes his father's bedroom and hears his mother whimper and giggle. He opens the spare bedroom to confirm; the sheets are neat, untouched.

It's been ninety-nine days since Kevin's mother returned home and Nico's father went missing. Mrs. Viljoen and Nico come for lunch at the house. Kevin's parents have invited their friends, and that includes Mrs. Viljoen, however, this is her farewell.

She arrives wearing a white frock, like a dove about to fly away. In her hands is a container, inside are vanilla muffins. She has always been a smiling woman, but one would think she is eager to leave.

Kevin observes his friend who follows his mother's footsteps as if he's never come to his house before and seems somewhat shy. Like his mother, Nico is wearing white – a white shirt, and short jeans. Kevin notices his hairy legs brushing each other as he walks.

Mrs. Viljoen hands Kevin the muffins and regards his face. She utters, "He will visit, and maybe you can come to the Free State yourself? I am sure your parents won't mind." She smiles even wider, touching his arm, she then proceeds to his mother.

"Hey buddy," says Nico. Since the search for his father, Nico's been distant. But Kevin didn't mind because he was living in his own bliss due to his parents' reunion. His friend's troubles regarding his own parents would have dulled his heaven.

"Where is the Free State?" Kevin asks, placing his hands in his pockets. He doesn't tell his friend that he spent half of last night staring at the South African map – measuring with a ruler.

"I've never been. But Ma's family is there," Nico replies.

"Do you like the house?"

"Only seen it in pictures,"

"And?"

Nico shrugs, and Kevin can't tell if he's acting, or if he really doesn't care about the architecture or the setting. "It is smaller," his friend finally offers, and then adds, "It will be just the two of us, and my grandmother."

For the first time since his father's disappearance, Nico seems sad by the idea of his father being absent. The reality of it perhaps hits him now. Kevin changes the subject when his small cousin and their classmate Sherry join them: "Do you want to see Goose?"

"Goose?" asks Sherry.

"Come and see him!" Kevin runs into his house, and they all follow.

There, at the corner, near his father's music studio – he wriggles in the cage with excitement when they see him. "Where did you get him?" Nico asks, walking closer. His whole face has brightened by the sight of the monkey.

"Ma surprised me," responds Kevin. Nico extends his right hand for a handshake, but Goose slaps it and laughs at him, and every one of them follow suit. "He is kind of rude," Kevin says. "Yesterday, he slapped Ma on the bum."

Sherry can't contain her laughter, and tears come out of his eyes. "He slapped her where!" she continues cackling.

Kevin's small cousin folds her arms, and asks him, "Why did you name him Goose?"

"It's the first word I thought of,"

"A monkey named Goose?"

Nico interjects, "I like it. Goose!"

Goose now licks the metal bars, he looks at Nico and stretches his hand, wanting to slap it again. Nico extends his arm, and they hold hands. They remain like that for a while, every one of them watch.

"He likes you," says Sherry, who now turns around when Kevin's mother calls.

"Everyone, outside! Leave him for a bit and let's eat."

They sit around the long table set on the front lawn. Kevin beside Nico, across from them is Sherry's mother and Nico's mother.

Kevin looks at his mother as he eats. She's cheerful in her yellow dress and sun hat, a trained hostess. Tzaneen has always been home and it seems she is here to stay.

However, his best friend is leaving, and nothing could ever be as it was, before the bathroom incident, his mother's disappearance, the murder, Nico's father's disappearance, before everything changed.

He looks at Nico, who takes his hand under the table and tightens his grip. He feels a tear coming, and he lifts his head, only to find his father's eyes on them – a chilling look on his face.

Kevin let go of Nico's hand, and then wipes the tear with a finger.

The Housekeeper

I am in the old garden, near my father's pigsty, where we used to play together before you left without telling me you were leaving. My mother calls me, and I wipe my bottoms five times with the ground – rocking like I am on a swing – I lift my underwear and push down my skirt.

She doesn't like it when I wipe with the floor or when I take a dump in the garden even though I am afraid of falling into our pit toilet and even though she hasn't been in here for a long time. It's like she is avoiding something, failure maybe, for not having maintained a tomato garden like our neighbours, the plants are all dry, and dead too.

I cover the poo with some soil and run, opening the small gate separating the pigsty from our house. My mother has a brown leather bag over her left shoulder, dressed in her purple pleated skirt and the yellow ANC party shirt, her church badge shines as I walk towards her.

“Let's go,” she says.

“Go where?” I forgot to wash my hands; I frown when I smell them.

“Your father has left for Giyani with your sister, and I don't know where your brother is.” I wait for her to explain. “I was called to work. I must go with you,”

“Work? On Saturday?”

“Yes.” I expected a reason why she's going to work when she should be home resting. “Go inside and change.”

You see what you've done? If you were here, I wouldn't have to go with her. I would come to your house and we would play, eat together, climb the Mulberry, stalk your

neighbours, and laugh at those who walked past your house. Do you remember how we taunted our classmates and hid in the leaves? That was funny, especially when they looked up at the sky as if it had been God who laughed at them. But it was us! It was us!

When I enter the bedroom to change, my mother shouts from outside: “Pack tomorrow’s clothes and your *vaslap* too!”

She locks the house and we hit the road to the taxi rank. My flip flops carry the soil underneath with me, we move aside when a car speeds past us – kicking gravels at us.

My stomach flutters when we pass your house. Dust has now covered your pavement, all of it. It looks as if a truck full of dust took a dump. The mulberry is dry without our laughter, the leaves curl from the quiet breeze, but it still looks so lonely.

“Are there kids there?” I ask.

“You are not going to play; we are going to work. You can play when we come back,”

“Play with who?”

She looks at me, pity in her eyes. “I know you miss Solly, but I hear he is living with his relatives now, and happy.”

The word happy saddens me. I wish your brother was still alive. If he were, you’d still be here with me. You’d have never had to leave. I dream about the two of you sometimes, you know? I see you seated together on your *stoep* eating breakfast. I see the two of you dancing and talking and singing, like the time he bought you a cake from town for your birthday, and he spun you around the veranda, your feet in the air, laughing. You had only invited me to your birthday. Only me, and yet you still left me.

Two nights ago, I saw your brother alone in the yard, he was looking for you. He was so sad when he found an empty house. My sister kicked my leg under the blanket, and I woke up before I could even talk to him. This is why you should come back home now. Your brother is waiting.

My mother talks about happy. But how could you be happy when your brother is dead and you're not home with your best friend? Is she hearing herself? Whoever told her where you are must have lied. I ask her, "Why couldn't he just live with us, in our house?"

She gasps, surprised that I even thought of it. "We can't do that. You and your siblings are already causing me and your father headache as it is."

"He doesn't have parents. Now he doesn't have siblings either. In our house he would have both!"

"Pretty..." she says and looks at me like I am a silly child, like how I look at babies learning to crawl; they are funny, and they look silly. It is silly. Our friendship was silly too since it didn't mean that much to you to even say goodbye.

At the taxi rank, a man hounds my mother with mielies, nudging her to buy some, and she tells him she doesn't have any money, which is true. I searched her purse yesterday when I wanted to buy *zimbas*, the rounded and colourful ones we used to wear around our fingers like rings.

Speaking of yesterday, I saw your brother's girlfriend, Cola, after a long while since your brother's burial. I'd heard from the older girls next door say she was heavily pregnant, but yesterday she was not pregnant, and there seems to be no baby. Wouldn't we have heard the good news already? Wouldn't we have heard the baby cry? The girls must have lied since they've always seemed jealous of her.

Our taxi arrives in Tzaneen town. My mother points east when we take right on the four-way intersection, "Lenyenye is that way," she says. My neck almost snaps when the driver makes a sharp turn. She adds, "Cola told me that's where Solly is now."

Cola, the witch. Even though I am sad that you are gone and that you think our friendship was silly – I am happy you are not with Cola. I am happy Cola and your brother never married. At least our prayers worked in that regard. However, at times, I feel we should

have prayed for your brother instead. It appears while we prayed for him and Cola to break up and fall out of love with each other, the devil was working on killing him. My mother said it too when we found out about his death, that it was the devil that shot your brother.

My mother blames the devil for everything these days. My sister's unending bedwetting, my brother's stutter, my father coming home in the morning, and my bad grades.

She shouts at the driver, "Short left!" and the taxi stops in front of a rugby field. Several white boys are playing ball, their voices echo in the air, calling each other's names.

When the minibus leaves, I see the big caramel house with a tall golden gate in front of us. We look both sides of the tarred road before my mother holds my hand, and we cross.

We stand outside for a while, two white girls riding bicycles pass by with such ease and freeness, and I stare – my eyes watch the wheels spin and their small legs paddle. I wish I had a bicycle, but the gravel road back at our village doesn't allow such ease, and my parents don't have money for such freeness.

The gate now opens like a self-controlled machine. A boy, also white, and medium height stands at the front door. We enter and walk towards him. There are several plants and flowers growing beside the walkway. The boy then presses the remote in his right hand and the gate closes. My mother greets him, and he looks at me.

"This is my daughter, Pretty," she mumbles, unsmiling. I would have smiled if I was introducing me to someone. I would have smiled if I was introducing you, too.

He nods at me, and I return it. "When did my parents send for you?" he asks in Afrikaans. His voice is too deep for a boy his age. He must be twelve or thirteen, one or two years older than us, and yet he sounds twenty.

"This morning before they left to their outing," my mother replies.

"They didn't have to. I can look after myself."

He thinks he's twenty. His parents were right to call. He sounds like a bigger version of you – stubborn. And is he going to let us in? The house is huge, I want to see its largeness on the inside.

I look around the yard – it's as big as ours and they have several gardens like we do at home but no pigsties and cow kraals. They have water, lots of it, that they leave it sprinkle all over their grass even when the grass itself is as green as their plants. I notice the four water-filled Coca Cola bottles on the lawn. They look odd, but they seem to have been put there on purpose. I want to ask the reason behind this strange presentation, but my mother opens the door like she lives here. It's weird to see this from her at somebody else's house. I've never imagined where she worked, and now that I know, it makes me awkward, like I'm stepping into another life she never talks about at home.

The living-room light is on even though it is around eleven o'clock, and there is an open box of biscuits on the table in a sand of creamy crumbs. The television is different from the one at home; the screen is so clean and without glitches, the sound clear without interruptions. How is it so sharp and colourful? You should see it!

My mother turns the light off and says, "Come with me." I follow her into another room, I can't tell what it is for. There is an ironing board with wooden legs. I notice clothes in two square shaped baskets on the floor. "Iron these while I clean the house. You should let me know when you are done, wa' nitwa?"

I nod and study the room. The floor is carpeted and there are several boxes by the window – inside are cleaning supplies and toilet papers and books. The window curtain is see-through, I can view the back of the house, and the lawn continues from the front. I see a circle-shaped ring with three silver legs and a net – covering the ring. I think I have seen it on a television program, but I can't remember which.

My mother walks towards a brown door and pulls the silvery handles. I think it's a wardrobe but not the same as the one at home, as this one is tall, touching the roof. She comes out with an iron and plugs it in the wall beside the ironing board. She then nods like the boy did when she introduced me and walks out.

I look around the room again, I feel like I'm in the middle of nowhere and I won't be able to find my way out.

Remember how, at your brother's funeral, you couldn't let go of my hand? Now that you have, I feel like I've lost something. You looked sad that day. You looked really lost. And I understand now, you know? Yes, you're not in heaven but it feels as if the day your brother passed, you did too. I may never see you again.

Do you remember that afternoon in class, when our teachers left early because it was their pay day, and we stayed behind along with some of our classmates? We played *Mantlwani*, and you picked me as your wife. I felt special and pretty. I was the chosen one amongst the girls. Do you also recall how loud Cola cried at your brother's funeral? Yes, I feel like a grieving widow.

The big shirts I unwrinkled are khaki in colour. I have seen this kind before on other white people I saw once at the mall. The boy's shirts are white and have an Afrikaans name on them written in blue ink. If I try to pronounce it, you might laugh at me like the time we laughed at that girl who couldn't pronounce the word 'colleague'.

It seems the boy goes to one of those expensive schools. I can tell from the richness of the coloured shirt and texture, as well as his beautiful maroon blazer. At the bottom of one basket are sport gears, with the same Afrikaans name. Soccer, or rugby?

When I am done ironing, I feel as though I know this family now, and I know my mother from knowing them. Instead of going to look for her, I search my way back to the living-room, passing by a closed door and two other open doors facing each other; one is

brown like wet sand, and it has the same wardrobe as the room I was in, just so much larger that it fills half of the wall. The other room is a peach bathtub, a showerhead hangs over it. The space smells of a nice, scented soap and seems to have been used right before we arrived. I step back to open the closed door, and I am happy when I find it unlocked.

I go inside with no hesitation because my mother showed me not to be afraid since she works here. The wall over the blue bed is full of pictures of the boy and what looks like his friends. They are everywhere – fishing, playing cricket, playing rugby, swimming, in a bus, at a restaurant, at a party, at the zoo, everywhere. Most of them are white. I compare their eyes, their noses, their smiles, and hair. They all look so happy together.

Another picture catches my eyes, I almost missed it. I believe the boy and his friends are with their parents, it is a party or a picnic or just a gathering, I can't tell, but they are eating and holding glasses and smiling with each other. The boy is standing beside a man, I think his father since they look alike, especially their eyebrows and eyes. There is a Black man standing before them holding a tray full of food, meat mostly, stacked together to make a meaty lollipop. When it dawns on me what I am looking at, I bump onto the bed; the sheet cover had looked hard when I walked in, but it is soft underneath my bums when I sit on it.

I look at the picture again. I need more eyes as I don't trust mine now. Perhaps yours would make sense of what I am staring at. I try to clear my vision, shaking my head and cheeks. When I hear a door shut outside the room, I get up and walk out, closing the door tightly as I found it.

In the living room, the boy is playing a video game on the TV. I sit on the black leathered sofa without saying anything. There is a noise in the room other than the television, whirling and whirling all over the air. I look up and find the aircon, it's bigger than the one in our principal's office. Did you ever see it? I did, when our class teacher sent me to him for

having called her by her nickname. It was foolish on my part, forgetting where I was when I used it and whom I was using it around.

Anyway, the boy and I share the conditioned air without words passing between us. I watch as he shoots at the small flying airplanes on the screen with an invisible gun. He makes grunts out of joy and other times frustration. I watch his thick rugby, or soccer legs, as they stomp the floor when he wins. Do you think the devil who shot your brother intended to kill him? Do you think he felt joy as he lay down on the ground?

The boy shoots and shoots and shoots, firecrackers boom off the screen. I feel like I am playing the game too now. I want him to win again. The gun is in my hands. His hands are mine. I want us to win! But when we lose, he looks in my direction. He seems frightened, as if he's only noticing my presence.

“You want to play?” he asks me in English.

“I don't know how to,”

“I will show you.” He walks eagerly to my seat but before I could even touch the game controller, my mother comes in. “Pretty...” she says, gentler than she had intended. I wait for her to tell me what she needs but the look in her eyes shoots me off the sofa. The boy looks disappointed. “Sorry Kevin, she has work to do.”

In the evening, the boy grasps his dinner from the kitchen table and eats in the living room while watching a rugby match. Perhaps he plays rugby and not soccer. I wanted to follow him, however, my mother insists we eat in the dining room. We eat in the living room at home because there is no dining but here, we have room for everything.

She eats slowly with care as if afraid she would spill the food onto the table. I've noticed her plate is half what she eats at home. It may seem as though, here, she is not herself; she is someone I can't recognize. Here, she doesn't shout as loud as she does at home. Here, she speaks with her facial features. Here, she drinks only half a glass of juice.

Here, she tells me to bath before we eat, when at home it doesn't matter what order. Here, she speaks English and Afrikaans. Here, my mother forgets the time her favourite radio drama begins, but I can tell from her eyes that something is missing.

She retires early and allows me to stay behind and watch television. The man on the TV pretends to be someone else to fool the people he talks to. He is not that different from magicians, like the one who came to our school, but with him there are no miracles, he only makes us laugh or tries to.

"Leon Schuster," the boy says, "he is my favourite comedian. Have you watched his other shows?" I shake my head. "He is very, very funny."

I try to smile. Some of the jokes are funny but some are not, but I guess that makes him funny. "Where do your friends live?" I ask rather randomly, but I am curious.

"My friends? Around, why?"

"Did you know the man in the picture?"

"What picture?"

"I saw someone I know, someone I knew, in one of the pictures in your bedroom."

"You went to my bedroom? You can't do that. This is not your house, okay?" he says this like he is teaching me something, perhaps respect, in a calm and yet mean way. I understand it but I still resent the coldness in 'this is not your house'.

"I am sorry."

He shakes his head and looks at the television again. He didn't answer my question, or he refused to answer it, but I want to know if he knew your brother and how well he knew him, if he knows he's dead and the man who killed him.

Kevin now gets up and says, "There is a sequel, let me go and make popcorns. Want some?" I nod, but what I am really interested in is the picture.

The white man on the TV keeps making his jokes and the TV laughs at the jokes. I have never watched this program before, but I know you'd like it. I miss hearing your laughter. It always sounded as if it would never end. I guess that's why tears welled down my cheeks as I climbed down the Mulberry that first time, I found out that going down is much harder than going up. Do you still laugh? Do the people you are with really make you happy like my mother said?

After a while, the boy comes back into the living room and places a bowl full of popcorns on the small glass table. He then sits closer to me. I feel the heaviness of him on my skin. "Did you mean him?" he says, pointing at the picture I had asked him about.

"No," I mumble, he had pointed at the man I thought was his father. "He is your father, right?" he nods. "I meant him," I knock your brother's face twice with my pointy finger.

"Oh, I don't know. I think he works there,"

"Where?"

"The place we were at,"

"And where's that?"

He looks at me, stunned by my questions. "It's a farmhouse, so there are many people who work there. They had a braai; my friend's mother was celebrating her birthday."

"I see. He died, you know?"

"The guy?"

The way he said "the guy" annoys me, it's as your brother had no name. But I don't blame him, even in the picture your brother is out of place. The people around him don't really see him either. "That is sad," Kevin finally adds.

Maluka's face was all over the news, for weeks. People around Tzaneen protested because of his murder. It was at that very farmhouse that he was shot by his boss. How could

he not know? I want to tell him more about your brother, but he doesn't seem interested. He places the picture on the table and starts chewing.

We watch the funny man again. Kevin and I laugh when we are asked to until my cheeks tinge. When he starts to fall asleep, I tap him on the shoulder, and he turns off the television. I want to take the picture with me when we leave, but I decide not to. I leave your brother on the table, surrounded by strangers.

I find my mother in the bedroom across the bathroom. It is a single bed, and there is another spare bedroom with a double bed, so I wonder why she picked this one when there are two of us. I wake her and ask. She says in a drowsy voice: "This is not our house," reminding me of something the boy has already made so clear.

I am beginning to believe my mother makes herself small here, so small she thinks we can fit in a single bed when she can't even stretch her legs at home with my father on their Queen bed. I would rather sleep on the floor like my brother, he always looks happier while he sleeps alone and comfortable enough to stretch and roll and roll and roll like a soccer ball to the end of the world.

In the morning, I find Kevin outside in the ring-shaped thing, jumping. My mother said it's a trampoline. I asked if I could play too, and she said yes. Kevin holds my hands at first and he grins at me as we spin in circles. I notice his eyes are bluish and that his teeth are white and straight as a ruler, and if he smiles wider his cheeks will get fatter, but he contains the smile in his mouth as if I am not worthy to know him fully.

I want to, I wish to know him. I don't wish to replace you, but I must make new friends now. I must stop believing you will come back to me.

Kevin lets go of me just when I was getting comfortable in his strong grip. I fall, and he keeps jumping and jumping. I giggle, but not out loud as I would with you. I try to get up again, but I am dizzy.

A car hoots outside, and that's when he stops and crawls out. The gate opens and a red car enters the yard and into the garage. A man and a woman come out. The woman is smaller on the hips than I had sized her when I ironed her clothes, and the man paler than his son and wife. The woman's heels make a commanding sound on the floor, and we listen to it. She has a firm face that doesn't change even when she sees a stranger in her yard.

She stops at the front door. "Are you Modajo's daughter?" she asks me in English. I want to answer but can't find the words since she called my mother by her first name and it caught me off guard, like she is asking about someone else entirely. Also, I feel I shouldn't have slept in her house, ate her food, drank her water, bathed in her water, ironed her clothes, and washed her dishes when she isn't sure who I am or why I am here, but my mother saves me. "Yes, that's my daughter,"

"Oh! Very beautiful girl, hello!"

"Hello," I mumble, embarrassed. Her voice doesn't match her pretty face, it is low pitched and manly. The man only glances at me and then walks in the house.

My mother finishes cleaning the house. It was clean from yesterday, but she still cleaned. She decides it's time for us to leave and go back home. I had hoped Kevin would see us out since we all spent a day together, but he is playing and focused on his video game now. This one is of cars racing each other, he doesn't even hear or notice as we walk out the front door. Are all boys like you?

Do you all have a problem with goodbyes?

A Murder in Tzaneen

Day of the Murder

6 AM

When the day began, he hung his blue coat over the nail beside the door like he always did before leaving. He put the work shoes at the foot of the bed. They used to be a bit smaller for his feet but had gotten used to him and reshaped themselves for his comfort.

He then locked the door and greeted his neighbours – the old woman he called Granny, and her nephew – who were having an early breakfast on their black polished *stoep*, dipping bread into steamy teacups. They returned his greeting and continued with their intimate conversation.

They were good neighbours. They didn't bother him and in return he made sure he didn't cross boundaries. He only asked for some sugar, milk, or pegs to hang his clothes when he ran out.

He strode his way out of the farm to get home. On his path, he was hailed by other workers arriving for the day shift, mostly in groups, wearing heavy jackets and holding their lunches in large containers, their mouths emitting fog as they chitchatted, and then diverged to different directions.

In the haziness, he could see Nicolas, the farmer's son, at his usual spot at the bathroom window, brushing his teeth before school. He waved over and carried on.

He scoured the area. He spotted tens of cows trekking away from the road, behind them was a little Black boy holding a stick. There was the windmill, then the narrow gravel-road going down a hill towards another farm.

Outside the main gate, Maluka was caught by surprise when he saw the number plate on the white car parked by the road. He stopped and waited. Shortly, his uncle and aunt stepped out of the vehicle, lovingly laughing at something they had been discussing. They looked the part – a good-looking pair in matching clothes – ready to act on what they'd been preaching for the last three years.

They noticed him then. “*Mchana*, you're still here. I thought you'd be on your way home by now,” said his uncle, Baloyi, looking at the gold watch on his wrist.

“No, I saw the weather and waited for the mist to clear.”

“I hope you get a lift that side.”

He lingered, for an explanation as to why they decided to go to the farm without letting him know, but they didn't share one more word with him, instead they walked past and through the gate. He was bamboozled. But it was clear to him, that the day of reckoning had finally come.

A teal Corolla stopped for Maluka after several cars failed. He got in the front and glanced at the child at the back; a teenage girl who looked very much like her father next to him; their dark skin tones, flat noses, small lips, and eyes made them look like younger and older versions of each other.

“Where to?” the father asked.

“Ga-Modjadji,” he replied, admiring the small rag doll hanging by the mirror. The car was warm and genially scented, and from the comfort of his seat, it felt new.

“I have family in Ga-Modjadji. We are from Nkowankowa, heading to Giyani. But we will pass by that side,”

“You have family in Giyani too?”

“Yes. We are going to a wedding. One of my aunt’s daughters is getting married.”

Maluka nodded and looked at the girl again, who appeared bored and sleepy, dressed in a green silky dress, her hair braided up to the middle of her head.

It must be wonderful, he reckoned, he couldn’t imagine what it must have felt like to travel in your father’s car. He never experienced that with his own. His father was dirt poor to afford one. “Weddings are always fun,” he mumbled after a short while. He also wanted to share that he was planning to get married himself, but he rubbed the thought away with the palm of his hand over his hair.

He thought about his girlfriend, Cola, and how much he’d disappointed her. Promises after promises, and not fulfilling them no matter how much he tried. Now she was three months pregnant, no money, no marriage. It was a big deal for her, something about “doing it right by the ancestors”. He couldn’t mess with things like that. But a ceremony needed money, and he didn’t have a cent.

The man was chatty during their ride, he now pointed to his far right, sticking his arm out the window: “I used to live there with my grandparents. All twelve of us, in one house.” Maluka stretched his neck to see the field. “There was a house, right at the corner, there, it was home even before I was born.”

“Why did you leave?”

The man observed him for the first time and chuckled amusingly. Maluka noticed the big swelling at the right side of his forehead. It was as if someone took a ball of meat and stuck it onto his head. It looked painful and discomforting. Plump, and bloody. The man briefly touched it now, fondling with it so nonchalantly, something he seemed to enjoy doing.

“How old are you son?”

“Twenty-five,”

“Then you are not naïve, I hope. We didn’t leave. They made us leave.”

Maluka nodded. He understood perfectly. His uncle, Baloyi, had told him a similar story in the past few years. Perhaps more dramatic and enthusiastic than the stranger.

Three Years Ago

There had been talks in the media about land-restitution. Talks about natives getting their lands back from those who stole from them during Apartheid. Baloyi had showed up randomly one afternoon and waited for him to finish his day shift. And he was driving him home when he asked him, “What do you see?”

Maluka felt hot, there was sweat in his tight shoes, the sun hit the left side of his face through the glass window. “What do I see?” he asked.

“What do you see, when you look around.”

He glanced out, and then answered, “Trees. I see trees.”

“Trees?”

“Ee, lots of trees,”

His uncle shook his head. “No, you fool.”

Maluka swallowed, embarrassed for not having gotten the right answer. His uncle corrected him. “Land. You see land. Everywhere land. And who owns this land?”

Maluka thought about his response this time around. “Afrikaners,” he blurted out the word, unsure.

“No, no, no. This land is ours. These farms are ours. All of them,” Uncle announced.

Maluka shifted, curling his sweaty toes, not knowing whether to speak or let his uncle narrate folk tales to him. Things only said at taverns, at political rallies, parties with old friends, in bedrooms with your lover, and not a casual afternoon with a relative you rarely

spoke to. “Since you work for *them* now,” his uncle said, “I want you to lay low, do your job.”

Maluka was dumbfounded. What did he mean by lay low? But then Baloyi asked him to do something rather perplexing to his ears. His uncle wanted him to spy on Viljoen, his employer. Everything that went on at the farm too, he was to inform him. What his boss was like. His wife and child. How he treated his workers, especially the Black workers. What he wore. What he drank. And if he had mistresses, he also wanted to know about them. “I want to know *everything*. It is very important. And then-”

“And then what?”

Baloyi changed his mind. “Leave the rest to me.”

Maluka thought his uncle had gone insane and very much delusional. The man he worked for was not the usual type his uncle dealt with in the townships. The Afrikaners in Tzaneen had money, connections, and guns too.

“Uncle, you can’t just show up and say give me my land.”

“You take me for a fool?”

Maluka sighed. “No, never. Never. I am saying this is different people.”

Baloyi shook his head and drove faster. He never said another word.

Day of the Murder

7 AM

The Corolla driver left Maluka at a junction in Ga-Modjadji. Maluka then stopped by the spaza shop near his house where he loaned a loaf of bread, a litre of milk, a bag of onions and rice. He always paid on the last day of the month when he received his monthly salary, and that was why the Indian shop owner was never hesitant to offer him more than one item. And besides, he needed customers and earn trust again after the arrest a year ago. The villagers all

discovered they were buying stolen goods when the police shoved him at the back of their truck. Nonetheless, Maluka was no thief, he always paid his dues.

Once home, he threw a quick meal on the stove and ate by himself in the dimness of the small kitchen while the neighbours' chickens clucked the morning away. When he was done, he woke his brother, Solly, who was still asleep on the sponge mattress in their bedroom.

"You're back," the boy mumbled, frisking his drowsy eyelids.

"Cola?" Maluka asked.

"She left, like an hour ago,"

"You are very late for school,"

"She said the same."

Maluka shook his head, kicking his shoes and getting into the blankets. "Bath and go to school. I won't tell you again." His little brother groaned but left the room to prepare himself.

Lying there, finally, sleep didn't locate Maluka. He couldn't help but feel an unease about what transpired earlier with his uncle and aunt at the farm. What was it that he was missing?

They had a plan, all three of them. They had a plan, and throughout they've never left the other in the dark. Why did they see it fit to introduce themselves to his employers today? Why were they in such a rush? Even Apartheid wasn't overthrown in one day, a lot of meetings, a lot of tears, deaths, manipulation, gaslighting, promises, lies, guilt, happened before it was abolished. He himself had to lie to his employers just to get his foot through the door.

It was all him, not his uncle nor his aunt, and they wanted to cast him aside without seeing the end of it?

Three Years Ago

Maluka struggled at first. He attempted to form a relationship with his boss as his uncle suggested, but the man couldn't care less about him or the other workers. His only concern was that everyone did their job.

At the end of every shift, when Viljoen was done monitoring and ordering his subjects, he abruptly marched to his pickup – his buckle belt jingling with keys to every vehicle and room in the property. Other times he walked all the way to the main house by himself. So Maluka knew he had no chance of infiltrating the family through him. Sometimes the man even pronounced his name wrong: Baluka, Daluka, Lucas, Brian. He answered to all of them without correcting him since the man had the patience of a one-year-old child.

Every time Maluka hissed under his breath, whenever he listened to Viljoen speak to the farmworkers. The old ones who tired easily were his favourite to yell at, some of them had worked at the farm since they were young men and women even before he inherited the farm.

Nevertheless, Viljoen did have good moods, and often on a Friday, when he'd gather some of the workers around the tractors and they shared beers, laughed at his very funny jokes about his hunting trips.

Maluka also sought to bond with the child, Nicolas, who was such a frightened boy. The only times he got to form small talk with him was when the boy went to see the ducks in the large pond near his room.

Maluka started by watching Nicolas from his door – he stood there and pretended to be only smoking a cigarette. The next time Nicolas showed up, he greeted him and made a comment about the ducks and how they'd missed him. Then he approached him and asked about his day and school. He got nothing much out of him other than the mundane, irrelevant

information. The boy was quieter than he imagined, and reluctant. He figured that Nicolas was the opposite of his own brother, who was forward, talkative, and wore his thoughts on his face.

Maluka was left to hatch a plan. One night, around ten o'clock, he went knocking on the main house, delirious, and he claimed that a masked man had tackled him and tried to steal his keys. He knew his boss, Viljoen, left for a farmer's meeting in the nearby town of George's Valley, only the wife and child were home.

"He is gone, I think he's gone, I fought him," he said to Mrs. Viljoen, feigning breathlessness. She switched the lights on and let him in the living room to see if he needed medical attention. "I am fine Madam, but please lock all your doors."

"My doors are locked, and windows closed. Are you sure you are, okay?"

"Ja, ja, I just wanted to be certain that he didn't come this side."

She asked him what the intruder looked like. That maybe it was one of the farm workers. "They are very untrustworthy; I wouldn't be surprised. Even the burglary last November, I know it in my gut that it was one of them," she stated.

Maluka analysed the woman. Her hair was unkempt, dressed in a long white cardigan, underneath it a navy-blue night dress. He then noticed the birthmark, or what he first thought was a birthmark. What wooed his eyes was the size of it – round and big. She quickly covered her collarbones and neck when she realised what he was staring at.

"Madam," he said, disturbed by the bruise.

"It's nothing," Mrs. Viljoen mumbled, folding the cardigan.

"Did you hurt yourself?"

"Ja." She looked over her left, her eyes roamed around the floor. "I slipped in the bathtub yesterday," she added. Just as he was to say something, her son entered the room in plain grey pyjamas, dragging his feet with him.

It was Maluka's third month on the job, and he'd never sensed any trouble within the Viljoen family, until now. He couldn't look away. Once he saw what was obscure from him all along, he saw it everywhere, as if nothing had made complete sense before.

It was in the way Mrs. Viljoen spoke, the way she walked, eye contact, how she dressed, how she ate, how she laughed. Fortunately for Maluka, Mrs. Viljoen was found to be the missing tool in trying to get to know the family.

A month later, Maluka was locking the garage at the beginning of his night shift when he heard a shriek coming from the main house. Around the farm, the atmosphere was growing quieter as most of the workers had gone home and only those who lived on the farm remained.

He thought he'd heard wrong as the scream stopped as soon as it was let out, and so he screeched the garage door and treaded closer to the house to see if there was any danger.

He heard a thwack, something quite heavy hitting the floor. A bang, then another came right after. He ran and knocked on the back door as it was the nearest to him. "Hello, is everything okay!"

No sound came, and he knocked again. "Madam! Is anybody in there?" Again, no one answered, and he stood there and waited, not knowing what to do as he was certain that the family was in fact home.

A brief time passed, and he finally heard a voice, it belonged to his boss, and he was cursing. It was apparent to Maluka what had occurred, and he worried about the child, Nicolas, if he heard it all or saw it all.

A memory flashed before him – his own mother running away from his father as he chased her with a broom. Once, he had grabbed a metallic chair and threw it at her, landing on the left side of her belly. He then proceeded to hurl the ugliest words a man could've said to a woman. Maluka recalled glancing at his brother – shock and helplessness all over his

small face. He never got over it, even years later when his parents were no longer a part of his world.

Two days after the incident in the Viljoen house, Maluka saw Mrs. Viljoen walking from her vehicle, a small blue Nissan she parked by the side gate. Her leathered handbag was now slipping onto her arm as she tried to balance the grocery bags in her hands. He quickly rushed to help.

“Good afternoon, Madam.”

She smiled, radiantly so, and it stupefied him. Because it was ridiculous to him, to be beaten down and still had the will to smile. “Is it still afternoon?” she asked him, handing over some of the plastic bags to him.

“Well, no, it’s around six, but the sun is still out.”

“Oh, the Tzaneen sun, always unwilling to let the day go.”

He faintly giggled. “That’s because it loves us,”

“Well, our soil doesn’t mind, it seems,”

“Yes, Madam, always bearing fruits for all of us.”

As they walked to the house, he watched their shadows in front of them on the grass. Across from them, beside the fence separating the yard from the orange trees, Granny’s nephew was playing ball with a friend.

Mrs. Viljoen invited Maluka to a braai. “It’s for my birthday tomorrow. Would you like to come?”

“To your party?”

She laughed at the astonished expression on his face. “Yes, Maluka, will you come?”

“But I don’t know anyone who will be coming,”

“You know me, and you know my husband, and Nico?”

He nodded. “What should I wear?”

“Just come as you are. You can help me serve our guests, pour drinks, that sort of thing.”

He understood. It was a work invite, not for him to mingle with her white friends. He was sad for that fact because he'd wished to get to know more about the Viljoens through those who knew them well. Nonetheless, he showed up.

It was one o'clock midnight. Maluka had just returned to his room from a night of endless runs between Viljoen's kitchen and the party guests outside. There wasn't a lot of them, but they drank too much that he had to drive one of them home.

A knock came at his door, and he rushed to open. There she was – tipsy and standing like a feather in the wind. When she wobbled into the room, he was so exhausted and annoyed by the state of her.

“Madam, what are you doing here?”

“Hold my hand,” she spoke, reaching out to him.

He took her arm and walked her to the white plastic chair beside his bed. “Should I get you some water?”

“No, no, no, no, no need, I'm fine,”

He stared, nervous, that her husband would come looking for her. She looked up at him with her feeble eyes and read his mind. “He is sleeping. He is drunker than I am.” She rubbed her cheeks and groaned. He stayed at his feet, waiting for the reason she had come to his room. After a while without her speaking, he decided to sit down on his bed.

She asked him then, “Tell me, Maluka, what can I do to end my marriage?”

“Ma?”

“Don't act like you don't know. I know you know what I go through. I think you are the only one who knows in this damn place.”

He wanted to tell her that she was wrong, some of the farm workers were aware of the abuse, but they ignored it. And to use his neighbour Granny's words: "I don't care. You shouldn't care," she'd said to him once when he made his concerns to her.

"You can get a divorce," he said.

Mrs. Viljoen didn't like his suggestion. He owned everything, and she owned nothing, she pointed out. "I come from nothing, Maluka." She added regretfully. If she got a divorce, not only would she suffer, what about her son? She asked him. "What about all the years I have spent taking care of our family?" She faced the wall then and lifted her blouse. "Kyk, kyk vir my!"

Maluka looked away. "Please, Ma, please." There were bruises all over her, the old and new. She turned back, stretching her legs and slumping into her seat. "And you know, he fucks women all over this town like a dog without a leash, the disgrace. I am a laughingstock!"

Maluka was dumbstruck by the things Viljoen's wife was telling him. The next words that came out her mouth shocked him even further. "Oh, I could kill him. I want to kill him with one of his guns, and he dies like a dog!" she said so loudly that he marched and shut the door.

Day of the Murder

8 AM

Maluka heard voices outside his house. He got up from the mattress he was lying on and peeked through the curtain. To his surprise, he saw his uncle approaching the house with his brother Solly who had opened the gate for him. He'd come alone.

Baloyi had driven from Tzaneen town to Ga-Modjadji with one thought in his mind – It was time to get rid of the bastard. That was what he said when Maluka emerged from the house to meet him that morning.

Solly hovered as the two spoke. They moved and stood by the two adjoined mango trees in the middle of the yard. “I have had enough. It must happen,” said Baloyi.

“How did your visit go?” Maluka asked him instead.

“It went as I thought it would. That racist couldn’t even show me an ounce of respect. I am sure he called us *kaffirs* as soon as we left. He looked down on me, on me! He thought I didn’t have the money to buy the farm?”

“Were you there to make him an offer?”

“Of course not, the wife wanted to see the place and so we pretended to be buyers. But that isn’t the point, *mchana*.”

Maluka listened, trying to understand why he was so adamant about killing Viljoen. He thought he’d made a good plea the last time they spoke on the matter. The man was no saint he knew that, but he didn’t deserve to die. Not for a farm his grandfather left him, he believed. His aunt had agreed, there was no need for violence, they had a good claim.

According to their own papers, the land belonged to the Baloyi, they only needed time for the proceedings to reach a conclusion. The list of all their relatives, along with their children was drawn not long before 1990, and according to it, their land crossed right through the Viljoen farm and ended in another Baloyi land in George’s Valley.

Maluka could tell his uncle had run out of patience. “He is on my land and yet the fool looked down on me!” Baloyi repeated, and Maluka shook his head.

Baloyi’s plot for his boss’s demise was one of the several Maluka heard ever since he started working at the farm. The workers were all sick of Viljoen, anything offensive that he uttered – provoked them.

He once eavesdropped into a conversation between a group of boys who worked at the Viljoen's cow kraals while travelling from Ga-Modjadji to Tzaneen at the back of a bakkie they'd hitch-hiked. The boys narrated how they would've tied Viljoen to a tree and did to him things they saw on some American slave movie. Their anger was real, so early in the morning, but their bluff was obvious in the jokes that followed. He was certain they didn't have it in them, and neither were they killers. But he sometimes feared and pondered if any of them meant it. What was he to do since his very job was to protect the Viljoens and their massive estate?

When his uncle was done insulting Viljoen, he walked to his car and returned with an envelope concealing the weapon to execute his master plan. "I will let my boys know that you have it. Every day that you go to work, you must have it with you, until the time comes."

"When will that be?"

"You will know when it is time,"

"But Uncle-"

"Do as I say, and everything will go well."

Maluka was hesitant, he'd never carried a gun in his life. He only knew the disastrous consequences it always left. His own father was shot once in the chest. Once, and it killed him. A big man who beat others with his big hands, killed by one bullet. The village gossip suggested he shot himself because of guilt after strangling his wife to death. However, Maluka never believed it. To him his father was incapable of remorse.

Maluka opened the envelope Baloyi had given him. Besides the gun was thirty thousand rands in cash. "What for?" he asked elated but surprised.

"You have done enough, *mchana*, well done. Now leave it all to me."

1 PM

Maluka was excited that afternoon. The money his uncle had given him lighted a fire in him that he hadn't felt in years. The only person he could share his burning joy with was his girlfriend, Cola.

He found her sleeping under a guava tree at the back of her house. He meant only to kiss her forehead and watch as she slept, but she woke, frightened. "It's only me, my love," he whispered. She yawned and asked how long he'd been back from his night shift. "A while," he responded.

"Mmm, you look tired." She touched his cheek, brushing it.

He closed his eyes to feel her skin on him. "How is the little one doing?" he enquired and placed his hand on her stomach. He asked if anyone asked about the pregnancy.

She shook her head. "I am flat as paper, no one can tell, not even my sister."

He shifted closer to her on the blanket. "I have something to tell you,"

She lifted her head. "What's wrong?"

"No, nothing is wrong. I," he paused, sorting his words. "I have the money. We can do the traditional ceremony as soon as possible."

Cola sat up straight, her eyes smiling with her teeth. "Really, love?"

He nodded, twice. "Yes. The gods have answered us."

She got up and jumped around, screaming, and hugging him. "Yes, yes! I'll go and tell the family!" As she was about to run to her house, he pulled her in for one more hug. He could hear her heart beating fast to his chest. "Maluka," she mumbled tenderly.

"Cola..."

"We are going to be parents," she said in his ear as if she had just only realised she was carrying.

"Yes, we are, my love."

5PM

Time was all Maluka and his girlfriend counted on that afternoon. But the gods were on their side, as the weather was not too hot and not windy to run from one place to another. Their excitement was only shown in their tenacity to make sure everything was arranged for their ceremony, otherwise they were stressed.

Perhaps, they should wait? Plan everything properly before calling their relatives? Cola suggested, but Maluka replied, “By the time we are ready, the pregnancy will be showing, and no one would care if we were going to make it right anyway.” It was final.

Maluka left home to Tzaneen for his night shift. He was fatigued; he hadn't slept after his uncle left but it seemed he and Cola were set for their ceremony the next day.

He hitchhiked a minibus with a group of dancers heading to a concert. The ladies were all made up with colourful makeup and their hair embedded with shiny beads, wearing *ishibelani* and crop tops, left their slim and fat bellies. The men wore white vests and black trousers, the only thing that made them look the part were the white and yellow marks on their faces.

The music played was loud, piercing his ear drums. But he was used to it, living three houses from Fanta, Cola's brother, with his endless parties, drumming, and whistling every weekend. If he'd known though, that he was going to travel the distance with his head ringing, he would have waited for another vehicle.

He furtively felt the insides of the backpack sitting on his lap and wondered to himself, if the dancers knew there was a gun in the bus, would they be dancing?

There were numerous dance groups in his village and each with a different level of step. The women were a marvel to look at, how they twisted their waists and jingled their bums in the air while their lips sung melodies through their whistles – was sensational. The

ones at his parents wedding, at his next-door neighbour's wedding, at parties, and at one of Viljoen's close friend's concerts the year he started working for him. He now recalled how, at the end of the performance, he heard the friend tell Viljoen in Afrikaans: "The monkey dance was a nice touch, right?"

For the best of him, Maluka never forgot that comment. He sometimes wondered if every one of the white people he crossed paths within Tzaneen town felt the same or looked at him and the other Black people like Viljoen's friend did.

6 PM

The Tsonga traditional dancers waved Maluka goodbye as their bus drove away on his arrival at work for his night shift. He was delayed at the gate by the trucks leaving the farm – loaded with oranges and mangoes. He spoke to the truck drivers, one threw him a pack of cigarettes, and they shared a laugh.

He then stopped by the gate security hut; the room always smelled of wood and tea. He found the two gate men sharing a strawberry yoghurt in a mug. As expected, they did not search him, instead they offered him a sip. "No, ke grand," he said.

He took out a cigarette from his pocket and lit it with a match. From where he was standing, he could see Viljoen talking to one of the farm workers. Maluka asked himself then what made a good husband. What constituted a happy marriage? Was it just one thing? Money, trust, children, love, sex, God, or laughter, etc. What was it that held everything together? What could he have done that would've made his pending marriage to Cola a long lasting and happy one? He had never witnessed a successful marriage throughout his life, so how was he going to know how to be a good husband?

When he finished his smoke, he crushed the bud with his shabby shoe. He then said his parting words to the two gate men and strolled to his room, passing by Viljoen. He raised his

hand to greet him, and as he hoisted his backpack over his shoulder, he was reminded of the gun, and a chill spread over his body.

The gun wasn't a surprise when his uncle presented it to him, as they had discussed many times with his "boys" about how to go about the murder.

Often, they planned to follow Mr. Viljoen on one of his travels and block his way, hijack style. A few times they thought about entering the Viljoen home in the middle of the night and shooting him in his marital bed, but every time that was suggested Maluka shook his head. "We don't need to frighten Madam, she has been through enough," he pleaded. Other times, they thought of entering the farm by the wire fence, cutting it off with a spanner, wait for the farmer by his truck which was always parked outside near the garage door, and then forcing him into the car and driving off into the morning until they found a remote area where they slit his neck.

It had been like that for the past years, planning a murder without action, that's until the fateful visit at their supposed land that upset Baloyi.

7 PM

Maluka was eating the dinner that his neighbour, Granny, had shared with him – a bowl of beans with tripe and a full plate of brown porridge, when he heard a scream coming from the main house. He wished it stopped soon as it often did, so he wouldn't have had to leave the food, but it didn't.

He quickly licked his fingers and marched to the house. As he got closer, Mrs. Viljoen's voice became frantic, spreading across the house – she was running.

He knocked as he always did, peeping through the glass on the door. For the first time in three years, she called out to him: "Maluka, Maluka!" When she reached the living room, her husband grabbed her and hauled her to the floor.

Maluka saw and he leapt, jerking the door open and shattering the glass. This startled the farmer, who yelled, “Guit, jou shit! Get out!”

“Madam...” Maluka mumbled, but stopped himself short, realising he’d just broke their door. Mrs. Viljoen was still on the floor, a bulge protruding from her forehead and her neck swollen red.

“Get out of my house!” said Mr. Viljoen, and they both looked at him, waiting in motion, deciding of what they should do. Their silence angered the farmer who then grabbed the large flowerpot by the TV. Like a rugby ball – he threw it at Maluka.

Mrs. Viljoen cried out, crawled over to Maluka who was knocked unconscious. “Are you sleeping with her? Are you sleeping with her? Every *kaffir* has slept with my wife, you aren’t the first, jou bloody shit!” screamed Viljoen.

When Mrs. Viljoen lifted the chunk of the flowerpot off Maluka’s torso, she saw it next to him – the gun. It appeared it had slipped out of Maluka’s pocket when he was knocked down. Mr. Viljoen saw it instantaneously as his wife did, but she grabbed it and pointed it at him – her hands quivering like a nurse with hemophobia holding a needle.

Maluka suddenly groaned on the floor, waking up. He was stunned by the blood coming off his face. When Mrs. Viljoen turned to look at him, her husband grabbed the gun from her and shot Maluka six times in the chest.

Mrs. Viljoen squealed and ran outside – cutting her feet with the glass on the floor.

End

List of Characters

Viljoen: Farmer.

Sunette: Viljoen's wife.

Nicolas/Nico: Viljoen & Sunette's son.

Coenie: Sunette's friend.

Sherry: Coenie's daughter.

Jaco van Vuuren: The Viljoen's family friend.

Marelie: Jaco's ex-wife.

Kevin: Jaco & Marelie's son

Granny & Lerole: Tenants/employees at Viljoen's farm.

Maluka: Security guard at Viljoen's farm.

Cola: Maluka's fiancée.

Solly: Maluka's younger brother.

Pretty: Solly's best friend.

Modajo: Pretty's mother and housekeeper to The Vuurens.

Baloyi: Maluka & Solly's uncle.

Esther: Baloyi's wife.

