

The Death of Masaba

'Fellows, what do you think of this business of Masaba?'

'Yes, just tell us what happened.'

'Men, the boy is dying. I heard from Stimela, the boss-boy of the lashers, that Masaba fainted twice in the mine today. Stimela he ran to tell Boss Tom, who did not even want to listen to him, but only said: "Get away, there are lots of boys in the compound."'

'But what made Masaba faint in the mine?'

'Well ... I saw that there was a mistake in his ticket. It was not stamped *ten days' light underground work*.'

The others they laughed when they heard the word 'mistake'.

'Clear out,' they cried, 'there is no *mistake* there! We old boys know well that if Masaba had been a white man there would have been no *mistake*. Didn't Boss Tom say "there are lots of Kaffirs in the compound"? "If one dies," meaning Masaba, "the Government will bring more." He said that after Stimela had told him, "Masaba is fainting, he cannot lash."'

The others were silent; each was busy with his own thoughts.

This affair was worrying their hearts a great deal. These men – they were five, sitting round a glowing bucket fire – had left their kraals for the mines, forced to do so by hunger and want. They left their homes knowing of the terrible accidents that occur below the surface of the mines. Their only hope was that the always-wise white people would be true to them and treat them well: safeguard them from underground dangers, and work them as people with equal feelings though their skins were black.

The working place where they were stationed was deep down on the 18th level. The heat on that level was terrible; so intense that unacclimatised boys were liable to get heatstroke. Behind them a yawning, dreary shaft threatened their lives; while in front a naked, creaking rock rose sheer above them. From its grim, muddy face trickled drops of dirty, poisonous water.

Under these disabilities, with death everywhere beckoning, Boss Tom

made them lash as though the Furies were after them. Here their half-naked bodies were bent unceasingly over the shovels. Even old lashing hands were seen staggering under the heat, and through the pangs of hunger. As these were their daily lot in life, they did not mind it at all, for they had infinite trust in their masters.

But today, when they saw Masaba, the victim of callous indifference, yes Masaba, their young fellow countryman, who was not even supposed to be placed on the lashing gang, their hearts were filled with blood. The first incident happened when they were shovelling madly. Masaba suddenly dropped down ... and fainted.

Boss Boy Stimela ran and told Boss Tom: 'Nkosi, the boy Masaba has fainted. He can't lash.'

Boss Tom was greatly surprised when he heard that a 'Kaffir' could not do the job for which he was solely created, the handling of the shovel. He said to Steamer: 'What! Masaba can't lash? A bloody Kaffir ... can't lash?'

'I know, sir,' replied Steamer, 'that Masaba faints as soon as he stoops to lash. I think he's not used to it yet.'

'Oh, kick him, Steamer.'

Steamer was, however, one of those fast-dwindling Boss Boys who, instead of 'waking up' Masaba with a kick, according to orders, went to him and said, 'Try and lash, boy. The Boss will hit you, say you're loafing.'

Poor Masaba went and threw himself at his master's feet.

'Nkosi, I am not used to lashing yet. I get so tired, sir, and my head aches so. My eyes get clouded and misty when I stoop to lash, sir. I beg you, sir, my good Boss, my father, give me another job until I'm used to this job of lashing. I will work well, sir. I will do anything for you, Boss. But lashing kills me, Boss, please.'

And he burst into tears, while his fellow workers muttered ominously under their breath.

It is difficult for a boy and his Boss to come to quick understanding down there. Because in the mine their language is different from ours. There their speech is made up of all those naked and revolting phrases that would shame the Prince of Darkness. Still muttering amongst themselves, they said, 'Masaba, isn't your ticket stamped?'

'I don't know,' sobbed Masaba. 'This is my first time to work in the mine. I began work yesterday.'

'Hey, what's up there?' bawled Boss Tom, drawing nearer. 'If I get you talking again, Masaba, there'll be hell for you.'

'He is dying, sir,' cried Stimela in a strained voice.

It was then that Boss Tom uttered words seemingly innocent in his thoughts, but to natives' minds full of damning meanings. This thoughtless

ganger who did not know the working of a native's mind said: 'There are lots of Kaffirs in the compound!'

The boys having digested these words bent once more over their shovels. A piercing cry stopped their labours. For, with a heartrending cry, Masaba fell with a sickening thud, knocking his head against a jagged piece of rock on the stope. Without delay he was carried to the surface and from there was hurried to the hospital. When his fellow countrymen heard that Masaba was seriously ill, they brooded.

'Lord Jesus, please save Masaba for his poor mother's sake. She will be left alone in this world.'

The next day, as they were changing from their wet clothes, a mine police boy entered their room: 'Er ... er ... Madoda, the manager said I should come to tell you that Masaba is dead.'

When an inquiry was held over the death of Masaba, it was found that Boss Tom was guilty. For he had caused a new boy to lash before putting him first on light underground work, as was the rule with new boys. Through his carelessness and indifference he had caused the death of Masaba.

'I say, fellows, if Masaba had died accidentally, it would not have mattered. But I hold that he was murdered. For his ticket was stamped: *Not to be employed on lashing.*'

'Hau, didn't you hear that Boss said to Stimela, "There are many Kaffirs in the compound"? Ho! Ho! You don't know the white people!'

And they went out to dig Masaba's grave.

Kid Playboy

Every time a hick job comes around in the office I get saddled with it. Now the editor pushes this folded white card at me and says to find out what I can get out of this here invite. I walk out of the office and read the card once more. According to the gold-lettered words a certain Kid Mabothobotho stays out Dube is getting hitched to an Alexandra cherrie.

On Saturday the wedding will take place at the cherrie's place in Alex. I decide I'd rather wait for it to come around to Dube on Sunday because I'm somewhat scared of hopping off to Alex especially on weekends on account the bright boys over there have turned the place into a gunsmoke and knife-happy township.

On Sunday I haul out my top hat and tails to make ready to go to Dube. I expect it to be one of those high society shindigs, as you know how hoity-toity these Dubeheimers can get when they want to. I get a good look at myself in my landlord's son's wardrobe mirror as I put on the tie he lent me, and I see that my eyes are unusually clear – sure sign among the boozing fraternity that I've been keeping shebeen queens, especially Aunt Peggy, waiting.

I get to Dube and don't have any difficulty spotting the place where this wedding is taking place on account of the half-a-dozen beribboned convertible cars parked in front of the house. A guy who meets me at the door looks scornfully at my not-too-well pressed trousers, whereupon he gives me the VIP treatment. Only he reckons the 'I' in VIP stands for 'Inconsequential'. He tells me to go and sit in the tent at the back of the house. I tell him who I am, whereupon he smiles and ushers me into the room.

This girl this guy's getting married to is so beautiful that I can't take my eyes off her for a pretty long time. After a while I manage to pull my eyes away from her to look at the groom. Cripes! It's none other than Kid Playboy. I feel the blood revolting in my veins. This is the same Kid Playboy who took away from me some time back the only girl I ever loved. He promised this girl of mine everything in the world and crowned

the long list of promises by telling her that he would build a fire under the ocean just so's she can swim in winter.

And like all starry-eyed girls, this girl of mine went and believed every word he told her. Maybe if she hadn't been so gullible she would still have been alive today. As it turns out, Kid Playboy gives her the bird after stringing her for a month on account another foolish cherrie falls for his sweet talk. So what does she do, but commit suicide!

Kid Playboy's eyes meet mine and I pull out my tongue at him. He turns coal black and his Adam's apple starts moving up and down like someone who's seen a ghost. The guy looks real scared, and I am just beginning to hate myself for having scared the boy by sticking out my tongue at him when I realise that it's not me who's the cause of his sudden jitters. There's a girl who's sitting a few feet behind me who is proving to be the why for Kid's jaded nerves.

I turn around and look at this girl to see what it is about her that can cause so much panic in a satanic soul. But all I can see is that she's an ordinary homely girl, and the small sleeping child she's holding in her arms is the sweetest thing I ever did see.

I'm still busily occupied at looking at this fear-instilling girl and hoping that she's not a ghost, when a voice that sounds like a constipated ostrich's booms, 'Ladees and gentlemen, all those who have presents for the bridal couple may now see the "mabalane" (the MC of the wedding).' The 'mabalane' stands up, breaks into a toothless grin, bows and sits down again.

I thought they had invited us to a wedding, now they want to fleece presents out of us! But seeing as the announcer man said 'ladies and gentlemen', I reckon he has left me out on account nobody ever accused me of being a gentleman, let alone a lady. So I happily ignore him.

A few folk get away from their eats and drinks with parcels of varying sizes beneath their armpits. They stand in line before the 'mabalane', who jots down the name and address of each and everyone who dumps a parcel on the table. Some guys who had decided beforehand that it would be much better to save the few pennies they have for paying their rent instead of buying presents for Kid Playboy and his spouse – and perhaps a few others who have a needle against him, like yours truly – suddenly discover that the room is too hot and march out.

After some time the last name and address is written down, and I can see the 'mabalane' hinting at the groom's people for his payment for services duly rendered – a nip of hooch. But he doesn't get the hooch. Instead, the girl with the baby, who had so disorganised Kid Playboy a short while ago, stands up and walks to the 'mabalane'. She dumps the child, who is now awake and bawling his young head off, on the table and

says, 'Here's my present to the bride and groom. My name is Maisie.' She gives a Mapetla address somewhere in Site and Service. She winds up by saying Kid Playboy's the pop of the child.

All of a sudden, there's a bang of a hullabaloo going on. Kid Playboy is making a hurried exit out of the house, and the bride is tearing at her bridal dress and hurling all sorts of names at Kid Playboy and his family, including the late ones. After every burst of unprintable words she keeps chorusing that she's got a lawyer that's going to show them what makes the grass green.

Up to today nobody ever hears a word about Kid Playboy. But Mr Rumour goes around the townships telling all and sundry that Kid Playboy is in his hometown somewhere in the Tanganyika Territory, although the folks from there pronounce it 'Tananika Torrotoro'.

I reckon the next time the editor tells me to go and cover a 'wedding', I'm gonna take an advance on my salary and hightail it to Aunt Peggy's joint and cover a bottle of hooch with Kid Playboy's ex-bride on my lap, as she now frequents this place ever since her lawyer proved not to be as hot as she had thought him to be.

Crepuscule

The morning township train cruised into Park Station, Johannesburg, and came to a halt in the dark vaults of the subterranean platforms. Already the young of limb, and the lithe and lissom had leapt off and dashed for the gate that would let them out. But the rest of us had to wade ponderously, in our hundreds, along the thickening platforms that gathered the populations disgorged by Naledi, Emdeni, Dube, Orlando, Pimville, Nancefield, Kliptown, Springs, Benoni, Germiston. Great maws that spewed their workship over Johannesburg.

I was in the press that trudged in the crowd on the platform. Slowly, good-humouredly we were forced, like the substance of a toothpaste tube, through the little corridor and up the escalator that hoisted us through the outlet into the little space of breath and the teeth of pass-demanding South African Police.

But it was with a lilt in my step that I crossed the parquet foyer floor and slipped through the police net, because I knew which cop to pass by: the one who drank with me at Sis Julia's shebeen of an afternoon off. It was with a lilt, because it was spring as I walked out of Park Station into a pointillist morning with the sun slanting from somewhere over George Goch, and in spring the young ladies wear colourful frocks, glaring against the sunlight and flaring in the mischievous breezes. I joyed as I passed into Hoek Street, seeing the white girls coming up King George Street, the sunlight striking through their dresses, articulating the silhouettes beneath to show me leg and form; things black men are supposed to know nothing of, and which the law assininely decrees may not even be imagined.

Funny thing this, the law in all its horrificiency prohibits me, and yet in the streets of Johannesburg I feast for free every morning. And, God, if I try hard enough, I may know for real in Hillbrow every night.

There is a law that says (I'm afraid quite a bit of this will seem like *there is a law that says*), well, it says I cannot make love to a white woman. It is a law. But stronger still there is a custom – a tradition, it is called here – that shudders at the sheerest notion that any white man could contemplate, or

any black man dare, a love affair across the colour line. They do: white men *do* meet and fall in love with black women; black men do explore 'ivory towers'. But all this is severely 'agin the law'.

There are also African nationalists who profess horror at the thought that any self-respecting black man could desire any white woman. They say that no African could ever debase himself as to love a white woman. This is highly cultivated and pious lying in the teeth of daily slaving in town and in cinema. African girls, who are torturing themselves all the time to gain a whiter complexion, straighter hair and corset-contained posteriors, surely know what their men secretly admire.

As for myself, I do not necessarily want to bed a white woman; I merely insist on my right to want her.

Once, I took a white girl to Sophiatown. She was a girl who liked to go with me and did not have the rumoured South African inhibitions. She did not even want the anthropological knowledge of 'how the other South Africans live'. She just wanted to be with me.

She had a car, an ancient Morris. On the way to Sophiatown of those days, you drove along Bree Street, past the Fordsburg Police Station in the Indian area, past Braamfontein railway station, under a bridge away past the cemetery, past Bridgetown Memorial Hospital (known, strangely, for bringing illegitimate non-European children into the world), up Hurst Hill, past Talitha Home (a place of detention for delinquent non-European girls), past aggressive Westdene (sore at the proximity of so many non-white townships around her), and into Sophiatown.

So that night a black man and a white woman went to Sophiatown. I first took Janet to my auntie's place in Victoria Road, just opposite the bus terminus. It was a sight to glad a cynic's heart to see my aunt shiver before Janet.

'Mama' – in my world all women equivalents of my mother are mother to me – 'Mama, this is my girl. Where is Tata?' This question, not because my uncle might or might not approve, but because I knew he was terribly fond of brandy, and I was just about to organise a little party; he would not forgive me for leaving him out. But he was not there. He had gone to some meeting of *amagosa* – church stewards, of whom he was the chief.

'Mama, how about a doek for Janet.'

The doek! God save our gracious doek. A doek is a colourful piece of cloth that the African woman wears as headgear. It is tied stylistically into various shapes from Accra to Cape Town. I do not know the history of this innocuous piece of cloth. In Afrikaans, the language of those of our white masters who are of Dutch and Huguenot descent, *doek* meant, variously, a tablecloth, a dirty rag, or a symbol of the slave. Perhaps it was later used

by African women in contact with European ideas of beauty who realised that 'they had no hair' and subconsciously hid their heads under the doek. Whatever else, the doek had come to designate the African woman. So that evening when I said, 'Mama, how about a doek for Janet', I was proposing to transform her, despite her colour and her deep blue eyes, into an African girl for the while.

Ma dug into her chest and produced a multi-coloured chiffon doek. We stood before the wardrobe mirror while my sisters helped to tie Janet's doek in the current township style. To my sisters that night I was obviously a hell of a guy.

Then I took Janet to a shebeen in Gibson Street. I was well known in that particular shebeen, could get my liquor 'on tick' and could get VIP treatment even without the asset of Janet. With Janet, I was a sensation. Shebeens are noisy drinking places and as we approached that shebeen we could hear the blast of loud-mouthed conversation. But when we entered a haunted hush fell upon the house. The shebeen queen rushed two men off their chairs to make places for us, and: 'What would you have, Mr Themba?'

There are certain names that do not go with Mister, I don't have a clue why. But, for sure, you cannot imagine a Mr Charlie Chaplin or a Mr William Shakespeare or a Mr Jesus Christ. My name – Can Themba – operates in that sort of class. So you can see the kind of sensation we caused when the shebeen queen addressed me as Mr Themba.

I said, casually as you like, 'A half-a-jack for a start, and I suppose you'd like a beer, too, my dear?'

The other patrons of the shebeen were coming up for air, one by one, and I could see that they were wondering about Janet. Some thought that she was coloured, a South African mulatto. One said she was white, appending, 'These journalist boys get the best girls'. But it was clear that the doek flummoxed them. Even iron-coloureds, whose stubborn physical appearances veer strongly to the Negroid parent, are proud enough of whatever hair they have to expose it. But this girl wore a doek!

Then Janet spoke to me in that tinkling English voice of hers, and I spoke to her, easily, without inhibition, without madamising her. One chap, who could contain himself no longer, rose to shake my hand. He said, in the argot of the townships, 'Brer Can, you've eaten caustic soda. Look, man, get me fish-meat like this, and s'true's God, I'll buy you a *vung* (a car)!'. That sort of thawed the house and everybody broke into raucous laughter.

Later, I collected a bottle of brandy and some ginger ale, and took Janet to my room in Gold Street. There were a few friends and their girls:

Kaffertjie (Little Kaffer – he was quite defiantly proud of this name) and Hilda, Jazzboy and Pule, Jimmy, Rockefeller and a coloured girl we called Madame Defarge because day or night she always had clicking knitting needles with her. We drank, joked, conversed, sang and horse-played. It was a night of the Sophiatown of my time, before the government destroyed it.

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times; it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness; it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness; it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair; we had everything before us, we had nothing before us; we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way – in short, the period was so far like the present period that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.

Sometimes I think, for his sense of contrast and his sharp awareness of the pungent flavours of life, only Charles Dickens – or, perhaps, Victor Hugo – could have understood Sophiatown. The government has razed Sophiatown to the ground, rebuilt it, and resettled it with whites. And with appropriate cheek, they have called it Triomf.

That night I went to bed with Janet, chocolate upon cream. I do not know what happened to me in my sleep; the Africans say *amadhlozi* talked to me – the spirits of my forefathers that are supposed to guide my reckless way through this cruel life intervened for once. In the mid of the night I got up, shook Janet and told her we got to go.

‘Ah, Can, you’re disturbing me, I want to sleep.’

‘Come-ahn, get up!’

‘Please, Can, I want to sleep.’

I pulled off the blankets and marvelled awhile at the golden hair that billowed over her shoulders. Then she rose and dressed drowsily.

We got into her ancient Morris and drove to town. I think it was the remembrance of a half-bottle of brandy in her room in Hillbrow that woke me and made me rouse her, more than the timely intervention of the *amadhlozi*. We saw a big, green *Kwela-Kwela* wire-netted lorry-van full of be-batonned white cops driving up Gold Street, but we thought little of it, for the cops, like fleas in our blankets, are always with us. So we spluttered up Hurst Hill into town.

Later, I heard what had happened.

I used to have a young Xhosa girl called Baby. She was not really my class, but in those days for what we called love we Sophiatonians took the high, the middle and the low.

Baby was pathologically fond of parties, the type of parties to which

tsotsis go. They organise themselves into a club of about half-a-dozen members. On pay-day they each contribute, say £5, and give it to the member whose turn it is. He then throws a party to entertain all the members and their girlfriends. Almost invariably guys trespass on other guys' girls and fights break out. Baby liked this kind of party, but it soon became clear to me that I was risking the swift knife in the dark so long as I associated with her. So I talked it over with her, told her we should call it a day and that I did not want to clash with her tsotsi boyfriends. She readily accepted, saying, 'That-so it is, after all you're a teacher type and you don't suit me.'

So far as I was concerned that had been that.

But that star-crossed night, Baby heard that I was involved with a white girl. She went berserk. I gathered that she went running down Gold Street tearing out her hair and shrieking. At the corner of Gold Street and Victoria Street, she met a group of tsotsis playing street football under the street lamp with a tennis ball. They asked her, 'Baby, whassamatter?' She screamed, 'It's Can, he's with a white woman,' and they replied, 'Report him!'

Africans are not on the side of the cops if they can help it. You do not go to a policeman for help or protection or the which way to go. You eschew them. To report a felon to them, good heavens! It is just not done. So for a tsotsi to say about anyone, 'Report him!' means the matter is serious.

Baby went to Newlands Police Station and shouted, 'Baas, they're there. They're in bed, my boyfriend and a white woman.' The sergeant behind the counter told her to take it easy, to wait until the criminals were so well-asleep that they might be caught *flagrante delicto*. But Baby was dancing with impatience at 'the law's delay'.

Still, that sergeant wanted to make a proper job of it. He organised a lorry-full of white cops, white cops only, with batons and the right sadistic mental orientation. Or, perhaps, too many such excursions had misadventured before where black cops were suspected of having tipped off their brethren.

When we went down Gold Street, it was them we saw in the green lorry-van bent on a date with a kaffir who had the infernal impertinence to reach over the fence at forbidden fruit.

I understood they kicked open the door of my room and stormed in, only to find that the birds had flown. One white cop is reported to have said, wistfully, 'Look, man, there are two dents in the pillow and I can still smell her perfume.' Another actually found a long thread of golden hair.

I met Baby a few days later and asked her resignedly, 'But you said we're no more in love, why the big jealous act?'

She replied, 'Even if we've split, you can't shame me for a white bitch.'

I countered, 'But if you still loved me enough to feel jealous, didn't you consider that you were sending me to six months in jail! Baby, it could be seven years, you know.'

'I don't care,' she said. 'But not with a white bitch, Can. And who says that I still love you? It's just that you can't humiliate me with a white bitch.'

I threw up my hands in despair and thought that one of these days I really must slaughter a spotlessly white goat as a sacrifice to the spirits of my forefathers. I have been neglecting my superstitions too dangerously long.

Funny, one of the things seldom said for superstitious belief is that it is a tremendous psychological peg to hang on to. God knows the vehement attacks made upon the unreason and stark cruelty of superstition and witchcraft practices are warranted. Abler minds than mine have argued this. But I do want to say that those of us who have been detribalised and caught in the characterless world of belonging nowhere, have a bitter sense of loss. The culture that we have shed may not be particularly valuable in a content sense, but it was something that the psyche could attach itself to, and its absence is painfully felt in this white man's world where everything significant is forbidden, or 'Not for thee!' Not only the refusal to let us enter so many fields of human experience, but the sheer negation that our spirits should ever assume to themselves identity. Crushing.

It is a crepuscular, shadow-life in which we wander as spectres seeking meaning for ourselves. And even the local, little legalities we invent are frowned upon. The whole atmosphere is charged with the white man's general disapproval, and where he does not have a law for it, he certainly has a grimace that cows you. This is the burden of the white man's crime against my personality that negatives all the brilliance of intellect and the genuine funds of goodwill so many individuals have. The whole bloody ethos still asphyxiates me. Ingratitude? Exaggeration? Childish, pampered desire for indulgence? Yes – yes, perhaps. But leave us some area in time and experience to be true to ourselves. It is so exhausting to have to be in reaction all the time. My race believes in the quick shaft of anger, or of love, or hate, or laughter: the perpetual emotional commitment is foreign to us. Life has contrived so much, such a variegated woof in its texture, that we feel we can tarry only a poignant moment with a little flare of emotion, if we are ever to savour the whole. Thus they call us fickle and disloyal. They have not yet called us hypocritical.

These things I claim for my race, I claim for all men. A little respite, brother, just a little respite from the huge responsibility of being a nice kaffir.

After that adventure in Sophiatown with Janet, I got a lot of sympathy and advice. I met the boys who had said to Baby, 'Report him!' I was sore because they had singled me out like that and made me the pariah that could be thrown to the wolves. They put their case:

'You see, Brer Can, there's a man here on this corner who plays records of classical music, drinks funny wines and brings white men out here for our black girls. Frankly, we don't like it, because these white boys come out here for our girls, but when we meet them in town they treat us like turds. We don't like the way you guys play it with the whites. We're on Baby's side, Brer Can.'

'Look, boys,' I explained, 'you don't understand, you don't understand me. I agree with you that these whites take advantage of our girls and we don't like the way our girls act as if they are special. But all you've done about it is just to sit and sizzle here at them. No one among you has tried to take revenge. Only I have gone to get a white girl and avenge with her what the whites do to our sisters. I'm not like the guys who procure black girls for their white friends. I seek revenge. I get the white girls – well, it's tough and risky, but you guys, instead of sitting here crying your hearts out, you should get yourselves white girls, too, and hit back.'

I got them, I knew.

One guy said, 'By right, Brer Can's telling the truth.'

Another asked, 'Tell me, Brer Can, how does a white woman taste?'

That was going too far. I had too great a respect for Janet, the *woman*, to discuss that with anybody whether he was white or black.

I said, 'You go find out for yourself.'

The piece of advice I got from the mother of a friend of mine who stayed in the same street, Gold Street, was touching.

She said to me: 'Son, I've heard about your trouble with the white girl. It's you that was foolish. People know that your white girl is around because they recognise the car. If they see it parked flush in front of your house, they say, "Can has got silver-fish." What you should do is to drive the car into my yard here, right to the back of the house so that nobody could see it from the street, and then they wouldn't suspect that you have the white girl in your room down there.'

It seemed to me to be excellent, practical advice.

So the next time I got home with Janet, we drove the car into the yard of my friend's mother, right back behind the house, and walked down in the dead of night to my room.

In the middle of the night, my friend came clattering on the window of my room and shouted, 'Can, get up, the cops!' We got up, got dressed in breathless time, rushed to the car at his mother's place and zoomed out of

Sophiatown on a little-used route past St Joseph's Mission through Auckland Park into Hillbrow, where in the heart of the white man's flatland we could complete breaking the white man's law as, apparently, we could not do in Sophiatown.

Later, I heard the sordid details of what had happened that night. My friend came home late, and overheard his mother and sisters discussing the Morris we had left in their yard. The mother felt that it was not right that I should be messing around with a white woman when she had unmarried daughters of her own and my eligibility rated high. So she sent one of her daughters to go and tell Baby that I was with the white woman again and that I had left the car in their yard. My friend felt that he did not have the time to argue with his family, that his job was to warn us as quickly as he could to get the hell out of there.

As it turned out, I need not have bothered. The darling Afrikaner at the desk told Baby, 'Look here, woman, every time you have a quarrel with your boyfriend, you rush to us with a cock-and-bull story. Clear out!'

The Young Man who was Carried off by a Lion

Translated by WHI Bleck and Lucy C Lloyd; reworked by Elana Bregin.

A young man of the Early Race – [said Dǎ!kwain] – while out hunting one day, ascended a hill to look for game. While he sat there, he became sleepy. He felt the need to lie down, for he was very sleepy. What could be wrong with him today? He had not felt such sleepiness before.

He lay down and closed his eyes. While he slept, a lion came. It was on its way to a water pit. The oppressive noonday heat had made it very thirsty. The lion saw the man lying there asleep, and it took him up in its jaws.

The man awoke in fright and found himself being carried away by the lion. He kept very still, knowing that if he moved, the lion would bite him and kill him. He waited to see what the lion intended to do, for it appeared to think that he was dead.

The lion carried him to a zwart-storm tree and carefully placed him in its branches. It still needed to drink, for its thirst was very great. It decided first to go to the water, and then come back and eat him.

It pressed the man's head between the branches of the zwart-storm tree, and turned to go to the water pit. The man moved his head, just a little. The lion caught the movement; it looked back suspiciously – why had the man's head moved? The lion was sure that it had fixed the man's head firmly between the branches. But it had apparently not been firmly enough, for the man fell over. The lion came back and once more pressed the man's head between the branches of the zwart-storm tree, this time very thoroughly. It licked the tears from the man's eyes. For the man was weeping. The man felt a sharp stick piercing the hollow at the back of his head. But he dared not stir, for he saw that the lion suspected that he was alive. Finally, since the man did not move again, the lion concluded that it had pressed him firmly enough into the tree. It went on a few steps, then looked back towards the man. The man kept still, pressing his eyelids together, looking through his eyelashes to see what the lion was doing.

The lion went away. It ascended the hill and began to descend it on the other side. The man gently turned his head to follow its movements. He

saw the lion raise its head, peering at him over the top of the hill, wanting to make sure that he was not just feigning death. When it saw that he was still lying as it had left him, the lion ran off quickly to the water, intending to slake its thirst and then return so that it might eat this man. For it was very hungry.

The man watched the lion disappear. It seemed as if this time, it had gone for good. Just to be sure, the man continued to lie still for a time, in case the lion again came back to check on him. For he knew that the lion was cunning. It might deceive him into thinking it had really gone away, only to return to catch him the moment he stirred. A long time passed. Still the man waited; finally, when there was still no sign of the lion returning, he concluded that it had really gone away.

He remained cautious, however. He did not leap up and flee immediately, but got up carefully, and sprang away to a different spot. His intention was to confuse the lion, so that it would find it more difficult to locate his trail from this new place. Then, instead of heading straight for home, the man ran off in a zigzag direction, hoping by this means to throw the lion off his trail. For he knew that if the lion detected his footsteps, it would follow him and seek him out where he lived.

Finally, he emerged at the top of the hill near his home. He called out to his people, telling them that he had been 'lifted up', he had been 'lifted up' by a lion. He instructed them to bring out many hartebeest-skins, and roll him up in them, for he had been 'lifted up' in the middle of the day, while the sun stood high. He knew that the lion, when it came back and found him missing, would resolve to seek him and track him down. For that reason, he wanted the people to roll him up in hartebeest-skins, so that the lion would not be able to scent him and get to him. Everyone knew that the lion does not forget its prey. Once it has killed, it will never leave its prey uneaten.

So the people rolled the young man up in mats and hartebeest-skins. They covered him over with sheltering bushes from around the homestead, so that the lion, when it came seeking him, would not be able to find him. For this young man was their hearts' young man. They loved him, and they did not wish the lion to eat him.

The people went out to seek a special edible root; they dug it out and brought it home at noon and baked it. An old man was one of those out gathering wood for his wife so that she could make a fire to roast the root. He was the one who saw the lion as it came over the top of the hill, exactly where the young man had walked, following the young man's trail. He shouted to the others, 'Look – look at the hill! There at the top where the young man came over – see what's there.'

The young man's mother said, 'You must not allow the lion to come near the houses. You must shoot it dead before it comes here.'

The people quickly slung on their quivers and went to meet the lion. But when they shot at this lion with their poisonous arrows, it would not die.

Another old woman spoke, she said, 'You must give the lion a child, so that it will go away from us.'

But the lion said that it did not want a child. It wanted the person 'whose eyes' tears' it had licked; he was the one that it wanted.

Other people said to those who had shot at the lion: 'How was it that when you shot at the lion you could not manage to kill it?'

Another old man said: 'Can't you see? This lion must be a sorcerer. It will not die when we shoot at it, it insists upon having the man whom it carried off.'

The people threw children to the lion; but the lion ignored them, still seeking the young man. The people continued to shoot at it. But their arrows had no effect. They said, 'Bring us spears, we have to kill the lion.' They stabbed it with spears, hoping to stab it to death, but their spears, too, had no effect. The lion continued to seek the young man, saying that it wanted the young man whose tears it had licked. He was the one it wanted. It tore things apart, breaking the people's houses to pieces, seeking the young man out.

And the people said, 'Can you not see that the lion will not eat the children we have given to it?'

And the people said, 'Can you not see that it must be a sorcerer?'

And the people said, 'You must give a girl to the lion, we'll see if the lion will eat her and then go away.'

But the lion did not want the girl either. It only wanted the man whom it had carried off.

And the people didn't know what else to do. They had been shooting at the lion since morning, and it would not die. It had refused the children whom they gave it, it had refused the young girl. It wanted only the man whom it had carried off.

So finally the people said, 'Tell the young man's mother that, although she loves the young man, she must bring him out. She must give the young man to the lion, even if he is the child of her heart. For she can see that the sun is about to set, and that the lion is still threatening us, it will not leave us, it insists on having the young man.'

The young man's mother wept and said, 'You may give my child to the lion. But you must not allow it to eat my child and live. You must kill it while it is upon my child, so that it dies as my child dies.'

So the people took the young man out of the hartebeest-skins in which they had wrapped him, and they gave the young man to the lion. And the lion bit the young man and killed him. And while the lion was biting the young man to death, the people shot at it and stabbed it.

The lion spoke: 'Now I will die,' it said to the people, 'for I have finally found the man I have been seeking.'

And so it died, lying dead with the young man that it had killed.

Hajji Musa and the Hindu Fire-walker

'Allah has sent me to you, Bibi Fatima.'

'Allah, Hajji Musa?'

'I assure you, Allah, my good lady. Listen to me carefully. There is something wrong with you. Either you have a sickness or there is an evil spell cast over your home. Can you claim that there is nothing wrong in your home, that your family is perfectly healthy and happy?'

'Well, Hajji Musa, you know my little Amir has a nasty cough that even Dr Kamal cannot cure and Soraya seems to have lost her appetite.'

'My good woman, you believe me now when I say Allah has sent me to you?'

Bibi Fatima's husband, Jogee, entered the room. Hajji Musa took no notice of him and began to recite (in Arabic) an extract from the Qur'an. When he had done he shook hands with Jogee.

'Listen to me, Bibi Fatima and brother Jogee. Sickness is not part of our nature, neither is it the work of our good Allah. It is the work of that great evildoer Iblis, some people call him Satan. Well, I, by the grace of Allah' (he recited another extract from the Qur'an) 'have been given the power to heal the sick and destroy evil. That is my work in life, even if I get no reward.'

'But Hajji Musa, you must live.'

'Bibi Fatima, Allah looks after me and my family. Now bring me two glasses of water and a candle.'

She hurried to the kitchen and brought the articles.

'Now bring me the children.'

'Jogee, please go and find Amir in the yard while I look for Soraya.'

Husband and wife went out. Meanwhile Hajji Musa drew the curtains in the room, lit the candle and placed the two glasses of water on either side of the candle. He took incense out of his pocket, put it in an ashtray and lit it.

When husband and wife returned with the children they were awed. There was an atmosphere of strangeness, of mystery, in the room. Hajji

Musa looked solemn. He took the candle, held it about face level and said: 'Look, there is a halo around the flame.'

They looked and saw a faint halo.

He placed the candle on the table, took the glasses of water, held them above the flame and recited a verse from the Qur'an. When he had done he gave one glass to the boy and one to the girl.

'Drink, my children,' he said. They hesitated for a moment, but Bibi Fatima commanded them to drink the water.

'They will be well,' he said authoritatively. 'They can now go and play.'

He extinguished the candle, drew the curtains, and sat down on the settee. And he laughed, a full-throated, uproarious, felicitous laugh.

'Don't worry about the children. Allah has performed miracles on what are coughs and loss of appetites.' And he laughed again.

Bibi Fatima went to the kitchen to make tea and Jogee and I kept him company. She returned shortly with tea and cake.

'Jogee,' she said, 'I think Hajji Musa is greater than Dr Kamal. You remember last year Dr Kamal gave me medicines and ointments for my aching back and nothing came of it?'

'Hajji Musa is not an ordinary doctor.'

'What are doctors of today,' Hajji Musa said, biting into a large slice of cake, 'but chancers and frauds? What knowledge have they of religion and the spiritual mysteries?'

'Since when have you this power to heal, Hajji Musa?'

'Who can tell the ways of Allah, Bibi Fatima. Sometimes his gifts are given when we are born and sometimes when we are much older.'

'More tea?'

She filled the cup. He took another slice of cake.

'Last month I went to Durban and there was this woman, Jasuben, whom the doctors had declared insane. Even her own yogis and swamis had given her up. I took this woman in hand and today she is as sane as anyone else.'

'Hajji Musa, you know my back still gives me trouble. Dr Kamal's medicine gave me no relief. I have even stopped making roti and Joggi is very fond of roti.'

'You should let me examine your back some day,' the healer said, finishing his tea.

'Why not now?'

'Not today,' he answered protestingly. 'I have some business to attend to.'

'But Hajji Musa, it will only take a minute or two.'

'Well that's true, that's true.'

'Will you need the candle and water?'

'Yes.'

She hurriedly went to refill the glass with water.

'Please, Jogee and Ahmed, go into the kitchen for a while,' she said, returning.

We left the room, Jogee rather reluctantly. She shut the door. I sat down on a chair and looked at a magazine lying on the table. Jogee told me he was going to buy cigarettes and left. He was feeling nervous.

I was sitting close to the door and could hear Hajji Musa's voice and the rustle of clothing as he went on with the examination.

'I think it best if you lie down on the settee so that I can make a thorough examination ... Yes, that is better ... Is the pain here ...? Bibi Fatima, you know the pain often has its origin lower down in the lumbar region. Could you ease your ijar a little ...? The seat of the pain is often here ... Don't be afraid.'

'I can feel it getting better already, Hajji Musa.'

'That is good. You are responding very well.'

There was a silence for some time. When Jogee returned Hajji Musa was reciting a prayer in Arabic. Jogee puffed at his cigarette. When Bibi Fatima opened the door she was smiling and looked flushed.

'Your wife will be well in a few days,' Hajji Musa assured the anxious man. 'And you will be having your daily roti again. Now I must go.'

'Hajji Musa, but we must give you something for your trouble.'

'No nothing, Bibi Fatima. I forbid you.'

She was insistent. She told Jogee in pantomime (she showed him five fingers) how much money he should give. Jogee produced the money from his pocket, though inwardly protesting at his wife's willingness to pay a man who asked no fees. Bibi Fatima put the money into Hajji Musa's pocket.

★ ★ ★

In appearance Hajji Musa was a fat, pot-bellied, short, dark man, with glossy black wavy hair combed backwards with fastidious care. His face was always clean-shaven. For some reason he never shaved in the bathroom, and every morning one saw him in the yard, in vest and pyjama trousers, arranging (rather precariously) his mirror and shaving equipment on the window sill outside the kitchen and going through the ritual of cleaning his face with the precision of a surgeon. His great passion was talking and while shaving he would be conducting conversations with various people in the yard: with the hawker packing his fruit and vegetables in the cart; with the two wives of the motor mechanic Soni; with the servants coming to work.

Hajji Musa was a well-known man. At various times he had been a commercial traveller, insurance salesman, taxi driver, companion to dignitaries from India and Pakistan, Islamic missionary, teacher at a seminary, shopkeeper, matchmaker and hawker of ladies' underwear.

His career as a go-between in marriage transactions was a brief, inglorious one that almost ended his life. One night there was fierce knocking at his door. As soon as he opened it an angry voice exploded: 'You liar! You come and tell me of dat good-for-nutting Dendar boy, dat he good, dat he ejucated, dat he good prospect. My foot and boot he ejucated. He sleep most time wit bitches, he drink and beat my daughter. When you go Haj? You nutting but liar. You baster! You baster!' And suddenly two shots from a gun rang out in quick succession. The whole incident took place so quickly that no one had any time to look at the man as he ran through the yard and escaped. When people reached Hajji Musa's door they found him prostrate, breathing hard and wondering why he was still alive (the bullets had passed between his legs). His wife and eight children were in a state of shock. They were revived with sugared water.

Hajji Musa's life never followed an even course: on some days one saw him riding importantly in the chauffeur-driven Mercedes of some wealthy merchant in need of his services; on others, one saw him in the yard, pacing meditatively from one end to the other, reciting verses from the Qur'an. Sometimes he would visit a friend, tell an amusing anecdote, laugh, and suddenly ask: 'Can you give me a few rands till tomorrow?' The friend would give him the money without expecting anything of tomorrow, for it was well known that Hajji Musa, liberal with his own money, never bothered to return anyone else's.

Hajji Musa considered himself a specialist in the exorcism of evil jinn. He deprecated modern terms such as neurosis, schizophrenia, psychosis. 'What do doctors know about the power of satanic jinn? Only God can save people who are no longer themselves. I have proved this time and again. You don't believe me? Then come on Sunday night to my house and you will see.'

On Sunday night we were clustered around Hajji Musa in the yard. As his patient had not yet arrived, he regaled us with her history.

'She is sixteen. She is the daughter of Mia Mohammed the Market Street merchant. She married her cousin a few years ago. But things went wrong. Her mother-in-law disliked her. For months she has been carted from doctor to doctor, and from one psychiatrist to another, those fools. Tonight you will see me bring about a permanent cure.'

After a while a car drove into the yard, followed by two others. Several men – two of them tall, bearded brothers – emerged from the car,

approached Hajji Musa and shook hands with him. They pointed to the second car.

'She is in that car, Hajji Musa.'

'Good, bring her into the house.' And he went inside.

There were several women in the second car. All alighted but one, who refused to come out. She shook her face and hands and cried, 'No! No! Don't take me in there, please! By Allah, I am a good girl.'

The two brothers and several women stood beside the opened doors of the car and coaxed the young lady to come out.

'Sister, come, we are only visiting.'

'No, no, they are going to hit me.'

'No one is going to hit you,' one of the women said, getting into the car and sitting beside her. 'They only want to see you.'

'They can see me in the car. I am so pretty.'

Everyone living in the yard was present to witness the spectacle, and several children had clambered onto the bonnet of the car and were shouting: 'There she is! There she is! She is mad! She is mad!'

'Come now, Jamilla, come. The people are laughing at you,' one of the brothers said sternly.

Hajji Musa now appeared wearing a black cloak emblazoned with sequin-studded crescent moons and stars, and inscribed with Cufic writing in white silk. His sandals were red and his trousers white. His turban was of green satin and it had a large round ruby (artificial) pinned to it above his forehead.

He proceeded towards the car, looked at Jamilla, and then said to the bearded brothers, 'I will take care of her.' He put his head into the interior of the car. Jamilla recoiled in terror. The lady next to her held her and said, 'Don't be frightened. Hajji Musa intends no harm.'

'Listen, sister, come into the house. I have been expecting you.'

'No! No! I want to go home.' Jamilla began to cry.

'I won't let anyone hurt you.'

Hajji Musa tried to grab her hand, but she pushed herself backwards against the woman next to her and screamed so loudly that for a moment the healer seemed to lose his nerve. He turned to the brothers.

'The evil jinn is in her. Whatever I do now, please forgive me.'

He put his foot into the interior of the car, gripped one arm of the terrified Jamilla and smacked her twice with vehemence.

'Come out, jinn! Come out, jinn!' he shouted and dragged her towards the door of the car. The woman beside Jamilla pushed her and punched her on the back.

'Please help,' Hajji Musa said, and the two brothers pulled the screaming Jamilla out of the car.

'Drive the jinn into the house!' And they punched and pushed Jamilla towards the house. She pleaded with several spectators for help and then in desperation clung to them. But they shook her off and one or two even took the liberty of punching her and pulling her hair.

Jamilla was pushed into the house and the door closed on her and several of the privileged who were permitted to witness the exorcism ceremony. As soon as she passed through a narrow passage and entered a room she quietened.

The room was brilliantly lit and a fire was burning in the grate. A red carpet stretched from wall to wall and on the window sill incense was burning in brass bowls. In front of the grate were two brass plates containing sun-dried red chillies.

We removed our shoes and sat down on the carpet. Jamilla was made to sit in front of the grate. She was awed and looked about at the room and the people. Several women seated themselves near her. Hajji Musa then began to recite the chapter 'The Jinn' from the Qur'an. We sat with bowed heads. When he had done he moved towards the grate. His wife came into the room with a steel tray and a pair of tongs. Hajji Musa took some burning pieces of coal and heaped them on the tray. Then he scattered the red chillies over the coals. Smoke rose from the tray and filled the room with an acrid, suffocating smell. He seated himself beside Jamilla and asked the two brothers to sit near her as well. He pressed Jamilla's head over the tray and at the same time recited a verse from the Qur'an in a loud voice. Jamilla choked, seemed to scream mutely and tried to lift her head, but Hajji Musa held her.

As the smell of burning chillies was unbearable, some of us went outside for a breath of fresh air. Aziz Khan said to us: 'That primitive ape is prostituting our religion with his hocus-pocus. He should be arrested for assault.'

We heard Jamilla screaming and we returned quickly to the room. We saw Hajji Musa and the two brothers beating her with their sandals and holding her face over the coals.

'Out Iblis! Out Jinn!' Hajji Musa shouted and belaboured her.

At last Jamilla fell into a swoon.

'Hold her, Ismail and Hafiz.' Hajji Musa sprinkled her face with water and read a prayer. Then he asked the two brothers to pick her up and take her into an adjoining room. They laid her on a bed.

'When she wakes up the jinn will be gone,' Hajji Musa predicted confidently.

We went outside for a while. Aziz Khan asked a few of us to go with him in his car to the police station. But on the way he surprised us by changing his mind.

'It's not our business,' he said, and drove back to the yard. When we returned Jamilla had opened her eyes and was sobbing quietly. 'Anyone can ask Jamilla if she remembers what happened to her.' Someone asked her and she shook her head. 'See,' said the victorious man, 'it was the evil jinn that was thrashed out of her body. He is gone!'

There had been the singing of hymns, chanting and the jingling of bells since the late afternoon, and as evening approached there was great excitement in the yard. Everyone knew of the great event that was to take place that evening: the Hindu fire-walker was going to give a demonstration.

'There is nothing wonderful about walking on fire,' Hajji Musa declared in a scornful tone. 'The Hindus think they are performing miracles. Bah! Miracles!' And he exploded in laughter. 'What miracles can their many gods perform, I ask you? Let them extract a jinn or heal the sick and then talk of miracles.'

'But can you walk on fire or only cook on fire?' Dolly asked sardonically. There was laughter and merriment.

'Both, my dear man, both. Anyone who cooks on fire can walk on fire.'

'If anyone can, let him try,' said the law student Soma. 'In law, words are not enough; evidence has to be produced.'

'Funny, you lawyers never get done with words. After gossiping for days you ask for a postponement.'

Everyone laughed boisterously.

'Hajji Musa,' Dolly tried again, 'can you walk on fire?'

'Are you joking, Dolly? When I can remove a jinn, what is walking on fire? Have you seen a jinn?'

'No.'

'See one and then talk. Evil jinn live in hell. What is walking on fire to holding one of hell's masters in your hands?'

'I say let him walk on fire and then talk of jinn,' said Raffia the dwarfish Hindu watchmaker, but he walked away fearing to confront Hajji Musa.

'That stupid Hindu thinks I waste my time in performing tricks. I am not a magician.'

A fire was now lit in the yard. Wood had been scattered over an area of about twenty feet by six feet. An attendant was shovelling coal and another using the rake to spread it evenly.

Meanwhile, in a room in the yard, the voices of the chanters were rising and the bells were beginning to jingle madly. Every now and then a deeper, more resonant chime would ring out, and a voice would lead the

chanters to a higher pitch. In the midst of the chanters, facing a small altar on which were placed a tiny earthenware bowl containing a burning wick, a picture of the god Shiva surrounded by votive offerings of marigold flowers, rice and coconut, sat the fire-walker in a cross-legged posture.

The yard was crowded. Chairs were provided but these were soon occupied. The balconies were packed and several agile children climbed onto rooftops and seated themselves on the creaking zinc. A few dignitaries were also present.

The chanters emerged from the doorway. In their midst was the fire-walker, his eyes focused on the ground. He was like a man eroded of his own will, captured by the band of chanters. They walked towards the fire which was now glowing flames leaping here and there.

The chanters grouped themselves near the fire and went on with their singing and bell-ringing, shouting refrains energetically. Then, as though life had suddenly flowed into him, the fire-walker detached himself from the group and went towards the fire. It was a tense moment. The chanters were gripped by frenzy. The coal-bed glowed. He placed his right foot on the fire gently, tentatively, as though measuring its intensity, and then walked swiftly over from end to end. He was applauded. Two boys now offered him coconuts in trays. He selected two, and then walked over the inferno again, rather slowly this time, and as he walked he banged the coconuts against his head several times until they cracked and one saw the snowy insides. His movement now became more like a dance than a walk, as though his feet gloried in their triumph over the fire. The boys offered him more coconuts and he went on breaking them against his head.

While the fire-walker was demonstrating his salamander-like powers, an argument developed between Aziz Khan and Hajji Musa. 'He is not walking over the fire,' Hajji Musa said. 'Our eyes are being deceived.'

'Maybe your eyes are being deceived, but not mine,' Aziz answered. 'If you know anything about yogis then you will know how they can pass off the unreal for the real.'

'What do you mean by saying if I know anything about yogis?' 'He thinks he knows about everything under the sun,' Hajji Musa said jeeringly to a friend. He turned to Aziz.

'Have you been to India to see the fakirs and yogis?' 'No, and I don't intend to.'

'Well, I have been to India and know more than you do.'

'I have not been to India, but what I do know is that you are a fraud.'

'Fraud! Huh!'

'Charlatan! Humbug!'

'I say, Aziz!' With a swift movement Hajji Musa clutched Aziz Khan's wrist.

'You are just a big-talker and one day I shall shut your mouth for you.'

'Fraud! Crook! You are a disgrace to Islam. You with your chillies and jinn!'

'Sister ...!' This remark Hajji Musa uttered in Gujarati.

'Why don't you walk over the fire? It's an unreal fire.' And Aziz laughed sardonically.

'Yes, let him walk,' said the watchmaker. 'Hajji Musa big-talker.'

'The fire is not as hot as any of your jinn, Hajji Musa,' Dolly said slyly, with an ironic chuckle.

'Dolly, anyone can walk on fire if he knows the trick.'

'I suppose you know,' Aziz said tauntingly.

'Of course I do.'

'Then why don't you walk over the fire?'

'Jinn are hotter!' Dolly exclaimed.

'Fraud! Hypocrite! Degraded infidel, you will never walk. I dare you!'

'I will show you, you fool. I will show you what I can do.'

'What can you show but your lying tongue, and beat up little girls!'

'You sister ...! I will walk.'

While the argument had been raging, many people had gathered around them and ceased to look at the Hindu fire-walker. Now, when Hajji Musa accepted the challenge, he was applauded.

Hajji Musa removed his shoes and socks and rolled up his trousers. All eyes in the yard were now focused on him. Some shouted words of encouragement and others clapped their hands. Mr Darsot, though, tried to dissuade him.

'Hajji Musa, I don't think you should attempt walking on fire.'

But Dolly shouted in his raucous voice: 'Hajji Musa, show them what you are made of!'

Hajji Musa, determined and intrepid, went towards the fire. The Hindu fire-walker was now resting for a while, his body and clothes wet with sweat and juice from broken coconuts, and the chanters' voices were low. When Hajji Musa reached the fire he faltered. His body tensed with fear. Cautiously he lifted his right foot over the glowing mass. But any thought he might have had of retreat, of giving up Aziz Khan's challenge and declaring himself defeated, was dispelled by the applause he received.

Crying out in a voice that was an invocation to God to save him, he stepped on the inferno: 'Allah is great!'

What happened to Hajji Musa was spoken of long afterwards. Badly burnt, he was dragged out of the fire, drenched with water and smothered with rags, and taken to hospital.

We went to visit him. We expected to find a man humiliated, broken. We found him sitting up in bed, swathed in bandages, but as ebullient and resilient as always, with a bevy of young nurses eagerly attending to him.

'Boys, I must say fire-walking is not for me. Showmanship ... that's for magicians and crowd-pleasers ... those seeking cheap publicity.'

And he laughed in his usual way until the hospital corridors resounded.

The Spirit of Two Worlds

The old woman pounded the spices in a wooden mortar. She sat on a grass mat in the sartorial position adopted by generations of women before her. It was cool under the mango tree and the gentle susurrations of the breeze among the leaves was like the voice of God murmuring His comfort. Out there it was quiet and she could think her thoughts in peace as she prepared the mangoes for pickling. But today her thoughts were not very pleasant. They were troubled and she was forced to acknowledge the disturbing fact that there was rebellion in her household. Ever since Veeran, her youngest son, had married, there was dissension in her home. He hadn't heeded her advice and had obstinately followed his own desires. So now he reaped the consequences. But a shadow hung over her normally peaceful household. Nothing pleased her new daughter-in-law. Nothing was good enough for her. She complained that the semi-detached house in the Indian township was too cramped and that there was not much diversion in the district. Her discontent and aloofness did not invite intimacy and she remained isolated. She kept to herself, joining the family only when necessary. The other daughters-in-law were tolerant at first but now there was an open resentment. It was time, they maintained, that she took interest in the family and did her share of the housework. She couldn't deny the truth of it. Sharda was headstrong and wilful. By bringing in her new ideas and an alien lifestyle, she had upset the smooth running of her home. In her days, oh in her days, none of this would have been permitted, she lamented inwardly.

Radha, her eldest daughter-in-law, came out to her. 'You like some tea, Ma?' she asked, speaking in Tamil.

The old woman nodded and as she watched her go again, she thought how good and obedient a daughter-in-law she had been. She always wore a sari and her hair was still long and worn in a simple plait. No task was too much for her. Not when it came to doing things for her.

Radha returned with the tea that frothed like beer in an enamel mug. Just the way she liked it, she thought sipping it slowly. The hot, fragrant

brew dispelled some of her depression. She wished Radha would go away and leave her to her thoughts. But Radha lingered.

'There is trouble,' Radha informed her. 'Now she wants to go to work. He said she cannot go to work. She was very angry.'

The old woman sighed but refrained from comment. She did not ask how she came by such knowledge. In the rather cramped living conditions of the council house, nothing was very private. Quarrels became public and one's tears, unless one cried quietly, were heard by all. Radha went on, giving her all the details, but the old woman stopped her with a gruelling gesture. She rose and went indoors.

Veeran stood at the window looking out vacantly. Sundays were usually so peaceful, the old woman thought as she studied him. Sundays were meant for outings, attending weddings and functions and visits to relatives. Now Sundays were torn by strife and tension.

'What is wrong, my son?' she asked quietly.

He did not turn around. She sensed his humiliation and hurt.

'She wants to ... work,' he said reluctantly.

'Then let her work, my son,' she said.

He turned and regarded her with disbelief.

'You ... want her ... to work!' he exclaimed.

She shook her head sadly. 'No, I don't want her to work. But if that is what she wants and if it will make her happy, then let her work.'

He turned away, his jaw setting in a grim, obstinate line.

'She doesn't have to work,' he pointed out.

'All women are not the same,' she reminded him.

'She says she is dying of boredom,' he told her.

Boredom. She left him then and went back to sit under the tree where she reflected upon this new and alien plague which afflicted the young. Her mind went back over the years searching for something that remotely resembled this malady, but there was nothing. There had been hardships, countless sacrifices which had been made willingly, much pain and heart-break and some rare and memorable moments of joy and happiness, but never boredom. She had married at thirteen, a child bride in an arranged marriage. In those days one did not question these things, merely complied with one's parents' wishes and submitted silently to whatever was arranged. She had nine children, six of whom had survived. An early marriage was followed by early widowhood and at forty she found herself alone at the helm. She hired a stall in the Indian market and managed to keep the family together. Over the years her struggle eased a little when her children were educated and settled in comfortable jobs. Soon she was able to give up the stall and retire, and so come to a quiet port.

But there were so many lessons in one's life that one could not pass on to the young.

Sharda went to work as a hairdresser in an elegant new salon in Durban. The old woman wondered whether her new-found financial independence brought her any happiness. She bought a whole lot of new clothes, all modern and fashionable. Her short hair was styled often and in different ways. There were murmurs of jealousy and resentment among the other daughters-in-law. Even Radha fell prey to this.

'What does she work for? Only her clothes and her perfumes! While we stay at home like slaves, she lives like a queen!' Radha observed acidly.

But that was only the beginning. Having got her way once, Sharda demanded other things. Her heart heavy with grief, the old woman looked on while Veeran weakly surrendered to her whims. Sharda learned to drive and demanded a car of her own. Bus journeys were long and tedious, she maintained. With a car of her own, she could get home earlier and have more time. More time for what? the old woman wondered. He was as malleable as clay in her hands. It was not right. No woman ought to have that much power over any man.

The car was small and sleek. The day she brought it home, the other daughters-in-law stood at their windows and watched her furtively. She drove with an enviable ease, and they could sense her irrepressible excitement as she sprang out of the car. But her pleasure was short-lived.

At supper that night the family sat around the table in a grim silence, united in their resentment and disapproval. For once, Sharda was not immune to their feelings. At first she ate in quiet defiance. A small knot of anger began to form at the pit of her stomach. It was unfair! What had she done that was wrong? Was it her fault if she could not fit in with their narrow conformity? Surely not! She rose abruptly and left the room. The silence around the table intensified. The old woman watched her go with a heavy heart.

In the weeks that followed, the old woman tried to hold her disintegrating family together. But the task was too much for her. There were lessons in this for her too. She was discovering that her matriarchal authority had its limits and had to give way to a way of life that was rapidly becoming the norm. The things her generation had cherished and valued were being replaced by an alien culture which sacrificed love and caring on the altar of Mammon and whose devotees foolishly pursued the things of the flesh. The old woman took her troubles to her gods in prayer. But there were no answers. Her heart heavy with grief, she saw the rift between her and Sharda widen and was powerless to halt the inevitable. And the inevitable came one afternoon when Veeran announced that he was

moving out on his own. The old woman received the news in chill silence. Her initial reaction was one of grief and then anger. Anger because he was allowing it to happen. He didn't want it to happen but he was giving in to his wife once too often. She studied him for a long moment, undeceived by his outward composure. He did not meet her eyes directly for he feared the betrayal of his true emotions.

'Are you sure you want to do this, my son?' she asked quietly.

It took him a long while to answer, and when he did it was with an effort.

'It ... is ... for the best.'

Surely he did not believe that! She rose and left the room and he did not see the naked pain in her eyes.

She sat in her room for a long while, her hands resting in her lap, numb with pain. He had been her youngest son and her best loved. Perhaps that had been a mistake. Sons were not yours to hold. They were arrows to be released into the world.

The old woman read the surprise in her daughter-in-law's eyes. For the first time they were confronting each other directly. For a long moment their glance met and held. It was the younger woman who looked away first. The old woman recalled the day Veeran told her of his wedding plans. He had met her at a party, he said. She was very pretty and so full of fun. She hadn't objected to his choice but had merely advised him to wait. But he hadn't waited. Alas, the young wanted everything quickly and easily.

'So you are splitting my home,' the old woman commented.

The younger woman's glance wavered. Then she straightened and her glance sturried.

'No, that's not true. All I want is to live on my own. Is that wrong?' said Sharda.

The old woman did not reply for a long moment. 'Have you slipped so far from our teachings that you've forgotten a son's first duty is to his mother?' she reminded grimly.

Sharda looked up and met the old woman's eyes. There was none of the old defiance or antagonism. But in the wordless silence the old woman studied her for a long while. There was strength in silence. She would not give her the satisfaction of having the last word. 'You came to this house in peace, so leave in peace. You are leaving this house on your free will. All I ask is that you look after my son. You have my blessing and I hope you will be happy. If this is your wish, then let it be. But know this, you too will have children. And you too will need them in your old age. I hope when you do, they will be there.'

Sharp words sprang to Sharda's mind then. She wanted to remind the

old woman that her son's duty was now to his wife. That times had changed. That she had tried to fit in with her family but had failed. But something within her checked her. Something of her mother's teachings came to her mind. She looked away. The old woman's words touched a chord in her mind and, dimly, she recalled something about respect for the elderly and submission to one's husband. Did these things really matter in these times? Perhaps they did. Who was she to question these things? Her world, her generation had all the questions but no answers.

Sharda and Veeran moved into a flat in Durban. Occasionally they came to visit the family. With time, the old woman came to accept the change. Some of the hurt was gone. But although she treated Sharda with the fairest consideration, she could not easily forgive her. Pride would not allow her to acknowledge defeat. There were some things she would not give in to. Like visiting Sharda. On special occasions, Sharda would try to get her to visit her, but the old woman always declined. When pressed for reasons, she maintained a tight-lipped silence. She was determined that nothing would make her yield to that. On one occasion, Sharda left in tears, chagrined by the old woman's obstinacy. The old woman watched her go and savoured the lone power of triumph. Let that be a lesson to them, she thought. She was not putty in their hands, to be moulded according to their will. Age did not mean easy capitulation to the whims of the young. She would not bend to their will! The winds of change were blowing down all the old pillars, but there were some things she would not easily give in to. There were times when the thought came to her mind unbidden, that perhaps she ought to bow to change gracefully, while time and strength were on her side. But she harboured the thought only fleetingly. The old, unyielding core of obstinacy would come to the fore, she would be strengthened in her resolve to remain adamant.

One morning Veeran came to see her. She wondered why he should call so early. She sensed his excitement and knew it meant good news.

'Ma, Sharda has a son,' he announced. 'You must come and see him.' She received the news with mixed feelings. Her grandson. A new life, a new beginning. This was a moment for rejoicing, for thanksgiving. For a long moment, she struggled with herself, longing for the release of surrender. Her spirit was tired and she was strongly tempted to call a truce. Wordlessly, she followed Veeran to the car.

Later, as she held the child in her arms, she recalled another birth in the distant past, when she cradled her last born who looked so very much like this child. She looked at Veeran and smiled.

'He's a beautiful child and he looks just like you did,' she said. 'Sharda will have to give up work now,' he pointed out.

The old woman turned to Sharda. When their eyes met, there was a new gentleness, a new peace in the old woman's eyes.

'No, she doesn't have to. I will look after the child,' she stated serenely. She put the child down and rose. The spirit of two worlds had emerged in a new beginning.

The Sacrificial Lamb

Before Siziwe was fully awake, the receiver – cold, hard and decidedly unfriendly – jabbed at the not-fully-awake flesh in the hollow between her shoulder, the pillow, and her ear. She did not remember how it had got there. There was a vague memory of the phone ringing; but even as she had struggled to hold it, sleep had left her in frustrating confusion with a tantalising overlap between reality and dream. But, of course, the phone must have rung, otherwise why had she picked up the receiver? And now, to the remote peep-peep announcing an overseas call she mumbled, ‘Hello?’ – relief washing through her. It was not the police, calling about her daughter, Fezi. She glanced at the bedside clock-radio thinking, *where, on earth, is that child?* Just then, a voice came through the line.

‘Hello? Is that you, Sisi?’

‘Yes, it’s me. Who is this?’ She no longer recognised the voices, her nieces sounded so grown to her whether on the phone or in their infrequent letters. No doubt, Siziwe was sure, distance and nostalgia accelerated and augmented the changes she perceived: with them ... with her.

‘Is everything all right?’ she asked; a new anxiousness replacing the earlier worry. What if her mother were ill? What would she do then? Go home? Or sweat it out here till ...? What would be the point of going then? But even as she argued with herself in her mind, she knew: of course, she would go.

‘Sisi, it’s me, Nozipho. Everything is fine; after a manner of speaking, that is. What else can we say?’

‘What has happened? Is Ma okay?’

‘Mama is okay. She says can you call her back?’ And before she could say yea or nay, there was a clang and the line went dead.

She leapt out of bed and went to make herself a cup of coffee. Might as well make myself comfortable, she thought. Calling Gala was never a simple operation. The call had to go via the telephone exchange ... and the Gala Telephone Exchange was slack and inept, and often the lines were down.

The coffee burned her throat the way she liked it. Her mind went back to that long-ago day, the day she had not known would be her last for her to see her father. One would have thought there was a way of feeling, of sensing, of somehow presaging such an event; a kind of body seismograph, reading her the foreshadowing symptoms. But no, despite her great love for him, she had looked at her father, talked to him and then walked away from him with a casual goodbye. Next thing she knew, the sturdy tree that had given her shade from scorching sun and shelter from the storms of life had fallen.

On the second attempt, much to her amazement, she got through.

'Hello, Sisi? It's still me, Nozipho. There's something I forgot to tell you.'

'Yes, Zips? What is it?' She tried not to think of the money she was paying, listening to idle chatter. Sheer waste.

'I have written you a letter and given it to Bhuti Wallace. He is coming there and we gave him your address and telephone number. Please, Sisi, do respond positively to my request. Do not disappoint me, you know I have no one else I can depend on.'

'What is it?'

'No, I can't say it now. Wait till you get the letter.'

'That bad, is it?'

'No, it's not!' A burst of thrilling laughter fractured her speech. 'Sisi, I must get off this phone.' Siziwe knew what was coming. She could hear her mother grumbling in the background. 'Ma is giving me her wicked look. You know her. Bye, Sis.'

'Bye!' Had she heard? wondered Siziwe for her 'bye' collided with her mother's 'Hello, Siziwe!' as belaboured breathing replaced Nozipho's breezy prattle on the line.

'Hello, Ma! Are you all right?'

'Siziwe, my child, the Lord keeps on minding us. But the devil is also busy, derailing us every which way we turn.'

'What is the matter?' And she had the presence of mind to stop short of adding the 'now' burning the tip of her tongue. But the irritation seared her brain. Can they never call just to see how I am doing? Is each telephone call always only going to be about some catastrophe?

'MaTolo is in hospital.' There was a slight pause, no doubt her mother waiting to hear her reaction to this piece of news. But Siziwe waited too ... Whatever she said would end up upsetting her mother; she did not seem ever to come up with anything kind to say about her eldest brother; a complete wash-out of a man.

'Our kind neighbour, Majola, took him to Gunguluza Hospital in his car.'

'What is the matter with him?' This time she was forced to say something since her mother had gone silent on her.

'We really don't know what happened to him. Saturday, early evening, some people come and told us that he was lying, face down, at the corner of NY 1 and NY 3. When we got there, we couldn't even recognise him. Half his face had caved in, probably hit with a brick – what they call the Wonder Loaf here. He was completely covered in blood that had already caked. As yet, no witnesses have come forward to say who did what to him.'

'But what about him? What does he say happened?'

'He can't even say one word, my child. All he does is groan. He does not even recognise those who have been to see him. I, myself, have not been to see him; could not bring myself to go ... no, I just couldn't go and see him looking like that ... like a corpse.'

'I am sorry, Ma. I'm really sorry.' And, to her surprise, she realised that she meant what she said. Of course, she was only sorry for the worry MaTolo's troubles always caused her mother. Her sisters and brothers were slowly killing the poor woman; ageing her and wearing her down fast with all the troubles they visited on her: drunken brawls, job loss caused by bad work habits, unemployment due to lack of qualifications, and a host of other causes besides. The same problems that plagued everybody else in the black townships ... why did she allow these things to disarrange her? Why would her family be any different from all the others?

Once more, her father's words of farewell led her to a decision. Often had she wondered whether they were a blessing or a curse. '*Mna, kuphela eyam intlungu yeyenyama*. My pain is only that of the flesh.' Thus had he thanked her ... or, perhaps ordered is more like it ... for those words had forever after directed her actions ... especially towards her mother.

Even so far away, in this strange land, among people whose ways were stranger still, she still heard those words. *While other men in this ward cry, not because of physical pain but because they do not know what their children will eat that very day or a man's family is being thrown out of the house because they owe rent money, I am at peace because you, my daughter, see to the needs of the family.*

'So, we thought we should ask for some help from you, my child.' Her mother's voice broke into Siziwe's reflections. 'I know we are forever bothering you with all these stupid problems these children are always getting themselves into. But, what else can we do? Who else can we turn to?'

There was a moment's awkward silence. The unspoken words ... '*Now that your father is no longer here*' ... heavy between them.

Had her father, in thanking her for giving the family financial support, in fact appointed her his surrogate?

'You must help us, my child.'

'Of course, Ma.' She was embarrassed. 'What did you think I should do?' Of course, that too was just formality. She knew exactly why they had called her ... why they always and invariably called her: Money.

'Whatever little money you can send us, will help. We have to go to the hospital to see him. What would people think and how would he feel? We can't abandon him there all on his own ... and at a time like this.'

The next morning, a Monday, she got up half an hour earlier than she usually did. She liked to start her workday punctually and purposefully; more so Mondays. She was dressed and getting ready to leave when a groggy voice asked her, 'Want a cup of coffee, Mother, dearest?' Siziwe did not trust herself to say a word in reply. But the look she gave Fezi was more eloquent than anything she could have come up with.

By nine, she had made the transfer from Chemical Bank to her mother's account with Volkskas Bank in Elliot, the nearest town to Cala that boasted such facilities as banks. Over a cup of coffee, she thought about Fezi. *Hope she makes it to class.* When the girl had eventually found her way home the previous night, Siziwe had no idea. Mama's call had come well after two; nearer three than two in fact. And after the call she had gone to see whether Fezi was in her room. Not getting a reply to her knock, she'd gently pushed the door open. And the serene bed so incensed her, blind tears rolled down her cheeks before she even knew she was crying. How many times had she told the girl, 'All I ask is that when you are busy having fun, I should not be lying awake in bed, wondering if the next telephone call will be the police, telling me you've been shot or strangled; raped, robbed or pushed in front of a moving train.'

But her daughter behaved as though the mother were a big fusspot. As if these horrendous things were not happening, every day, in the city where they made their home. As if they were something Siziwe just conjured up to frighten herself and use to chain her daughter to the house. But then, that is the privilege of the young, the singular lack of fear of death; completely believing in their own immortality.

After work, she stopped for Happy Hour at The Ritz, a cosy little restaurant patronised by the foreigners because of its international cuisine. She was meeting Nomsa, a fellow South African who had lived in New York for almost thirty years. As usual, before long their talk was about home, the country, its people and, more particularly, their families.

'Hey, Siziwe, do you want to hear the latest about my crazy family?' When she nodded her head, knowing full well that whether she wanted to hear Nomsa's news or not, hear it she would, Nomsa told her, 'My sister is unbelievable! Do you remember her?' There was a pause but not

for long. Nomsa answered herself, 'I've told you so much about her, you must. This is a woman, over forty, who dropped out of university. She is so bright, she had a first-class matric pass, passed the first two years in college with flying colours, but then, despite our advice, despite our protestations, decided she wanted to get married.

'Well, of course, that didn't last. Two children. No profession. Too proud of "My University Education" to do any job unless it is not beneath madam's status.

'Doesn't she call me, collect? Do you know how many times I have told her not to do that? Unless, of course, it is absolutely necessary: a death or grave illness, something of that nature.

'But no, each time she goes on a binge, she remembers she has this rich sister in America and calls me, but I have to pay for those calls. She is not that drunk she forgets that an overseas telephone call costs a lot of money.'

'I also had a call from home yesterday ... or, early this morning, I should say.' Siziwe interrupted, still smarting from the hole the morning's withdrawal had made in her savings.

'Ah, but your family, listen to me, your family is reasonable. Mine? Mine, is something else, believe me!'

Siziwe started to tell her about her mother's call, Then, somehow, Fezi's staying out the whole night, '... for she must have come in well after four - came in and took centre stage.

'I miss having my family help me with the children. You know, at home, this wouldn't be just my problem alone. Her uncles, my brothers, would help. So would Mama. She would talk to her, show her how to behave herself.'

'Yes, that's true,' replied Nomsa. 'Our extended family is truly a blessing. One is never alone, whatever travails one is facing.'

Siziwe nodded her head, thinking of her mother and the strength she drew from her, just knowing she was there. Whatever would she do if anything happened to her mother? She told Nomsa, 'You know something? Often, when I'm troubled, I will pick up the phone and call Mama. But, when I hear her voice, realise how far she is, I ask myself: Why should I bother her with my little troubles? She would only worry. And the Lord knows, she needs that like she needs a second head on her shoulders. And, do you know what? Just hearing her voice; just knowing she is there, I already feel better.'

'Remember what you said, some time ago?' Nomsa was looking at her expectantly.

'No. What?' Which of the numerous things she had said to Nomsa over the years was the other referring to? Well, Nomsa would just have to remind her. Siziwe waited, eyebrows raised in question.

‘You said, “Those of us who are supposed to have ‘made it’ are the ones whom, for whatever reason, the ancestors have chosen as sacrificial lambs for the family!”’

‘Oh that? Sure,’ said Siziwe, ‘but this is slaughter! And when will I save for old age? Things are changing and I would be a big fool if I expected my children to look after me when I am retired.’

‘Very true, my friend. But, as you yourself have said, we are helped to be successful, so that the family may endure. How else would so many of us have survived apartheid ... were it not for those who, despite overwhelming odds, “made it” to where they could support us?’