

NGOZI

A novel

by

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Vengeful Spirits: the writing of *Ngozi*

In an interview with Salon Magazine, Booker Prize-winner Arundhati Roy said “I don't believe anyone should write unless they have a book to write. Otherwise they should just shut up” (Jara 2). I enrolled in the MFA programme because I had a particular book that I wanted to write. A large investment of time, money and passion requires that the resulting work be worthwhile, and I made a commitment to writing a book about Zimbabwe that would lay some of my personal ghosts to rest, as well as express the experience of other white Zimbabweans under Mugabe's regime. In his seminal work on creative writing, *The Art of Fiction*, John Gardner stated:

Each writer's prejudices, tastes, background, and experience tend to limit the kinds of characters, actions and settings he can honestly care about, since by the nature of our mortality we care about what we know and might possibly lose (or have already lost), dislike that which threatens what we care about, and feel indifferent toward that which has no visible bearing on our safety or the safety of the people and things we love. (42)

This was certainly true in my case, and meant that I needed to write this particular book before I could move onto any other project. It focused on my childhood in post-Independence Zimbabwe, the political troubles there, and my subsequent departure from that country. It is a topic about which I care very strongly, and the Master of Fine Arts programme was the perfect forum in which to explore it further.

Living as a white Zimbabwean in the 1990s meant a near-perfect life: your clothes were always clean and ironed, there was always tea in the silver teapot, gins and tonics were served on the verandah, and, in theory at least, black and white lived in harmony. As

Mugabe's presidency turned sour, however, this idyllic and privileged world began to crumble into anarchy. My family and I left to escape the political violence in 2002, and moved to New Zealand. My novel *Ngozi* draws on these experiences to tell the story of one troubled white family who struggle to stay afloat in the collapsing economy and escalating horror of Mugabe's Zimbabwe. The story is told through the eyes of a young white girl, who is partly based on myself. When the farm invasions begin, the violence threatens to destroy the family's way of life forever. They eventually leave Zimbabwe, but escaping the vengeful ghosts ('ngozi') of their past still seems impossible.

Ngozi evolved from a short story. As well as standing alone, a short story can be a "single element that, if brilliantly done, must naturally become the trigger of a larger work" (Gardner 35). I wrote a short story in 2003 that was set in the period just before we left Zimbabwe, focusing on the farm invasions in 2000 and their effects on white Zimbabweans. I submitted it for the Macmillan Brown Prize, and won. It was the first time I had written about Zimbabwe since leaving, and the strong feelings I had about the topic intensified. After I had examined that single incident, I found that I wanted to explore further and open up the story to its full potential.

The themes I planned to explore in this book included: the blurring of the narrator's black and white identities; black magic and superstition overcoming white reason and civilisation; and the fragility of so-called 'normal' life. Inevitably, since the novel follows the protagonist as she grows up, another theme emerged as I wrote: the crumbling of the narrator's idyllic childhood world and innocence.

Anais Nin said "We write to taste life twice, in the moment and in retrospection," (quoted in Koval viii) which is a particularly appropriate phrase when describing the experience of writing a semi-autobiographical novel. It requires that you sift through your experiences, remember them as vividly as possible, and then transform them from personal memories into something worth communicating as a piece of fiction. To me, there was never any question of whether this should be a novel or an autobiography. In an autobiography, personal events intrude to muddy the themes and imagery of the book;

novelising the events enables an author to lift them out of the ordinary. I wanted to emphasise that this story belongs not only to me, but to every white Zimbabwean who lived under Mugabe's regime. I believe that "through the specifics of your life, you arrive at universality," (Davis 4) and make the story more powerful.

It was difficult to revisit my memories of Zimbabwe. We left in 2002, when the violence against white farmers was at its height, and since then I had tried not to think about it for fear of feeling the grief again. As I started writing *Ngozi* I noticed strange blanks in my memory, usually around the more difficult times, and it took a lot of effort to override these blanks. The process of remembering was bittersweet. Occupying that lost world again had a familiarity and joy about it. I was home. I also realised afresh, however, what I had lost. I felt it was important for the book to be emotionally charged and written from the heart, but I did not want it to dissolve into a mess of tears and angst. I tried to keep a balance between the raw emotion and the considered, thoughtful construction of a well-crafted book. If I wrote the book purely as catharsis, no one would want to read it. To this end, *Ngozi* is a composite of my experiences, research and the experiences of others. My stepfather kept books of newspaper clippings from 1998 till 2002, which have been an invaluable resource for writing this book, and also has a significant collection of books on Zimbabwe and Rhodesia that were very helpful. It is difficult to find good resources on Zimbabwe here in New Zealand, which is understandable, and without my stepfather's resources my job would have been much more difficult. I also set up small interviews with friends and family who had lived in Zimbabwe, and poached some of their experiences for the book; after significant changes, of course.

Ngozi is written in first person and present tense. I decided to write in first person in order to place the reader directly inside the narrator's experience. Norman Mailer said, "The strength of the first person is that it gives you great immediacy. The moment you pick up a book and someone is saying 'I', the reader jumps into the 'I' and feels at home" (Mailer 68). It is a short-cut to instant emotional involvement, and I wanted to create that involvement. I also wanted the narrator to be an observer, someone ordinary, who would allow the reader to have a clear-eyed view of the situation in Zimbabwe. The narrator's

childlike, innocent perspective acts as a lens through which an adult reader can see what is really happening, although it might escape the narrator herself. This is displayed in the narrator's assumptions about her lifestyle:

We are special, somehow. We do the important jobs; have nicer clothes and bigger houses. You never see a poor white person. We must have done something to earn all these nice things. It makes sense. (Mitchell 14)

The reader will see these words as ironic, but the narrator is unaware of their implications. She herself disappears. That was my intention. I did not want her to be clearly separate from the reader, an imposing character who demanded attention. I wanted her to have a degree of translucency; the reader sees through her rather than seeing her. To this end, I decided not to name her.

Writing in present tense was an instinctive rather than a conscious decision. I experimented with past tense as well, but it flattened out the text and made it less fresh and vivid. I have since come to the conclusion that the present tense worked for this book because it gave the impression that the events are still present in the narrator's life. She does not see them as being in the past, because they still affect her so strongly.

The sequence of events in the book follows the path of my life in Zimbabwe to some degree, but only as a rough guide. Eudora Welty asserted that "the events in our lives happen in a sequence in time, but in their significance to ourselves, they find their own order ... the continuous thread of revelation" (quoted in Cameron 11). Novelising the events gave me the opportunity let me highlight the "thread of revelation" rather than the actual march of time. I moved from Chinhoyi to Harare when I was very young, and it was important to me that the narrator follow this particular path as well because it represents a widening of her viewpoint, and also a narrowing; when she moves to Harare, her world opens up socially and politically, but she loses her consciousness of the Shona spirit world that was so strong in Chinhoyi. This was important as a way of widening the story's focus as the narrator grows up.

I framed the novel with a prologue and epilogue. The prologue is set in the present day and reminds us that, although the narrator is recalling her life vividly, she is somewhere else now, looking back on her life. I assume a basic knowledge of the situation in Zimbabwe on the readers' part; most people will have some inkling of the troubles there, no matter how vaguely they grasp them, and I wanted to acknowledge that. The prologue tells the reader that the narrator leaves Zimbabwe eventually, even before he or she begins reading the main text, and so produces a feeling of impending doom and inevitability about the story.

As the prologue is about loss, it was necessary to end with loss as well. The epilogue is set at the same time as the rest of the story, and deals with ghosts and death; both the literal deaths of some of the characters, and the symbolic death of the narrator's time in Zimbabwe and her Zimbabwean identity. I also wanted the epilogue to revisit the theme of Shona spirituality, which would emphasise the narrator's separation from that world as she leaves Zimbabwe. I chose to end the book before the family left, as I wanted the story to be wholly contained within one setting. I felt that including another, external setting would just dilute the impact of the reader's immersion in 1990s Zimbabwe.

A novel is "a vivid and continuous fictional dream" (Gardner 97), and the author's job in traditional fiction is to first create the dream, and then refrain from waking the reader. An advantage to writing an autobiographical novel is that the author can draw on memories to authenticate the setting and events, and thus keep the dream convincing. Although *Ngozi* did require a large amount of research, I was able to rely on my memory for a great deal of the details and sensory elements. Gardner also states that "the realist must authenticate continually, bombarding the reader with proofs" (25). I had to be aware of not only the concrete details I included, but also of the imagery and metaphors I used. They all had to work together to create an authentic atmosphere. In the first draft I made some errors and used inauthentic imagery; in an early chapter, I compared words on a page to tombstones on snow. This comparison was unlikely as snow is not something with which the narrator would be familiar. This was an occasion when

The writer distracts the reader – breaks the film, if you will – when by some slip of technique or egoistic intrusion he allows or forces the reader to stop thinking about the story (stop ‘seeing’ the story) and think about something else. (Gardner 32)

It was very important to me to have both the black and white Zimbabwean voices in the novel be authentic. I do not use a great deal of Shona or Afrikaans in the book, but I wanted to include some to further colour the setting and characters. The Afrikaans phrases I used were the most common ones that had entered into the Zimbabwean vernacular: ‘bakkie’, ‘voertsek’ and ‘ja’, for example. For the Shona phrases, I relied on my own knowledge of Shona for basic words, and emailed longer phrases to a Shona friend. At first, I translated the Shona and Afrikaans alongside each use of a word, but that intruded the author’s voice into the text. Professor Evans pointed out that it would be a more immersive experience for the reader if the Shona and Afrikaans words were left untranslated, and most of the meanings can be grasped from context.

Another advantage to writing a novel rather than a memoir was that I could include the Shona superstitions and spirituality that interested me. The ongoing themes of the spiritual world lifted the narrator’s experience out of the ordinary and gave it a greater significance. They were also important as a way of showing the narrator’s blended black and white identities and her connection with Zimbabwe, which is slowly severed over the course of the book. Her connection with Shona spirituality is very important to her in the early chapters, but it fades as she grows older, moves away from Chinhoyi and becomes absorbed into the world of the whites in the big city. Shona spirituality becomes something ‘other’ and menacing, a force which threatens to destroy her way of life and the civilisation that the whites have so carefully built:

But when I pray, the words are sucked into a vacuum. There is just darkness out there. Darkness and the old, vengeful gods of Zimbabwe, the ones who want blood-offerings and sacrifice. On a blazing blue-sky day, I can’t imagine a God

somewhere up there. Instead it feels like a bright, merciless eye pinning us to the world like bugs to a board, watching us squirm with a compassionless gaze. There are older things here than Christianity. They were here first. They are stronger. (Mitchell 351)

There are several images that repeat and resonate throughout the book. Some of them were planned, and some of them emerged on their own. I found that:

Good description is symbolic not because the writer plants symbols in it but because, by working in the proper way, he forces symbols still largely mysterious to him up into his conscious mind where, little by little as his fiction progresses, he can work with them and finally understand them. (Gardner 36)

The tokoloshe, a mischievous Shona nature spirit, is a particularly important motif that appeared throughout the book to symbolise the narrator's childhood connection with Zimbabwe and Shona spirituality. The idea of the tokoloshe fascinates the narrator from the beginning of the book, and an important early chapter follows her quest to find a tokoloshe. She finds one, and it marks her first real encounter with the spirit world of Zimbabwe. The tokoloshe also appears in the final chapter, echoing the narrator's earlier quest; then, it was playful, but now it is a serious search for a final connection with the spirit world. She knows that she is no longer welcome in Zimbabwe, and that this encounter with a tokoloshe represents her farewell to the country and to her identity as a Zimbabwean.

Another symbol that appeared in the text as I wrote was that of the snake, which represented misfortune and death. Again, like the appearance of the tokoloshe, this was unplanned; it emerged of its own accord. Its first appearance was in the third chapter, where a snake appears in the narrator's garden. Her father and gardener kill the snake by severing its head with a spade. Unconsciously, I was referencing the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden by having the snake appear in the garden, driving the narrator out. The narrator dreams of snakes that night, and the next day another snake is found in

her uncle's chicken run. At the end of the chapter she leaves Chinhoyi, and it is the beginning of the end of her innocence and childhood. When Steve receives the call telling him Grandpa is dead, he leaves the receiver "hanging there like a snake twisting its heavy head this way and that" (Mitchell 183). When the roof of the family's house begins to leak, the first sign that their world is crumbling, they watch the water "snake down the wall, coiling and hissing into the puddles when it reaches the floor" (Mitchell 340). Just before Mr Cooper is killed, the narrator sees a snake in the long grasses of the farm (Mitchell 416), and the manner of Mr Cooper's death echoes the death of the snake in the third chapter.

Some of the characters in *Ngozi* are drawn from life, but even those that are inspired by real people are not an accurate portrait of one person. It is impossible to take characters directly from life and place them on the page without changing them in some way; the author's viewpoint, prejudices and influences must necessarily intrude. Even if I intended a character to be a version of a real person, the character developed of its own volition as I wrote, as if a real person with free will had come to life on the page.

In the writing of a novel, character, setting and plot are entwined to such an extent that "... Every slightest change the writer makes in the character's background and experience must have subtle repercussions ... Thus, plot not only changes but creates character" (Gardner 46). The character of Steve, for example, began as a composite of my stepfather, my uncle and a certain Rhodesian stereotype, but soon evolved beyond that. As Steve's background emerged and I learned more about him, he became a character distinct from any real-life person. I knew that in including the character of the stepfather, I would strain an already difficult relationship with my real-life stepfather, but I made the decision to let the character go where it wanted to go without trying to curtail or direct the process. I came to the decision that "the writer must do whatever he can to avoid such trouble [hurting family, friends, enemies], but ... he cannot allow the opinions and feelings of others to stop or to interfere with his writing" (Davis 2). It was one of many "hard choices between the life and the work." (Davis 2). It was fascinating to watch these characters, many of whom were inspired by real people, develop on their own.

The most significant lessons I took away from this project were those of craft and process. For previous projects, my process had been very linear. My first published novel was a children's book that I wrote as a serial for my cousins, who were sick at home with nothing to do. I finished a chapter a night and emailed it to them. Chronological order was necessary, because they were reading as I wrote, and I assumed that would always be my process. For *Ngozi*, however, my novel-building took a very different turn. I plotted out as much of the novel as I could, but only roughly, in order to keep the writing fresh and surprising. If I could not see a scene clearly, I moved on to a scene about which I did feel confident. This change in process startled me, and at first I found it worrying; I was not writing 'properly'. I was also concerned that the act of writing did not feel fluid and easy. I thought that if the writing was difficult for me, the reader would also find it laboured. An excerpt from my diary in the first week shows how difficult it was to settle down into the process:

The book has made a stumbling progress so far, with disjointed paragraphs and pages ... I used to write with urgency, at almost the same speed at which I read, eager to find out what happened next and to reach the conclusion ... I think this book is different from others I have written. I think it needs to be written at a slower pace. But I need to tie it all together – at the moment it is very formless, just isolated incidents. It needs a thread of readability and forward momentum, and it needs more punch.

I felt that the book was developing in a haphazard way. I had to let go of my desire to assert control over the process and write the book the way it wanted to be written. Although my process was not linear, I gave chapters to Professor Evans in order of their sequence in the final book, because I wanted him to have a reader's experience. Each day I worked on four or five different scenes or chapters, but I also went back over the chapters I had already written and prepared them for Professor Evans. In my mind, I could already see the novel as a coherent whole. This made it easier to write different parts of the text at different times without its feeling disjointed.

When I began writing in earnest, I embarked on a period of reading deprivation. I considered this a way of kick-starting my writing; keeping the stream pure rather than muddying it with other people's work. Usually I read a book a day; I have a fiction habit that demands a constant diet of prose. During the writing of *Nguzi*, however, I read nothing other than articles and the occasional non-fiction book. I found that when I did start reading a novel, some of the author's style would start to creep in to my own work. Therefore, I stopped reading fiction.

I had never had the luxury of writing full-time before, and at first the expanse of time felt overwhelming. I knew that setting up a solid routine was essential, but I worried that approaching the task as I would any other job was less 'authentic' and 'artistic' somehow. I searched for writer interviews and books that supported my theory that a good work ethic did not somehow prevent the creation of 'real' art. To my relief, there were many other writers who seemed to work the way I did.

I found these quotes particularly inspiring:

'Do it every day for a while,' my father kept saying. 'Do it as you would do scales on the piano. Do it by prearrangement with yourself. Do it as a debt of honour. And make a commitment to finishing things.' (Lamott xxii)

You write. That's the hard bit that nobody sees. You write on the good days and you write on the lousy days. Like a shark, you have to keep moving forward or you die. Writing may or may not be your salvation; it might or might not be your destiny. But that does not matter. What matters right now are the words, one after another. Find the next word. Write it down. Repeat. Repeat. Repeat. (Gaiman 1)

They emphasised the dogged persistence and solid work ethic that I knew I needed to be a productive writer. John Gardner compares an artist to an athlete in terms of training and dedication (35), and I agree. I discarded my vision of the starving artist who writes when

inspiration strikes, and committed to a daily word quota. The first, optimistic figure was 4,000 words a day, but this was over-ambitious. I dropped it to 2,000, which I found was a very achievable target. Having this set word quota motivated me and gave me a sense of achievement every evening when I looked back on the day's work.

Reading Anne Lamott's famous book on creative writing, *Bird by Bird*, introduced me to the concept of a "Shitty First Draft":

Almost all good writing begins with terrible first efforts. You need to start somewhere. Start by getting something – anything – down on paper. A friend of mine says that the first draft is the down draft – you just get it down. The second draft is the up draft – you fix it up. You try to say what you have to say more accurately. And the third draft is the dental draft, where you check every tooth, to see if it's loose or cramped or decayed, or even, God help us, healthy. (25)

This idea was very helpful. I felt that to write a first draft successfully I needed to be completely immersed in my work, getting it all down as fast as possible without editing as I went. I wrote every day, whether I felt inspired or not, doggedly churning out my word quota. It did not matter if the 2,000 words I wrote that day would be deleted or completely rewritten later; what mattered was writing them anyway, and keeping the mental taps turned on. I put in the quantity, and trusted that the quality would come. Using this method, the words mounted up, and I had a first draft completed by mid-May.

The beginning and the end of the book came together more easily than the middle. At the beginning of the book, the story was new and exciting, and I was giddy with the potential of my themes and characters. At the end of the book, the drama was building to a climax, and the momentum of the story swept me along. In the middle, I needed to develop characters and themes while still moving the plot along at a steady pace and giving the book substance. Jim Butcher's essay *The Great Swampy Middle* expresses perfectly the problems that the middle of a novel presents:

It laughs and dances on the ashes of your enthusiasm. It knows full well that you are going to be its bitch from now until you somehow finish the book or else give up in despair and slit your wrists with the edge of one of those index cards you're using to try to figure out the rest of the plot. It rejoices and dances around a primal bonfire, howling its glee at the uncaring stars. The smug bastard. (1)

The character of Farai was my solution to the “Great Swampy Middle”, although I did not realise this until I started to revise the novel. She enters the story at a point where the plot has slowed down; she is colourful, energetic and strong, and wakes up both the narrator and the story.

While I was writing the last third of the book, I became mired in all my ideas, plot threads and details. I am a visual person, and find it difficult to see something clearly in my mind unless I can see it clearly in the literal sense. I wrote a brief description of each scene on a coloured Post-it note and stuck it to the wall of my study in storyboard format. This enabled me to move scenes around when I needed to, or remove them entirely. I colour-coded the Post-its according to theme. If a scene dealt with the theme of Shona spirituality, it was pink; politically significant scenes were yellow; scenes primarily devoted to developing character were green; and so on. As well as ordering my thoughts and clarifying the plot, colour-coding the post-its enabled me to see how the different themes worked in the book as a whole. I could see that in different sections of the book, certain themes were explored more thoroughly. It was a way of pinning down an instinctive and organic process. Towards the end of the book, I wrote all the remaining scenes onto Post-its and stuck them onto a section of the wall that I headed ‘To Write’. At the beginning of the day I could simply pull two or three tickets off the wall and write them up. Writing in this systematic way helped me to get through the slump in energy I experienced towards the end of the book.

Writing the final chapters, which dealt with a lot of horror and violence, was very difficult. I was writing about them during the 2008 Zimbabwe elections, which saw a recurrence of the dreadful violence and oppression. Writing about the disintegration of a

society and way of life was a heartbreaking task, particularly when new images of torture and murder appeared on the news sites every day, and I began to feel fatigued and ill. I found it difficult to keep the final chapters of the book from getting too bogged down in political events, because the narrator's life had become "absorbed into the wider drama," (Mitchell 348) and, at the time of writing, so had mine. Zimbabwe itself almost becomes a character in the latter third of the book, and it became a character in my life during the 2008 elections. The narrator muses that:

Living in Zimbabwe is like having a demanding younger brother or sister. It is loud, disruptive and badly behaved. It demands everyone's attention, sucks up everyone's energy, ruins family holidays and dinner conversation, keeps everyone up at night worrying about its future. All our problems centre around Zimbabwe's problems. It would be disorienting to be suddenly free of it – to make choices that aren't dictated by its rowdy, unignorable presence. (Mitchell 365)

Although my family actually left Zimbabwe in 2002, I decided to end the book in 2000. That was the year when the killing of white farmers escalated to its highest level. My parents sent me to live with my grandparents in England after the murder of Martin Olds, in April 2000, and although we lingered in the country for another two years, to me that was the end of our life in Zimbabwe.

When I finished *Ngozi*, the manuscript approached 125,000 words in length. I followed my first instincts, made several cuts, and the word count dropped to 115,000 within a day. The rest of the cuts were more difficult, however, and far more laborious. The most significant structural change I made was reworking the central chapters that dealt with the narrator's introduction to Sean and Mr Cooper. Originally the narrator had met Sean first, and he made a strong impression on her. By contrast, her meeting with Mr Cooper was incidental. Mr Cooper needed to emerge more strongly as a major character, since his death forms the climax of the novel, and so I reversed the order of the meetings and wrote more scenes that developed Mr Cooper's characterisation. I also took an unexpected turn with one of my characters after a conversation with Professor Evans. I had planned for

the character of Oliver to end the book defeated and destroyed, but I had envisioned that as an anticlimactic defeat. I had planned to send him to South Africa to get a corporate job, leaving his beloved Bush behind. Professor Evans suggested that Oliver needed to die in order for the reader to grasp the full impact of his symbolism. As a white man who is completely enmeshed in the Zimbabwean landscape and culture, Oliver represents a new Zimbabwe, and his death symbolises the death of hope that the new Zimbabwe can come to pass. I rewrote the scene, and Oliver killed himself.

The narrator does not age smoothly throughout the book; there are leaps forward in time when she ages a few years. My beta readers told me that these transitions were jarring, and so I decided to separate the book into parts, each headed with the year. It was a simple solution, but I felt it was the best. I did not want to make the transitions too self-conscious. The simplicity of a blank page with the year on it was an understated way of marking the transition.

Choosing the title of *Ngozi* was a difficult decision. There is a trend towards longer titles at the moment; a recent release chronicling the life of a girl in Rhodesia, *The Voluptuous Delights of Peanut Butter and Jam* by Lauren Liebenberg, illustrates this. The book is similar to mine in setting, young female narration and memoir-like structure, but I think that the title detracts from its impact. I preferred something along the lines of *Mukiwa* by Peter Godwin; one Shona word that evokes a sense of place and exoticism (to a non-Zimbabwean reader). The choice of title came down to two possibilities: *Tokoloshe*, after the mischievous Shona spirit that makes several appearances in the book; and *Ngozi*, which means vengeful spirits. The whites in the book are punished for the sins of their ancestors, and they will never be able to shake off the ghosts that follow them. Both these titles referred to the spiritual world of the Shona, which plays a significant part in the book, and in choosing a Shona word rather than an English one I felt I was removing the emphasis from a purely white experience. I decided on *Ngozi* in the end, as I felt *Tokoloshe* was light-hearted and referred to the idyllic earlier chapters of the book, while *Ngozi* referenced the later, darker chapters. I wanted to place emphasis on the

disintegration of the narrator's world towards the latter end of the book, and I wanted the haunting, foreboding feeling of *Ngozi* to be present from the first page.

I was very much aware of my position as a white Zimbabwean while writing *Ngozi*. Issues of race are present in the book, but for the most part are seen through a child's eyes. The narrator is preoccupied with her own family and their problems, and seldom thinks about the problems faced by black Zimbabweans. My desire to be honest fought with my desire not to offend. Most of the black characters in the book are servants, because that is the capacity in which the narrator would have known them. The only major black character who is not a servant is Farai. I realise that this may be difficult for someone with a Western sensibility to understand, but it was more important to me to accurately portray the prejudices with which the narrator grew up than it was to be 'politically correct'. I was sensitive, however, to the fact that black Zimbabweans suffered far more than the whites. In an interview with Peter Stanford for the online edition of *The Independent*, Peter Godwin expresses this perfectly:

As a white writing about Africa, I always feel quite self-conscious ... The suffering of blacks in Zimbabwe is many multiples of what white suffering is. I take that as a starting-point. And I do find the idea of whites writing about what is predominantly black suffering a bit rich. (1)

I felt that the story needed to be told, however, even if it was from a white perspective. I felt the burden of expressing the experience not just of myself and my family, but of hundreds of other white Zimbabweans, and I tried to live up to those expectations. These words of Susan Sontag's resonated with me:

... I have a very exalted, very idealistic idea of literature, because of my own experiences, because of what literature has meant to me. So when I write something, I ask myself this question, this really big question – is this book necessary? (216)

I believe the reason I was able to stay focused and work hard on *Ngози* was that I felt a compulsion to get the story out, and that I felt the story should be heard. Writing a novel is a long, difficult process. It requires daily commitment and the motivation to keep going on the darkest days. The only thing that will keep an author focused and enthusiastic about the project is passion for the material and the characters. I set out to write a book where the reader could see “a slow, sick disintegration of a way of life” (Mitchell 400). If the people who survived this disintegration do not think, talk and write about it, the whole experience would be meaningless and unbearably sad. A famous piece of writing advice states ‘write what you know’; I was writing to find out what I knew, to pick up the puzzle pieces of my life in Zimbabwe and see if I could form them into a picture that made sense. Milan Kundera argues that “the novel's purpose is not to uplift us, or to provide moral guidance, but to make us less afraid” (Salter-Reynolds 1). Peter Godwin expresses a similar sentiment:

Writing is the way I deal with things. Writing it down will make it safe...

Otherwise what has happened is just too sad. It's just literally, terminally sad. And writing is all I've got. (Stanford 1)

I wrote *Ngози* to make my life in Zimbabwe safe and sane, expressed in a creative work rather than wreaking havoc in some unexplored area of my subconscious. It is the book I needed to write. Now that it is finished, I can see my experiences with greater clarity and meaning, and I hope that clarity and meaning will be passed on to its readers, as well.

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NGOZI

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Prologue

It is a choice. We are not chased out by war vets brandishing axes; we are not forced to fly out at midnight, as my aunt and uncle did, carrying their half-asleep child and a suitcase of possessions. Yes, we are told to go, but we do not have to listen.

Not only do we leave behind the intangible things ('home', that strange and inescapable true north; history; pride): we leave behind a rubbish tip of Stuff. All the toys I have lost in the garden over the years. The bobby pins I dropped behind the dressing table. Cat hair in the carpet. A tiny body buried in a shoebox at the bottom of the garden. My mother's jewellery. The dead bodies of my grandparents, crumbled into ashes at their old church. The rifles and bayonets my stepfather threw down the borehole and concreted over. The books. The furniture. The cat, the chickens, the whole menagerie that lived with us. The endless memorabilia and detritus of three lives lived in one house. We leave fingerprints on the walls and footprints on the wooden floor. The ghosts, however, come with us.

It is a choice. We have lived our whole lives with one foot in Somewhere Else. There was always a backup plan, a secret stash of money, the whisper of a plane ticket. We always knew we were going to leave. The question was when.

Our house was known as Fort Knox. It had broken glass on the six-foot fence, burglar bars on all the windows, padlocks on all the doors.

“When we get broken into,” said my stepfather, not quite believing it, “then we will go.”

The night came. Smashing glass, a yell, footsteps down the corridor. My stepfather brandishing a cricket bat. A perfect dusty footprint in the space where the computer used to be. And we did not go.

It took a murder. After weeks of fear, when rumours and the truth were indistinguishable. It took a blood offering to the old gods. There was no other way for it to end. Everything crumbled, from the pot-holed roads and the dying crops to the bodies of the dead.

And finally, we left.

I find it hard to remember. It happened to someone else, a long, long time ago, back in the time when stories happened. There are genuine gaps where I remember nothing.

“The strength of a fish is in the water.” I never understood this Shona proverb until I was away from Zimbabwe. For a start, it is a landlocked country, and Harare is the most landlocked city in it. To me fish seem weak – voiceless, legless, with gulping mouths and beseeching eyes. Things that are left gasping when the water dries up, as it does in the hottest summers. They are imprisoned in the water. But you can grow to love a prison.

And I loved mine.

Last night, I dreamed I was back there. I felt the acacia thorns under my feet, and the baking heat of the sun. I heard the hum of the crickets, a sound I never noticed until it was gone forever. I walked to our front gate. Through the bars I could see our garden, raucous and vivid behind high, broken-glass-topped walls.

There may as well be an angel at the gates now, keeping me at bay with a fiery sword. I cannot go back. I can never go back. The place where I used to live is gone forever.

I walk through my house now breathing clean, dry air. The weather is mild, the sky thin and pale. I hardly ever see an ant. My dishes and clothes are cleaned by a machine rather than black hands, and the cat that wraps itself so elegantly around my ankles is not the same prowling, midnight cat who condescended to live with me so many years before. Something leaves me gasping here, and dried out. Something is slowly evaporating. I have tried to capture it, but it slips golden through my fingers and is gone.

Part One

1990

Chapter One

Her skin is smooth and many-coloured, like old pewter. My nose is buried in the sweet, meaty smell of her armpit, where it curves to meet her breast. She jiggles me on her lap.

She sits, legs outstretched, against the sun-warmed wall. I hear a stream of language that lingers on long vowels. Each sentence she speaks is met by a chorus of women's voices, in agreement or mild horror or quiet amusement.

“Eh-eh.”

“Oh-oh.”

Comfortable, lazy sounds. They have settled in for a long gossip. I have started to understand more and more words now, in what they say – the muddy water of conversation flows past, but the occasional word stands out in bright meaning. Amai; mother, or a term of respect for an older woman. Mangwanani; good morning. Maiwe! – variously, oh my goodness, you don't say, I can't believe it.

The earth is red and baking, the sun almost invisible in a white-hot sky. I stare at the ground, an endless source of amusement, covered in ants, worms, chongololos and beetles. I watch red ants swarm over the body of a rhino beetle stranded on his back, who rocks back and forth in dumb bewilderment. Beauty (my nanny) reaches out a hand and flicks him over onto his front. I am torn between happiness at the beetle's redemption and faint disappointment that I couldn't watch him die.

Occasionally a man passes by this coven of women, a pair of legs stretching up higher than I can see, even if I squint. He is usually wearing overalls of thick, scratchy fabric. The women become more subdued when a man passes, only a few daring to laugh with him or call a remark. I know that black men (apart from our gardener) are something to be feared, like strange dogs or hot ovens, and I stay silent, glowering from under my floppy sunhat.

“You are starting school soon?” one of the women says to me in English. Her hair is glistening and oily under her dhuku, a brightly-coloured tangle of cloth tied over her head.

I hide my face in Beauty’s arm. My glasses bump against her skin and smear. These are a new addition, prompted by my mother’s discovery that I was covered in bumps and bruises from walking into furniture I could not see. I am still not quite used to wearing them, but I enjoy the new discoveries they bring – for example, that dirt isn’t just a smooth swathe of colour but has individual grains.

“She starts Grade Nought next week,” says Beauty, also speaking in English, so I know the remark is partly directed at me. I am not sure how I feel about starting school.

“What is this Grade Nought? How can there be a Grade Nothing?” says another woman. They all laugh and I feel embarrassed, although I don’t know why.

“It is before Grade One,” Beauty explains.

“Oh-oh.” The other woman says something in Shona that I can’t understand. I am getting a little sleepy now.

“Beauty,” I take a handful of her uniform and tug on it.

“We must go now,” she excuses herself, and stands up with a great deal of exclaiming and brushing away of dirt and ants.

We make our way up the hill, our hands clasped and sweaty. When I get tired, Beauty hefts me onto her shoulders. On the way home we pass women who carry their babies in slings on their backs. Little round macadamia-nut faces peep over their shoulders.

“Mangwanani!” we say as we pass. I don’t know how the word looks – words are still just spiky black-and-white to me – but I imagine it like a long chongololo, a black and yellow centipede, unfurling. It is satisfyingly long and enjoyable to say.

The road is red dust and tyre tracks. We pass houses with green lawns – house grass is always green. All the other grass, especially in The Bush, is golden brown like baked bread, but grass by houses is green and squeaky to walk on. There are always sprinklers going along the side of the road, and if I am quick I can let go of Beauty’s hand and run through them. Even though it is so hot, the water is always too cold. I like the sprinklers that go sput-sput-sput across the grass, then quickly unwind and spin backwards with a hiss. At home my sister and I are allowed to strip to our underwear and run through the sprinkler, with our dog running around us barking and getting wet.

There are four of us at home, not counting the dog or the servants – Mum, Dad, my sister and me. My mum is beautiful and young. Dad has a moustache and grey hair. My sister is two years younger than me, and alternates between being a playmate and a nuisance.

We are nearly home now, at the top of the hill. Everything is brown up here except for our house. I like where we live because there are houses in front of us and to the side of us, but not behind. Behind is the Bush. In the Bush, you need to wear proper shoes, not even flip-flops, because acacia thorns can come right up through the rubber and stick into your foot. The Bush is prickly and dry and hot, and full of buzzing things that bite you. Beauty told me that it is also full of spirits, and you must not insult them when you are walking because they will make you get lost for ever.

Once I went walking in the Bush with my dad. He brought sandwiches and a fat, heavy compass. He put a red cloth down where we were standing.

“We will see the red cloth and know that this is where we started walking,” he said. He shook the compass a little and started the needle swinging. “And the compass makes sure that we know how to get back.”

We walked away from our red cloth, carrying our rucksacks. After a while I got hot and tired. There was nowhere to sit. A fly was trying to land on my eyeball.

“Bluddy flies,” said my dad. I wondered if this counted as insulting the Bush. I thought it did. I said, “I don’t mind,” even though I did mind, just in case.

“We’ll go back now,” said my dad.

We turned around and followed the compass. After a few minutes my dad started to look worried. We could not be too far from the house, but it was impossible to tell – every part of the Bush looked exactly the same. I started to feel very tired and grumpy.

I asked if we were lost.

“No, no,” said my dad, but his moustache looked worried.

I started to panic. Beauty had told me about tokoloshes – spirits that could look like monkeys with horns, or little children without faces. They were mischievous and quick to take offence. I did not know what to do to appease them. The Bush suddenly looked malicious, and the light was fading. I blinked, and through the film of tears saw a sharp face winking from a tree.

“Ah, here it is,” said my dad with relief. He reached up and snatched the red handkerchief down from a branch. “I wonder how it got up there.”

I knew how, but I didn’t say anything in case the tokoloshes were listening.

We reach home. I know that Mum will have a tray of ice lollies in the fridge. I let go of Beauty’s hand and run up the driveway.

Mum waves at us. “Hello! Did you have a good walk?”

“Yes, Medem.” Beauty lets go of my hand and I run towards Mum.

There are visitors on the stoep. There are always visitors. Chinhoyi is a small town where everybody knows everybody. People are always coming up to me and pinching my cheek, or patting me on the head, because they know my parents. They have names like Hennie and Pieter and Nicky and Marie. We have to call them ‘Auntie’ or ‘Uncle’, even though they are not our real aunts and uncles. The men all wear shorts and long socks like Dad does, and they have hairy legs. The women have sunglasses pushed back on the top of their heads. I hold a handful of Mum’s skirt as everyone says hello.

There is always some new gossip. When people come over they drink gin and tonics in short glasses and complain about their servants, who always seemed to be stealing or doing something stupid.

“Did you hear about Hendrik?”

“Ja, his house boy took off with their safe, hey.”

“Typical bluddy munt.”

“He had worked for them for years, apparently. It just goes to show ...”

“You can’t trust them.” Someone stubs out a cigarette. Everyone is smoking, and the ashtray is overflowing.

“It’s his own fault for putting temptation in their way.”

“Ja, no, hey.”

‘Ja, no, hey’ is a long way of saying ‘yes’ or ‘no’. If you are saying ‘yes’ you nod your head and raise your eyebrows, and if you are saying ‘no’ you say the ‘no’ part louder and shake your head, and the words go down at the end.

Everyone agrees that Hendrik was too soft with his servants. If you are too soft and sweet here you are snapped up like a fat buck by a crocodile.

I ask if I can go to my room and play.

“Ja, but it is nearly lunch time. I’ll ask Beauty to come get you in a bit, hey?”

“Okay. Where’s Lucy?”

“Sleeping.”

So there’s no one to play with. Beauty has disappeared, probably to go and work in the kitchen. Poppy the dog is lying on the cold stone of the verandah floor, panting and looking imploringly up to the adults in case they drop a potato chip. I go to

my room and get out my toys, but I can still hear the adults talking on the verandah. They sound like “ugh ugh ugh.”

Even though I have not started school yet, I am very busy during the day. These are good games to play in the garden: spotting an ant lion’s tiny burrow in the red soil, and mimicking the footsteps of an ant with a slender twig. Watching the ant lion emerge in an avalanche of dust, pounce on the stick, then disappear beneath the surface, disappointed. Finding a chameleon on a branch and letting it walk along your hand, feeling its scaly feet loop and scrape along your fingers like Velcro. Spending half an hour with a sharp rock and a concrete slab trying to break open a macadamia nut. Catching black beetles and keeping them in an old ice-cream tub with some grass and a bottle-cap of water.

“Be careful,” my Mum is always saying.

I know that we are not really welcome here. There are too many things that can kill you: snakes, leopards, hippos, hyenas, charging elephants, spiders. There is potential death or pain in every step. Even the plants are out to get us. There is a plant in our garden that oozes milk when you break it, and is Deadly Poisonous, Mum says. There is also one called Morning Glory that will make you go mad if you eat it, and one covered in tiny yellow fibres of spines that will stick under your skin forever if you touch them. Walking barefoot, my sister and I have grown hard and crusty soles on our feet to protect against acacia thorns lurking on the ground, or those tiny plants with white spiky flowers that grow on the lawn. Every expedition outside is accompanied by insect repellent, sunscreen, a hat and calamine lotion. Every activity is dogged by unseen dangers. Our

parents are eternally dabbing things on us, pulling out splinters or bee stings and slapping on plasters. A day does not pass without a cut or bruise.

Mum irons everything we wash, including underwear, sheets and pillowcases. You have to iron everything because of the putzi flies. I have never seen any, but I have heard the horror stories. Mum has told me that they live in cloth, and then burrow into your skin and lay eggs under it. When the eggs hatch, dozens of putzi flies crawl out of your skin and fly away. It is a disgusting but fascinating idea, and I would quite like to see it in action.

Going to bed at night is also fraught with danger. All the windows have burglar bars, and all the doors have padlocks. We have to check all of them are closed and locked before going to sleep, and then set the alarm. The night presses against the windows and tries to find a chink, but it cannot get in. I have a night-light; a little china castle with two china mice standing outside. It keeps the night back behind the windows, where it belongs.

I play in my room and think, and half-listen to the visitors through the open window.

“Those bloody munts. If we hadn’t come here they would still be killing each other.”

They are always saying things like this. Or they say, the blacks would still be slashing and burning, there would be no land for farming, there would be no water, hospitals, roads, schools. But all this doesn’t matter. You can’t win.

“They should be bloody grateful.”

But they aren't, anyone can see that. I don't understand. It seems like bad manners.

I know from listening to the adults that black people are like children, but also that they are cunning and not to be trusted. I also know that they do all the jobs like packing bags at the supermarket, begging on the street and driving buses. There are lots of them, like busy worker ants scurrying about around spilled juice on the kitchen floor. It is hard to tell them apart unless you know them personally, like we know Beauty. Women are always 'girls' and men are always 'boys', no matter how old they are. My dad is called 'Baas' and my mum 'Medem'.

We are special, somehow. We do the important jobs; have nicer clothes and bigger houses. You never see a poor white person. We must have done something to earn all these nice things. It makes sense.

I go to sit with Beauty and the other servants in the garden. They eat big bricks of peanut butter sandwiches, and their tea is sweet and milky, in big enamel cups. Beauty sometimes gives me a corner of her sandwich – one without crusts, because I do not like them, even if they are supposed to make your hair curly. I don't know how she can eat so much peanut butter. It is hard to chew and makes my mouth sticky. For dinner, Beauty has told me that she eats sadza and relish, and sometimes she will stir in a big dollop of peanut butter.

Poppy flops down next to us as well, hoping for the crusts that I won't eat. We have a big 'Chenjera Imbwa' sign on our gate, but people don't really need to beware of Poppy at all. Dad calls her his soppo dog, or Soppo Poppy.

I lean up against Beauty and listen to her talk. The noise is soothing. It has been a long day. I hear the sound of laughter and clinking ice from the verandah, and I feel content.

Chapter Two

When I do start school, it is Beauty who comes to collect me at the end of the day. The kids there are tough. Farm kids. They wear scuffed shoes at school and no shoes whenever possible. At playtime they play rough games that involve a lot of chasing and wrestling, and my glasses pop out of their frames more than once. I am relieved to leave this strange world of other children, giant crayons and finger-painting to go home to my dog, my sister and Beauty's stories.

Beauty smells like Vaseline and Sunlight Soap in the mornings, and as the day goes by she starts to smell of fresh sweat and cooking fires as well. She teaches me a song about five green frogs, and we sing it together as she does the washing up or polishes silver on newspaper sheets laid out on the lawn.

“Five green frogs

Five green frogs

(The word ‘frogs’ must be shouted)

Where can they be?

Where can they be?

(Here you shade your eyes with one hand and look around)

Hiding away

Hiding away

Hiding away
From me!”

She also teaches me how to count to ten in Shona. I say the numbers over and over until I can recite them without thinking. “Poshi piri tatu china chishanu tanatu nomwe sere pfumbamwe gumi.” I learn a strange mixture of English and Shona words that have the local farm workers cackling with delight when I visit them.

She tells me about totems.

“Mitupo are the animal spirits that protect the family,” she says. She is polishing the floors, which always puts her in a contemplative mood. I sit on a rag, my legs crossed, so as not to spoil the wooden floor with footprints. “My totem is the buffalo. Like the buffalo, I am strong.”

“Does it also mean you are fat like a buffalo?”

Beauty takes a swipe at me with the duster. “Don’t be cheeky.”

“What’s my animal?”

Beauty sits back on her haunches. “I do not know if you have one.”

“A cat?”

“Why not?” She clicks her tongue and gets back to her work. “Remember, it is unlucky to kill your totem animal.”

“I’m not going to kill a cat.” I remember a dead kitten I saw on my aunt and uncle’s farm – one of the wild ones. They have farm cats that live in the barns and give birth to endless litters of tiny tabby kittens. This one had not survived. When I found it, it

was partly eaten away by maggots and ants, its body falling apart into sandy crumbs when I poked it with a stick. I was fascinated, and went back to visit it every day until it disappeared – either removed by one of the farm workers or carried off by some animal.

“Still, you remember,” says Beauty, and I nod. It feels like a solemn vow. She reaches into the pocket of her uniform and pulls out a little bundle. I can see feathers, twigs and leaves, tied together with twine.

“What is that?”

“It wards off evil spirits.”

“Evil spirits?”

“Like tokoloshes. Or ngozi.”

I know what tokoloshes are, but I have never heard of ngozi.

“What are ngozi?”

“Ghosts who are looking for revenge.” Beauty puts the bundle back into her pocket.

“Can I have one too?”

“I will make you one.”

On the weekends Beauty dresses in white robes and goes to meetings. She does not talk about where she goes, but I know it is to some kind of church. When we are driving to church on Sundays I sometimes see big groups of people, all in white, standing under a tree singing in effortless harmony. It looks a lot more exciting than our church, which is in a big stone building that smells of old newspapers and where we have to stand up, sit

down and kneel, like a big game of Simon Says. I ask Beauty if her church is like ours and she purses her lips.

“It is not exactly like yours.”

“What do you do?”

“We sing, and we praise God.”

“Why?”

“Because we are grateful.”

“What for?”

“Everything.”

Beauty wears a cross around her neck all the time. Sometimes I think it is strange that she wears a cross and carries a talisman at the same time. I ask her about it, and she explains that although she worships God and Jesus she also has to be careful of the spirits and make sure to keep her ancestors happy. When I tell this to Mum, she shakes her head and smiles, but does not say anything.

Beauty goes to consult the n’anga, the witchdoctor. Someone in her family is very sick, and she thinks they have been cursed. She has to see him on a day when she should be looking after me, and so I have to go with her. I am sworn to secrecy.

“Why is your aunt cursed?” I ask with great interest.

“Shush.”

“Did she do something bad?”

“Kwete.” No.

“But why would someone ...”

“Shush! It is not lucky for you to speak of these things.”

A worrying thought occurs to me. “Could I be cursed?”

“I do not think so.”

“Why not?”

“I do not think our curses work on white people.”

“Oh.” I think about this. “What if a white person cursed me?”

“White people do not have magic like this.”

I feel insulted. “We might have.”

“No.” Firmly.

I try a different tack. “What is the n’anga like?”

“He is an old man.”

“Does he wear a hat?” I have a confused impression of a pointy hat with stars.

“Yes. Now we have to go. Stay quiet, hey?”

“Okay.”

I trot along beside Beauty. We are going to a part of town that I have never been to before. There is no grass or flowers here, just red dirt. People stand in front of their houses sweeping the ground until all the grass has gone and it is all red and dusty. Dad makes jokes about these people. He calls them Sweepers.

“Now there is a red-breasted Sweeper,” he says, pointing out of the car window to a man in a red shirt. “It is a shy and retiring specimen.”

In this part of town there are more Sweepers than I can count. There are also thin dogs with their ribs showing and their tails down, and picanins in shorts and colourful shirts. I have only ever passed through here in the car before, on the way to my

uncle's farm. On the quieter dirt roads my sister and I are allowed to stand in the back of his bakkie, wiggling our toes carefully on the corrugated floor to avoid the rusty patches, holding on to the roll bar. It is a treat with a catch; although it is exciting to feel the hot wind, your eyes become crusted with red dust and you are chased by a crowd of small black children trying to jump onto the tow bar.

Now they look at me curiously as I trot along beside Beauty.

"Hello! Hello!" they shout, showing off their English. I stare at them loftily, secure in my position as a Baas's daughter, and say nothing.

We pass a shebeen, a drinking hall. There are a few men outside, sitting on the edge of the verandah, drinking Chibuku Scud. It is a sweet beer that comes in big plastic tubs. I persuaded our gardener to let me have a sip once, and it tasted like milky sweetcorn and batteries.

Beyond the tin-roofed houses I can see huts. The walls are made of earth, and the roofs are thatched.

"The n'anga lives here," said Beauty. She looks nervous. "You must be quiet, you hear?"

I nod.

There is a sign outside, written in blue paint on a white-washed stone. There are two words and a number.

"What does it say, Beauty?"

Beauty got her High School Certificate and is always happy to show off her learning. "NGANGA. DIVINER. 122."

“What does the number mean?”

“It is his address.”

Of course. I follow Beauty as she walks up to the hut door and knocks.

“Gogogoi.”

I like that word. It means “Knock, knock,” like the jokes.

The n’anga is a younger man than I had expected. He wears a feathered headdress that looks mangy, and one feather sticks out at a rakish angle over his ear. A leopard skin is draped across his shoulders. It is smelly and looks dusty, but Beauty tells me later that to wear a leopard skin is a sign of great power. The leopard is an important animal that produces potent muti. This particular leopard had been an old man-eater that killed a three-year-old boy from the village. When the hunters caught and killed the animal, they brought it to the n’anga, who cut its heart out of its chest and ate it before the whole village. It has imbued him with power.

“Come, come, come, come.” The n’anga’s speech is fast. “Come inside, sister.” He sees me and says something in Shona that sounds friendly enough. Beauty replies, and starts to usher me outside to wait for her, but the witchdoctor grabs my arm.

“No, no, she must come in.” He grins, showing a gold tooth. His hand feels dry and scaly on my arm. His palm is bright pink.

Beauty looks worried, but does not contradict him.

“You stay with me,” she hisses.

I am delighted. The opportunity to see inside a n’anga’s hut is too good to pass up.

It is very clean inside. The floor is swept and there is a small pit for a cooking fire. All of the witchdoctor's equipment is on shelves around the walls.

"Now, how can I help?" He speaks in English rather than Shona, giving me a sidelong glance from one yellow eye. He is showing off.

Beauty tells him the story of her aunt; how she has suddenly become sick, is coughing and covered in sweat, getting thinner and thinner. The n'anga nods gravely.

"She has indeed been cursed," he says. "It is because of something your ancestors did. But I can help."

He picks up a handful of stones and chips of bone, mutters something and throws them on the ground. He spends a while staring at them while Beauty and I wait. Then he heaves himself to his feet, straightens his loin cloth and wanders over to the shelves. He selects a jar of something orange and powdered.

"You must give this to her to mix in water and drink," he says, sitting down. "I will also make spells for you tonight and tomorrow night, asking for the curse to be lifted."

"Thank you, n'anga," says Beauty respectfully. She claps her cupped hands together in the traditional gesture of a woman receiving something from a man. I watch as she gives him a bundle of crumpled notes. I don't know how much she gives him, but I can see it is a lot of money.

"And you," he says, ruffling my hair with his scaly hand. "You are well-behaved?"

"Yes," I say. "Sir," I add.

“Good, good.” He brings down a little plastic bag of brown powder. “You must drink this. Will make you grow up strong.” He passes it to Beauty, who takes it uncertainly.

“Fambai zvakanaka,” he says to me as we walk away. Go well. It is what you say to someone who is going on a journey.

“Beauty,” I say as we walk away, “Can I have my medicine?”

“No,” she says shortly.

“Why not?”

“I told you. Black people’s medicine does not work for white people.”

“But it’s mine!”

“Shush.” Beauty picks me up and hoists me onto her shoulders. “Shall we go and get a Penny Cool?”

Penny Cools are little tubes of flavoured ice in a plastic bag. You bite off a corner of the plastic to get at the insides. I like to squish them in my hands until the ice warms up and melts a little, turning into slush, and then squeeze the slush out through the hole.

“Okay.”

The shop is not like a supermarket. It is full of colourful things: Freddo Frog bars; white Milko chocolate; Mazoe orange juice; cream soda; fake cigarettes made from sugar and food colouring; real cigarettes; Coke; a lost chicken chased out by a broom. The man behind the counter wears overalls and is missing a tooth.

“Would you like a wem?” he asks.

“A wem?”

“A jelly wem,” he explains.

“Oh, a worm!” I say, over-pronouncing the word. “Yes please.”

The man does not seem to mind my arrogance. He opens a jar and pulls out a long, multicoloured strand of gelatine. “Here is your wem.”

“Thank you,” I say.

“No, no.” The man cups his hands together and claps them with a hollow clock clock sound, like I saw Beauty do earlier. “You must say mazvita tatenda.”

I copy his movement. “What does that mean?”

“It means thank you. Two words meaning thank you.”

“Why don’t you just say one?”

“Because you are very grateful for the free wem.”

“Why do they sound different if they mean the same thing?”

“They just do.”

“Mazvita tatenda.”

“Very good.”

Beauty buys me a Penny Cool.

The witchdoctor visit sticks in my mind for days afterwards. I remember all the mysterious jars and packets of powder. He is nothing like our doctor, who is a very old man with a white coat and a jar of sweets on his desk. Our doctor does not believe in spirits. I know he doesn’t because I heard him telling my Mum.

“They’re dropping like flies,” he said, “and they blame it on spirits, or curses, and go to the bluddy witchdoctor. All they need is a packet of condoms.”

I have seen condoms before, on the side of the road. I know I’m not meant to touch them, even though they look like balloons. Beauty always tuts and turns her head away when we see one.

I ask Beauty, “Will your aunt get better now?”

“I think so, when we give her the muti.”

I hear later that Beauty’s aunt has died despite the medicine.

For a while I wonder who is better, the doctor or the n’anga. The n’anga is undoubtedly much more interesting to visit, but my mum takes me to the doctor, and she is usually right. In the end I decide that maybe the doctor and the n’anga are both right. When I have earaches or runny noses, the doctor fixes it, but as far as I know he can’t do anything about the evil spirits. And I think they exist, because everyone believes in them. Even my parents believe in them.

Beauty has told me the story of the tokoloshe she saw when she was very young. She was going to the water pump to get some water for washing, and she saw a figure standing there. It looked like a little child, but when it turned around she saw it had the face of an old, old man. It had no eyes, just sockets that were scarred and burnt as if someone had gouged them out.

“I was very afraid,” Beauty told me. “But I needed water. It stood there looking at me and I thought that maybe it wanted to drink but did not know how to work the

pump. It stepped back and let me pump some water into my bucket, and then it grabbed my bucket with its monkey hands and took a drink. Then it ran away.”

I want to see one for myself.

I decide to hunt a tokoloshe, and rope my sister in to help. There is a place at the bottom of the garden, over a small hill. Nothing is planted there because it is so dry – there is only a straggly acacia tree with white thorns, and a few tufts of khaki grass. An old, rusted tap drips red water into a pool fringed with weed and water-boatmen – insects that splay themselves across the surface of the water and row jerkily. Away from human eyes; quiet; near water. The perfect place for a tokoloshe.

I decide to treat the tokoloshe hunt as a proper expedition, and start to gather supplies. I raid the kitchen cupboard and liberate five Marie biscuits which I hide in my bedside drawer. They are a little soggy, but still edible. I also pack a torch, a map and an apple for the tokoloshe. I am unclear on what they eat, although I have an uncomfortable feeling that it might be children, but I think an apple could act as good bait or a helpful distraction.

On the morning of the tokoloshe hunt I eat breakfast with my parents, then announce that my sister and I are going on an expedition.

“Where?”

“To the bottom of the garden.”

“Oh.” They seem amused. “That’s fine.”

Lucy's face is going shapeless, the way it does when she is going to cry. I pinch her knee under the table.

"Is Beauty coming?" she asks.

I think about it. Beauty's knowledge of tokoloshes would be invaluable, but on the other hand it would take away some of the drama. I have a feeling that Beauty would laugh and humour us.

"No," I shake my head. "But I'm bringing biscuits."

Lucy brightens. She can easily be bribed with a biscuit. I even got her to eat a chongololo once for the promise of a Jammy Dodger.

We set off after breakfast. I open up the map with much ceremony and lead Lucy and Poppy on a roundabout route, circling trees and flower beds, doubling back, hopping over stones on one foot. I stop every few minutes and consult the map, then change direction.

"I'm tired," says Lucy after a while.

"We're nearly there."

"I want a biscuit."

"We can't have them now."

"Why?"

"If we eat them now we won't have them later and we'll starve."

Lucy's face goes red.

"Well, maybe one," I say hastily. I pull out one of the Marie biscuits and divide it carefully into three. Poppy swallows hers in one gulp. Lucy also finishes hers quickly. I have a special method that involves eating all around the edge again and again until it is

all gone, and so mine takes a bit longer. By the time I finish my two followers are drooping again.

“I want some juice.”

“I didn’t bring any juice.”

“I’m going back to the kitchen.” Lucy stands up.

“You can’t go back to the kitchen!” I grab her hand. “It’s miles away.”

She eyes me sceptically.

“I know it looks like it’s just over there, but it’s really very far away. You’d get lost.”

Poppy foils this attempt to play with my sister’s mind by walking over to the kitchen and collapsing on the cool concrete steps outside. A startled lizard shoots off the steps and up the wall.

Lucy seems to resign herself. “Okay.”

We resume our journey. I take a more straightforward route this time, as my sister is rapidly losing interest in the whole venture. After a few minutes we reach the appropriate spot.

“What do we do now?” asks Lucy.

I’m not really sure. I have a vague plan of using a stick as a spear and creeping through the undergrowth, but the only sticks are thorny ones and there are only a few patches of brittle grass to creep through. It is the kind of grass that sneakily draws its blade along the back of your knees and leaves red welts.

“We wait,” I say with finality. Lucy looks unimpressed.

“Can we eat the rest of the biscuits?”

I think about it. “I suppose so.”

We divide the biscuits up and eat in companionable silence. Then we sit looking at the acacia tree and listening to the slow ‘plonk, plonk,’ of the rusty tap dripping into the puddle.

“We should give this place a name,” I say. “Like Narnia.”

“Narnia.”

“No, I didn’t mean we should call it Narnia. I meant we should think of something else.”

“I don’t want to.” She is getting grumpy.

“Come look at the map.”

“No!” She gets up, with some difficulty. Her legs are short and chubby – hardly legs at all, just appendages that stick out straight ahead when she is sitting, like a teddy bear’s. “I’m going home.”

“You can’t go home! We haven’t found the tokoloshe yet.”

My older-sister authority has lost its power for the day. Lucy stumps off. I settle down to wait.

After what feels like several hours I wonder if I can go back to the house and get some toys to play with while I am waiting. That feels like cheating, though.

Soon I am feeling very hungry. Poppy wanders over to me when the sun is directly above and warming a round patch on the top of my head.

“Poppy! Come here.”

She trots over obediently, but without much enthusiasm. She is hot to the touch, and floppy, her tongue hanging out of her mouth like ham out of a sandwich. I want to use her to send a message back home, but don't know what to send. I don't have any paper or pens. In the end I just pick up a bunch of leaves from the ground and thread them all around her collar, until it looks like she has a green mane.

“Go home, Poppy!” I urge her. She looks at me, then at the house.

“Go on!”

Poppy's tail wags a little, questioningly, and then she trots off. In dismay I watch her flop down underneath a shady tree a few metres away.

“Poppy! Go home!”

She lifts one corner of her black lip in a smile.

I sit stubbornly, making a little rock garden out of pebbles and twigs. When the novelty of that wears off, I spend a while staring at the map. And then I sit. Mum comes out to check on me.

“Are you okay? Do you want to come in for some lunch?”

“I can't come in, I'm waiting.”

Mum disappears, then reappears with a sandwich and a green plastic cup full of juice. It has my special no-spill cap on. She also brings a hat, which she wedges firmly onto my head, so low that it dislodges my glasses.

“Are you sure you don't want to come inside?”

“Yes.”

I eat my lunch. Time passes. The tap drips. A persistent fly tries to land on my face. A beetle climbs over my toe. Eventually the shadows get longer and the air grows cool. The first mosquito of the evening starts to whine in my ear, followed by an ominous silence when I know it has found a spot of skin to feed on. I can hear the clinking of plates from the kitchen – Mum is making dinner. I scramble up the hill a little way so I can see the house. One light goes on, then two. I can see a silhouette at the kitchen window. It looks cosy. I start to sniffle a little, feeling sorry for myself. It is a luxurious sniffle, because I know that if I wanted I could go inside where it is safe and cosy, but I have chosen to stay out here and fulfil my quest. There is a strange satisfaction in it.

I click on my torch, shine it up into the sky and wonder if people in Space can see me. The light makes a dusty, pale cone for a few metres and then seems to vanish.

My mother calls me, and I shout back, “In a minute!” Night-time is noisy here. The crickets are ululating in the grass and the mosquitoes whine like far-away jet planes. The grass rustles and snaps. Suddenly the idea of hunting a tokoloshe doesn’t seem like a game. I turn off my torch and sit in the dark. A feeling like fear, but not quite, spreads from my chest down both of my arms.

Something moves in the acacia tree. I can taste metal in my mouth. I stay very still. I remember the apple, still in the bag, that I saved for the tokoloshe. I might as well have eaten it, because I am paralysed and can’t get it out.

A pair of round, pale eyes appear in the tree. They see me with old, old cunning. I stare back from behind my glasses. I don’t know what to do. Was I planning to catch the tokoloshe, like Pooh and Piglet setting a trap for the Heffalump? No chance of that now.

The air seems to thicken and concentrate itself around that glowing paleness. The world slows down and waits for something. I feel a horrible urge, like standing on top of a tall building and suddenly wanting to jump off, to give in to all that sucking empty air and gravity.

I force my eyes downwards, away from those of the tokoloshe. I hear a sound like cats make when they're looking at birds, a low chattering, and then nothing.

I jump up and run to the house. My limbs feel like thick sap, bendy and unreliable. The kitchen light and the moths fizzing and dying around it are the most comforting things I have ever seen.

I burst into the kitchen, sobbing. My mum asks me if I am all right. I cannot explain.

Later, my mum tells me that it must have been a bush baby I saw.

"It's unusual, though," she says. "You never see them up here. Down on the farms, yes, but ..."

I have seen bush babies before, on the farm. They have round yellow eyes that blink down from trees. But I know what I saw. And I know what I found the next day, under the tree where I saw the tokoloshe; a small bundle of herbs, a crow feather and a porcupine quill, tied together – a talisman to ward off evil spirits.

Chapter Three

This is what happens the day we find a snake in the garden.

Lucy and I are playing next to the compost heap by the big tree. We are jumping around and laughing loudly, and Poppy is jumping with us and barking. Then I see leaves and grass start to slip and move, like someone is moving the garden hose, but the hose isn't here. I scream "Snake!" and Dad comes running to scoop both of us up and grab Poppy by the collar, although I don't know how he did that with just two hands. The gardener also comes running with a big spade. Lucy and I are shut inside, behind the big French doors, and Mum is holding us. We watch Dad and the gardener circle the snake. Dad is holding the big rake and Maxwell is holding the spade. There is a sharp movement and Maxwell darts forward and crunches the metal edge into the ground. Then the snake rears up, high as Dad's waist. Its head is gone, and there is just a big red hole ringed with white. It stays there for a minute and then drops down.

Dreaming of snakes is a sign of trouble ahead, Beauty says. That night I see snakes as tall as buildings, and I am running through them trying to reach something on the other side. Since I am so small I think perhaps they will not notice me, but one of them swings down its head and hangs there, its eye on my face.

The day after the snake is killed, we drive to my aunt and uncle's farm. There is a long dirt road that makes the car hop from wheel to wheel. Sometimes I am allowed to sit in

the back of the bakkie and watch the wake of sand kicked up by the wheels, but more often I am inside to keep my clothes from getting dusty. On hot days my legs stick to the leather seats and feel like raw chicken getting slowly cooked. We can't wind the windows down because of the sand and the bugs, and we don't have air-conditioning. When I get out of the car I leave a thin layer of skin behind.

Today I am allowed to sit in the back, with Lucy, as long as I promise to keep my arm around her. Dad did not come with us today, which may be why Mum is so lenient. Lucy and I press our backs to the back window of the cabin. We pass groups of farm workers on their way to lunch and wave. We have invented a game called 'Sweet and Sour' that we play in the back of the truck; we wave at someone, and if they wave back they are sweet, and if they don't they are sour. The game has no winner, but it is fun to wave at people and see what they do. Sometimes we make faces, but we don't do that so often since we stuck out our tongues at a fat black woman with shopping and she put her shopping down and chased after us for a while with her own tongue out.

The farm is down a long dirt track. When I see the line of tall gum trees ahead, I know we are nearly there. The gum trees have bark that is pale blue and green. Their leaves are thin and whispery and smell like medicine. On the other side of the driveway is a row of long, low chicken sheds. They smell of feathers and must, and they make a racket, my Mum says.

The house is right at the end of the driveway, behind tall gates that are kept closed for the dogs. They have three dogs, two big ones and one small, and the whole house smells of them. It is not a bad smell. Phineas runs to the gate when we arrive and opens it for us. He waves and grins as we drive through, then has to run after the dogs, who always escape when the gate is opened.

My aunt waits in the doorway.

“The weary travellers!” she says.

She hugs my mum. Mum’s shoulders look bony and small.

“How are you?” My aunt looks very serious. Mum replies with something, but I have wandered inside, flanked by dogs, and can’t hear them.

We go inside, to the big kitchen where herbs and vegetables hang from the ceiling. My sister and I sit on the sofa and Mum brings us some juice and a plate of Marie biscuits. We have to sit inside for a while and eat our biscuits quietly before we can go and play outside.

My aunt jokes about everything, even Phineas. He is the garden boy, and he steals from the farm all the time. She calls him the Trinepon Man. I ask Mum about this, and she tells me that it is because Trinepon is something sticky you use to fix things together, and Phineas’s hands are so sticky that things stick to them and won’t come off – things like tools, small change and food. He can’t help it, she says.

My uncle is a big beard in the sky, on top of a long pair of hairy legs in shorts. His voice is loud and booming, and he seems angry all the time, even when he is

laughing. My mum tells me that I don't need to be afraid of him but I can't help it. Sometimes he will pick me up by my hands and start spinning me around in the air, and although it is exciting, it also makes me feel a little bit sick.

Today we are allowed to ride the horses, and one of the farm workers is sent to get them. While we are waiting, my uncle takes Lucy and me to feed the chickens.

The tiny chicks that have hatched in the incubator go onto trays, and sometimes my uncle lets us tip them out onto the shed floor. They are sweet, and very fluffy, but when there are hundreds of them running around, the cheeps echo off the corrugated iron roof and hurt my ears. I am scared of stepping on one, and I am also scared of falling over and getting buried in yellow chicks.

“Shit!” says my uncle when we arrive at the chicken house today. He calls over one of the workers and they talk, waving their arms and pointing.

My uncle tells us to stay where we are, so I do not move forwards, but I can see what they are pointing at. It is a mess of feathers and gloopy chicken poo and blood, right against the wall of the hut.

Nyoka, nyoka, nyoka, the worker says, over and over. Snake.

It is probably still in the hut somewhere, or just outside the wall. That is the thing about snakes. They do not run away after they have fed; they sit with their eyes closed and rest until they get hungry again. The chickens are all clustered in the far corner, as if they know there is a predator about. They seem quite unconcerned though, slapping about on their scaly feet and pecking at the ground.

Today is not a good day to feed the chickens. My uncle takes us out of the hut, and we blink in the sunshine. I look back and see that live chicks are already pecking at the remains of the dead one.

“We’ll just ride the horses today, ja?” says my uncle. “Don’t worry about the snake. We’ll get it.”

His hand is very heavy when he rests it on my shoulder. It is not comfortable, but I don’t want to move away because I know he is being kind.

The horse has arrived. My uncle helps me into the saddle. He lifts me up and I slide my feet into the stirrups. I am wearing flip flops, and I can feel the hot metal of the stirrup through the thin rubber. The horse’s skin on my bare legs feels hot and gritty. I pat its neck and watch a little cloud of dust rise. One of the farm workers stands at the horse’s head, holding the reins. I want to ride by myself, but my uncle hefts my sister up in front of me. She is warm and heavy, and her hair tickles my chin.

“Move back,” she complains, wriggling her bottom on the saddle.

“I can’t move back.” I push her forwards slightly. We jostle until we reach something approaching comfort. My uncle slaps the horse’s rump and says something in Shona to the worker, and we start to walk forwards. The horse’s head bobs up and down as he walks. We amble around the garden.

“Can we go out onto the farm?” I ask. The worker grins.

“Okay, Medem.” I think he is joking with the Medem part. He leads us out of the gate and onto the white dirt road. The dust is thick and creamy. We pass the chickens and fields of cows who flick their tails lazily to keep off flies. All farm animals that I

have seen have flies all over their noses and in the corners of their eyes, anywhere there is moisture.

A calf sticks its head through the fence and makes an anxious noise.

“What does he want?”

The worker stops by the fence and holds out his hand to the calf. It grabs his two middle fingers and starts sucking enthusiastically.

“Why is he doing that?”

“He think I am his mother.” The worker pulls his hand away. It comes with a wet-sounding slurp.

“Can I do that?”

The worker lifts me down. For a moment I am pressed against the rough fabric of his overalls and I can smell his stale sweat. Then I am on the ground, holding out my hand to the calf. It sniffs it, then starts to suckle.

“Sis, man!” My hand is covered in slobber. I pat the calf on the head and the slobber glues hundreds of short hairs to my hand. Mum will not be happy. I am lifted back onto the horse and we carry on.

The road is lined with long grass. At the top of each stalk is a long cluster of seeds, almost like a tall flower, coloured white or dark pink. I love these grasses. They are so pretty, and they are fluffy to touch. I have tried picking them and putting them in water, but they die within half an hour.

“How far can we go?” I ask. It is hot, and I can see beads of sweat between all the little wiry hairs on the worker’s head. My head is starting to feel sweaty around the brim of my hat, and Lucy is squirming in the saddle.

“We should go back now,” he replies. I wish I hadn’t said anything. We turn around and start back. I can feel the horse’s sides going in and out underneath my knees. He must be hot too.

We pass other farm workers, and our man stops to talk to them in rapid Shona.

“Kurumidzai!” I say when the conversation has gone on too long, and they almost fall over with laughter.

When we get back to the house, Mum and Auntie Mary are sitting on the verandah.

Mum’s napkin is in tatters in her lap, and she is twisting a little piece around her finger.

“Did you have a good ride?” she asks as we run up. There are buns and hot dog sausages on the table, and some salad. I put lots of tomato sauce on my bun. Lucy has to have hers cut up specially but I can eat the whole thing.

Today I notice something changing. Mum and Auntie Mary are watching us eat, and I know they are waiting for us to finish. I chew the last few bites very slowly, but the hot dog has to end sometime, and I can’t put it off any longer.

“I’ve got a surprise for you,” says Mum.

My sister and I look at each other.

“You are staying here tonight,” Mum says after a pause.

“Why?”

“Because it will be fun.”

I suppose so.

“Why didn’t Dad come with us today?” I feel like this is important.

“He was busy.”

“Are you staying?” I ask. Mum shakes her head. No.

I do not remember being away from Mum at night before. Lucy starts crying.

Auntie Mary comes over and gives Lucy a hug. “It will be fun. We’ll have a yummy dinner and I have ice-cream for afterwards.”

If something is really fun then people do not keep telling you it is.

When Mum leaves it is still light outside, and I start to think that staying the night won’t be so bad. It could be exciting. I love Auntie Mary’s house. They have a lot of servants, because it is a big farm and not just a house like ours. We only have Beauty and a gardener called Maxwell, but they have the Trinepon Man, Joy the nanny, a maid, a gardener and lots of farm workers. We sometimes go and play with the farm workers when they are having a meal. They always build a fire, even when it is so hot that the backs of your knees are dripping like tears, and make tea in an enamel pot. Joy is my cousin’s nanny, and I am scared of her. My cousin loves her, but that is because she is his nanny. I like Beauty better – she is soft and round and always smiles, but Joy is spiky and has big bushy eyebrows that are always frowning. She shouts at us when we are too loud and will brush us away like flies when we are being annoying. She speaks quicker than Beauty, too, and when we pass by the male workers she will answer them back with a snap. I think they are a little afraid of her too.

Joy is looking after us today. There is a big lounge at the back of the house that is far away from the main lounge, so we can play without annoying the adults. We bring the

dogs in with us and play with the dress-up box until supper time. I feel like we are waiting for something.

“When is Mum coming to pick us up?” I ask. I know she said tomorrow, but I want to make sure.

“First thing in the morning,” says my aunt. She is busy feeding our baby cousin a stick of sugarcane. He has a line of white drool hanging from the corner of his mouth.

“Is Dad coming too?” asks Lucy, perking up.

“I don’t think so.”

There is still that strange feeling of waiting. It makes me wriggle in my seat, as if someone has told me to sit still and be quiet.

At bedtime, I lie in the big bed next to my sister. I cannot get to sleep. It is so dark without my mouse-light. I can hear Lucy breathing evenly beside me and it makes me angry that she can sleep. I want to wake her up or go through to my aunt and uncle’s room, but I don’t want to step down onto the floor in case there is something under the bed.

I start thinking about the Bush outside the window. A hill rises up behind the farmhouse, covered in trees and granite rocks. I know there are snakes up there, and I have heard Phineas tell stories of jackals. I remember the tokoloshes with no faces, the ones that look like little children. I feel panic rising in my throat like vomit, but I can’t make any noises. If I was at home I would go through to Mum and Dad’s room and I wouldn’t mind them seeing me, but I am scared of my uncle and I want to impress my aunt. I give Lucy a nudge, but she just grunts and doesn’t move at all.

An owl hoots outside the window. A mosquito whines at my ear. And then I hear a snick snick sound, like claws. I lie very still in bed, so that whatever is coming will think I am asleep and leave me alone. Then I start to worry – what if it wants me to be asleep? I turn over in bed and breathe loudly.

Something thuds onto the bed, panting. One of the dogs. It licks my hand with meaty breath and settles down for the night, tail thumping. It is a comforting weight at the end of the bed and, finally, I am able to sleep.

Mum comes to pick us up in the morning. Her freckles are standing out on her face, as they do when she is sick or angry. That night, without any words, Mum and I move out. Lucy stays with Dad.

We do not move far – just down the road, to another house. It belongs to a man who I remember, a little, from those braais on the verandah. He is very polite to me, as if I were an adult. He and Mum spend a lot of time whispering together. I miss Beauty and Poppy and Dad. I even miss Lucy, although at first it is nice not having to share any toys.

After a few days, Mum tells me we are moving to Harare, leaving behind Poppy, Beauty, my dad and my sister.

As we drive out, we pass the hut of the n'anga. He is standing outside watching the road. He raises a hand and grins.

Fambai zvakana.

Chapter Four

Harare means 'he does not sleep'. It is much bigger than Chinhoyi, and there is no sign of the Bush anywhere. Mum is excited.

We drive through the centre of town, down Samora Machel Avenue. The street is wide enough for six lanes of cars, and it is lined with purple jacarandas and red flamboyant trees, and beggars. We had a few beggars in Chinhoyi, but I have never seen so many all in one place. Every pavement we pass is divided into two invisible lanes – one for the pedestrians, and one for the people sitting against the walls with begging cups held out. People in suits – black people and white people – march past the beggars without looking at them. I know that some black people are like us, the special blacks, so I am not surprised by the suits, but I have never seen so many special blacks all in one place before. Whenever we stop at a traffic light, half a dozen street kids and beggars clamour around the car.

“Money for bread! Money for bread!” one of them yells. He is about nine years old, and skinny. The whites of his eyes look like egg yolk. Mum winds up the window right in his face, and we sit in the hot, smelly air of the car watching them mouth silently outside.

“Can't we give him some money, Mum?” I ask.

“No.”

“But he wants to buy food.”

“No he doesn't.”

“What does he want to buy, then?”

“Glue,” says Mum, and puts her sunglasses on. I can see her reflection in the window, bland and faceless with the glasses on. It floats like a pale ghost in front of the crowd of street kids.

The light goes green and Steve speeds up. I look back and see the kid shaking his fist at us. Why would someone want to buy glue?

The sun is so harsh that it hurts to look at the buildings. I can smell rubber from the tyres melting on the tarmac.

“Are we living here now?” I ask Mum.

“Yes, in the suburbs.”

“Where?”

“Mount Pleasant.”

That sounds nice. I think of a green mound covered in flowers. “Is it up a hill?”

“No, but it is very pretty.”

“Are we going there now?”

“Yes, but not to our new house just yet. We are going to visit Steve’s Mum and Dad.”

“Your new Granny and Grandpa,” says Steve.

I want my fluffy toy cat. He is somewhere in the bags in the back of the car. We left a lot of things behind in Chinhoyi, but the car is still full.

I hear lots of sirens behind us. Steve pulls over quickly and the car bumps up onto the grass verge a little bit.

“It’s Bob and the Wailers,” he says.

Three motorbikes with sirens go past, then a big black car with dark windows.

And another. And another. There are nine in all, with little flags on the bonnets.

“Who is Bob?” I ask.

“President Mugabe.”

“Was he in that car?”

“Ja.” Steve looks grim.

I can’t believe it. I have just seen the president drive past. Something this exciting would never have happened in Chinhoyi.

“What happens if you don’t get out of the way?” I say.

“Everyone gets out of the way.”

“But what happens if you don’t?”

“Everyone does.”

“Can I wave at them?”

“No!” Mum grabs my hand before I even move it. “Never do that.”

I rub my wrist. I was only going to play the ‘Sweet and Sour’ game that I made up with Lucy. “Why not?”

“Just don’t.”

Harare seems to leave more questions unanswered. Steve switches the indicator on and we pull out into the traffic again.

Now we must be in the suburbs. Everything is very green, and I can see gardeners mowing lawns or watering the verges. All the houses have high walls and some of them have electric gates. Storm drains run along both sides of the roads. Mum tells me they are for carrying the water away when there is a thunderstorm. They go under driveways, through little archways that look like bridges. We have been driving for so long now that my stomach feels hollow, and I do not know yet whether I feel hungry or sick, or both. The car is hot and I can still smell the sandwiches and bananas that Mum brought with us for lunch. We ate those hours ago, but the smell has soaked into all the upholstery, and its cloying ripeness mixes with the scent of hot leather to produce a smell that seems to sum up all long, hot car trips everywhere.

We pull up at a house on a shady street. It has a big wall with broken glass on the top, and a heavy iron gate with spikes. Steve presses the intercom. He stopped the car a little too far away, so he has to open his door and lean right out. A red light flashes on the intercom and the gate begins to rumble open along little tracks.

“Do they have dogs?” I ask.

“No.”

“Cats?”

“No.”

This visit does not show much potential.

The car crunches up the gravel driveway and parks in front of the house. I see a big wooden door, which opens. This must be Steve’s dad. He has grey hair carefully parted and combed to one side, and big square glasses. He is leaning on a wooden stick

with some kind of carving on it. Steve jumps out of the car and goes to talk to his dad. I can't hear what he is saying. Mum and I sit in the car. Mum has reapplied her lipstick and blotted it onto a tissue, and is now tearing the tissue into tiny pieces.

Steve comes back to the car and opens the door for Mum and me to get out. Mum is wearing her nice sandals, the ones with the gold braid, and her hair is done. She ducks her head as she gets out of the car so as not to squish the curls.

“Thank you for having us,” she says to Steve's dad, and the voice she's using is her phone voice. It is clearer and higher-pitched. She and Steve are standing close together. I jump out the car and slam the door loudly, and no one says anything.

“Come in, come in,” says Steve's dad. “Tea?”

I wipe my feet carefully and climb the steps to the front door.

The house is dark. It has wooden floors, and the furniture is green and mustard and brown. There are little lacy cloths over the top of each chair. Steve's mum is round and smiling. She is twisting her apron between her hands.

Everyone is introduced. Hello, hello hello, long drive, hot, tea? Yes please. And juice for me. I don't know how anyone can drink tea when it is so hot outside. A maid appears, yes Medem, yes Medem. Disappears. My head feels full of liquid, sloshing about behind my eyes.

“Are you all right?” says Mum.

I tell her about the sloshing head, and everyone bursts out in relieved concern.

Sit down, have a drink, put your head between your knees. Hot day, too hot. They all nod. I think I have broken the ice for everybody, which is all very well but my head hurts. Now they are all sitting down. I have finished my juice and my head is starting to feel better. When I look up, the house doesn't seem as dark.

Steve's mother is beckoning me over. I look at Mum, who nods, and then walk over. She gives me a big brown jar with a lid, and I open it. It is full of buttons. I ask if I can empty them out.

"Of course you can," she says.

I tip the jar onto the mustard-coloured carpet and the buttons spill out like a shoal of shiny fish. There are buttons of every size and colour. There are even some shaped like little sailing boats and teddy bears.

"What are these ones?" I hold up a gold button with a coat of arms on it.

"Those are from Grandpa's police uniform."

The gold buttons are heavy and beautiful. I start organising the buttons into colours while the adults talk. The maid comes in behind me with a tray, which she puts down on the coffee table. It is silver, bright and polished, and so is the teapot and milk jug. She gives me a smile. She has sad eyes, but a sweet face.

"Thank you, Mercy," says Granny.

Mercy bobs her head and goes back to the kitchen, where I can hear her clinking dishes and running taps. I want to go with her and sit on the cool tiles and watch her legs moving about. I wonder if she has any children. I hear her call to someone out the window, and the familiar musical sounds remind me of Beauty.

I realise that Mum is trying to get my attention.

“We’re going to talk to your Granny,” says Mum. “You stay here with Grandpa.”

Steve and Mum follow Granny down the passage. I am left with Grandpa.

We sit for a moment in silence. I stare at the bobbles on the carpet. He rocks back and forth in his chair. After a moment, he speaks.

“I was in the BSAP with your grandfather.”

“What’s that?”

“The British South Africa Police.”

There are guns and swords all over the walls, and on a table there is a black stone bust of a man wearing an army uniform.

“That’s me. A fellah who sold sculptures on the side of the road did it for me. From a photograph.”

He lights his pipe, and its smell fills the room. Something like manure, a sweet, dark brown smell. I sniff.

“It’s good for you,” he says. The pipe scoots over to the corner of his mouth when he talks, and wags up and down. “Stops you getting colds.”

“Can I try one?”

“No. Not good for children.”

I see there are several pipes where that one came from, strung up on a little revolving stand.

“Do you use all of these?”

“Not all of them.”

“Why do you have them?”

“People give them to me as presents.”

Now that I have smelled the pipe, I realise what that strange smell in the house was. The walking stick is propped up against a table.

“What is this?”

I trace the carving on the stick – a monster that looks like a snake, curling around and around the stick and baring its fangs on the top. It is surrounded by tiny people carrying food on their heads.

“That is the Nyaminyami.”

“Nyaminyami.” The word sticks my tongue and the roof of my mouth together.

“What’s that?”

“The River God of Lake Kariba.”

“Mum says we are going to Lake Kariba one day.”

“That’s good. It’s a good place to have a holiday.”

“What does the Nyaminyami do?”

“He protects the river.” Grandpa settles back in his hairy green chair. “When the whites came to the Zambezi River they decided to build a dam on it, so that they could use the water to make electricity. Nyaminyami did not approve of the dam because it harnessed his power. People living around the river had to move their homes, and he did not like that either. When the whites had almost finished building the dam, Nyaminyami struck with terrible floods. The waters washed away the partly-built dam and killed many of the workers.” His voice has changed to that special story-telling voice, the one Mum

uses when she reads to me. I shudder pleasurably, being far away from any floods or water monsters. Nyaminyami's wooden eye winks at me from the walking stick.

“Some of the dead workers were white people, and their bodies disappeared into the river. The whites called the local tribesman to help them search for the bodies, and the n'anga of the tribe explained that Nyaminyami was keeping them until a sacrifice was made.”

This seems only fair. I am familiar with the eye-for-an-eye philosophy of most of the local gods.

“The whites brought a calf to the river bank, slaughtered it and pushed it out into the river. Three days later, the bodies of the missing white men appeared where the calf had been sacrificed.”

“Did they ever finish building the dam?”

“They did, but only after years of flooding and destruction.”

“So we've beaten Nyaminyami.”

Grandpa paused, idly stroking the stick with the tips of his fingers. “The whites like to think they have tamed Nyaminyami. They fought with him for ten years to build the dam. But I do not think he is tamed. I think he is waiting.”

“Waiting for what?”

“For his opportunity.” Grandpa heaves himself to his feet, placing his weight on the stick. “Would you like to see the garden?”

The garden is full of trees. Grandpa lists them as we walk: banana trees; avocado trees; macadamia and pecan nut trees; Australian cherry trees; lemon trees; acacias; and

flamboyants. All whites have nice gardens, but this one is different. The colours clash. Spiky, aggressive plants are flanked by low mists of ground cover and frills of flowers. The air smells sweet, like decay. The hum of insects is almost deafening, and I strain to hear Grandpa's voice over the top.

"I like your garden," I say, although this is not quite true. It scares me a little.

"All the gardener's work," says Grandpa. "The man's a genius when it comes to planting. He's never had any proper teaching, it's all instinct."

Grandpa has chickens in a pen at the end of the garden. They are fat, with dusty feathers and comfortable broad backs.

"Can I pick them up?"

"If you can catch them."

I reach out for one of the chickens. It flounces away, but slowly, and I manage to catch hold of it. Once I have it firmly under one arm it does not struggle, but swivels its old-lady neck to blink at me.

"Now what are you planning to do with her?" says Grandpa.

I put the hen back down, and she fluffs herself out before rejoining her friends.

"Help me collect the eggs," says Grandpa.

There are beds of straw at the back of the hen house, and there is a special roof on hinges that you can lift up. When Grandpa lifts it, I can see one egg in each bed, two in some. They are warm and round, with little bits of feather and chicken poo sticking to them. Grandpa lets me hold one in my palm. The shell feels like a stone that has been warmed in the sun.

The door to the chicken run creaks, and something moves to block the light.

“Ah, Jonah.” Grandpa continues unhurriedly collecting the eggs. “This is my new granddaughter.” He chuckles a bit.

Jonah is a tall black man with hollow cheeks and wide, staring eyes. He looks like a picture of a prophet from the Bible.

“Baas,” he says, and I see he is carrying a bucket of chicken feed. It clonks against the gate frame as he moves through.

“That’s Jonah,” says Grandpa as we leave, carrying the eggs. “His wife is Mercy. They live in the khaya.”

I can see it, beyond the vegetable garden. A little whitewashed building surrounded by a fence.

“Jonah has been with us for years,” says Grandpa. “Since I finished building the house almost thirty years ago. He started work as a houseboy, and then when he grew up I made him the gardener. He married Mercy, who is an excellent maid, and we have all lived very happily together ever since.”

I look over my shoulder. Jonah is standing perfectly still, watching us. I turn back quickly.

“Quiet chap,” says Grandpa. “A good man, though. Very loyal.”

I am looking around at the garden and so do not see what I am walking into until it is too late. There is a sickening crunch, and a feeling of softness under my foot. I am wearing flip-flops, and something hard pierces the rubber.

“Damn.” Grandpa leans down to look at what I have stepped in. He reaches out with his stick and pokes it gently.

It is a crow – a very dead one. Where I have trodden, its chest has caved in and leaked sluggish blood. Ants are already marching to its dusty eyeballs.

“Are you all right?” Grandpa asks. He examines my shoe. The bird’s beak has pierced the sole of the flip-flop.

“Don’t worry – it doesn’t bite,” he says, laughing at his own joke. He pulls out the beak and holds the shoe at the ends of his fingers. “We’ll take this to Mercy and get it cleaned up. You’ll just have to hop to the kitchen. Think you can manage that?”

I nod.

“Jonah!”

The gardener comes over.

“Bird fell down again.”

I look at the crow again. There is a rope attached to both its scaly feet. Jonah picks up the end of the rope and the bird revolves slowly, its toes curled and tangled together as if it is turning an upside-down pirouette.

“Put it back up, will you?” asks Grandpa. Jonah nods and starts towards the shed.

“Why?” I ask. I feel a bit sick.

“Why what? Oh, the crow? Well, those things are a damned nuisance.” Grandpa looks up into the branches of the pecan nut tree. Half a dozen crows have settled there, looking down at us with blank yellow eyes.

“They punch a hole in the nut with their beaks ... look, here’s one.” Grandpa stoops and picks up a pecan nut. It has a neat round hole in its side. Some of the meat is

missing, but there is still a great deal left. As I watch, an ant pops its head out of the hole and then disappears inside again.

“They don’t even eat the whole thing.” Grandpa shakes his head. “So, every so often, Jonah will shoot one and hang it in the tree. Scares the others away.”

“Like a scarecrow?”

“Exactly like a scarecrow.” Grandpa chuckles to himself.

We walk back (or rather, Grandpa walks and I hop) towards the kitchen.

Looking over my shoulder, I can see Jonah up a stepladder, reattaching the dead bird to the branches. It is revolving slowly and fixes me with a dead glare.

“Well,” says Grandpa as we reach the back door. “That was a bit of an adventure. You all right?”

“Yes.” My head is filled with beaks and feathers, exotic plants and mad prophets.

We are staying here tonight, and maybe for a few more nights after that.

“Just until everything is sorted out,” says Mum.

I dig through the suitcase until I find my stuffed cat toy, and prop it up against the pillows. Mum and Steve are in one spare room, and I am in the other by myself. There is an oil painting of buffalos over the bed and a brass bulldog on the bedside table. It smells of floor polish.

I go looking for the bathroom, but the doors down the corridor are closed and I am not sure which to open.

“Mum!”

She emerges. “What?”

“I need the toilet.”

“Oh.” She shows me the door. “Don’t forget to wash your hands.”

I go into the toilet. There is a woolly cover on the toilet roll that is shaped like a princess. Her skirt covers the toilet paper. I haven’t seen anything like this before, and it seems fancy.

I do a wee and pull my pants up. At home, we do not flush when it is just a wee. We wait until a few people have been and then flush, to save water. When there was a drought we weren’t allowed to water our garden either, and we had to share bathwater. Sometimes Mum would get in at the same time as me and Lucy, and we would play games with the soap and our plastic bath toys.

I wash my hands and go down the passage to the lounge. I can hear voices and smell something good that must be dinner.

There they are, sitting on the hairy green chairs. I sit on the ottoman again and swing my legs, banging my heels against it. Mum puts a hand on my knee to tell me to stop.

Mercy comes through. “Lunch is ready, Medem,” she says to Granny.

“Thank you, Mercy.” Granny stands up, smoothing down her dress. “You all go through. I’m just going to the powder room.”

I wonder what the powder room is. We sit down at the table. There are proper napkins, cloth ones, with brass rings around them. Mine has a zebra on it.

Granny comes back in a couple of minutes with a serious face, and says something to Mum. Mum looks at me.

“I’ll have a word,” she says.

I sit through lunch with my bum clenched, wondering what I have done. When Mercy is clearing the plates and everyone else has gone onto the verandah, Mum pulls me aside.

“It’s about the toilet.”

I am very confused. I washed my hands. I made sure there weren’t any drips. What’s the problem?

“Here in Harare, they flush after everything, even wees.”

“Okay.”

“It’s not your fault, you didn’t know. Just remember from now on, okay?”

“Okay.”

I can feel my cheeks getting hot. When we go onto the verandah, I hang behind Mum a bit. Granny gives me a serious look. I feel like I have done something disgusting. I sit on a chair and drink my juice while everyone else is stirring milk into their tea. Grandpa catches my eye and gives me a wink. I feel better.

By the end of the week, I am very bored. Mum won’t let me unpack all my toys because we are meant to be moving soon, and there is no one here to play with.

“Jonah’s girls are back from school for the weekend,” says Grandpa. “She might like to go and play with them.”

Mum nods, but Steve looks uncertain. “I’m not sure it would be appropriate ...”

“Nonsense.” Granny is brisk.

And so I meet the two girls. They are chasing each other around the vegetable patch. Granny and Grandpa let them play in the garden. Their names are Jane and Susan. I know that they will probably have Shona names as well as their English ones, but Grandpa tells me the story behind their names.

“When Mercy first fell pregnant,” he says, “Jonah was going to name the baby after me. Unfortunately, when it popped out, it turned out to be a girl. He asked me to suggest a name and, as a joke, I told him the most English name I could think of. Susan. Same thing happened with the second one.”

The girls are pretty, and shaped differently to me. They have long hands and feet, and small, neatly shaped heads with close-cropped hair. With my glasses and mousy hair I feel pudgy and colourless next to them. My features seem to get lost in the beige of my face, like thumbprints in dough, while theirs stand out in sculpted curves and planes. There are lots of colours on their skins; dull red, purple, gold, a rich brown and even a shine of blue when they are in shadow.

They stop their game and wait for me to say something.

“Hello.”

“You are the Baas’s granddaughter?”

“Yes,” I say.

We stand for a minute. I feel a fly land on my arm, then take off again.

They are playing catches. We play that at school. When I tell them that, I become an expert on catches and Susan lets me make up the rules. I make up all sorts of complicated variations – we can only use our left hands, and we can only run one way around the vegetable patch. I like ordering them about, I discover, and I like the way they obey me.

“Would you like to see our house?” asks Susan.

“Yes.”

The khaya smells like cooking fires. I can stand at the front door and see the whole house. There is only one bedroom, with a big bed and a mattress on the floor. Some cut-out pictures from magazines are taped to the walls. Next to it is a small bathroom with a concrete floor, a toilet and a showerhead sticking out of the wall. The only other room is a kitchen with a big stone sink, a stove, a table and some chairs.

“It’s so small,” I say.

Susan is surprised. “This is a nice house. You should see some others.”

“They are very bad,” says Jane.

“Oh.” Nice houses to me have pools and big gardens. I can see a doll on the mattress. Its hair has gone fuzzy.

“Do you all sleep in one room?” I ask.

“Yes.” Susan looks a bit uncomfortable.

“What about when you want to get dressed?”

“We get dressed in the bedroom.”

“But ...” I see that Susan doesn’t want to answer any more questions. “Okay.”

I think of my bedroom back in Chinhoyi, that I shared with Lucy. There were two beds, and a carpet with little roads and houses on it that we could push our toy cars on, and an alphabet blanket knitted by our grandmother.

“It’s a nice room,” I say.

There is a small noise from behind me. Susan spins round, looking guilty. Jonah is in the doorway. His skin looks blue-black in the dim light.

“She should not be here.”

“But Baba ...”

“She should not be here.”

He looks straight at me.

“Go home.”

Later, I realise I could have argued that, technically, he didn’t own his house. Grandpa did. And I was allowed to play anywhere I liked. But Jonah’s staring eyes scare me, and so I run.

“Will you come again?” whispers Susan before I leave.

“I think so.”

Chapter Five

The removal men jump down from their van.

“Morning Baas, Medem.”

Mum and Steve start showing them where all our things are. We have laid most of them out on the lawn, to make it easier. Mum has bought some furniture over the past week – a lounge suite a friend sold her for cheap-cheap (that is how Mercy says it), a bed for her and Steve, and a small bed for me.

The men start carrying the furniture up into the van. They bang the edge of the sofa against the wall and Mum winces, but they are cheerful and laughing. There is much hilarity when they almost drop one of the beds. Mum goes inside so she doesn't have to watch.

“Do you want to come with us to the new house?” asks Steve. I hadn't realized there was another option. “You can ride with the removal men if you like.”

That is much more exciting.

I am allowed to jump up between the two removal men in the front cab of the truck. The seat is disembowelled leather, leaking stuffing, and it is hot and sticky. The top of the gear stick is rubbed smooth by years of sweaty hands.

“Is there a seatbelt?” I ask the driver.

“Ah-ah, no,” he says cheerfully. “She does not work. Do this.”

He shows me how to hold the broken middle seatbelt so that it looks like it is fastened. I can see the other removal man in the window. He slams the big door shut, then

sticks his hands in his pocket and whistles as he walks towards us. He is in – he shuts the door. It takes a few goes before it shuts properly, and the whole truck shakes.

“Okay,” says the driver, and starts the truck up. It is hot and noisy, and judders like our old washing machine. I look in the mirror and see Mum and Steve getting into their car to follow us.

“Is it far?” I ask.

“No, not far,” says the driver. He negotiates the gate with hardly any room to spare. A branch squeaks and scrapes against the roof.

The other removal man turns on the radio. Crackling static, and then Shona music. It is sunshiny and jangling, with mbiras and drums. They start to sing along. I do not know the words, but I join in enthusiastically.

We have turned onto the main road now. I look out of the window. We are right next to a big yellow bus stuffed full of people. It has stopped on the side of the road, one wheel up on the kerb, to pick up another dozen passengers. I wonder how they are all going to fit in, but they seem to manage it. The roof of the bus is piled with suitcases and crates, strapped down by rope. There are some chickens in a cage on the roof, squawking and fussing.

“Look,” I say, pointing it out to the removal men.

“Eh-eh,” says one, “I saw a goat on top of a bus the other day.”

Every time we turn a corner the whole van lurches sideways. I can hear things sliding about in the back, and once I hear a bang.

“Is everything okay?” I ask.

“She is fine,” says the driver. He is still singing lustily.

After about ten minutes we pull up at a big black gate. A little door in the gate opens, and a black man in a uniform comes out. He and the driver have a short conversation, and then the gate is opened for us. The man in the uniform gives the van a playful smack with his truncheon as it goes through.

The van comes to a halt, and I jump down from the cab. I can already see Mum and Steve's car rolling in through the gate.

"Which one is ours?" I ask when Mum gets out of the car. She pulls some keys out of her pocket and I follow as she walks to our new house. Behind us I can hear Steve arguing with the removal men about something, and a lot of banging.

The new house is much smaller than our house in Chinhoyi. It is a little house which is next to a lot of other little houses, all joined together like the carriages of a train. We all share a driveway and a little patch of green in the middle that anyone is allowed to play on. All of this is contained within a wall that separates us from the big main road and from the shopping centre on the other side. There is a guard whose job it is to stand at the entrance and make sure that no one who is not a resident can come inside, but whenever I see him he is either reading a paperback with the spine bent all the way around or sitting with the black men who hang around the bottle store.

Everything is unpacked now, and my toys are spread out in my new room. I get to know the flat. I find out where the anthills are in the garden; how many pumps on the handle the toilet needs before it will flush; what the view is like from inside cupboards and on top of tables. I find the little graveyard of dead moths and flying ants that have collected

in the bottom of the outdoor light bulb. I find the bat that lives below the eaves outside my bedroom window.

There are lots of people in the Flats. There are a lot more rules here, as well. I am not allowed to go into anyone else's garden, into the guard's hut, outside the gates, or into the servants' quarters. It is very different from Chinhoyi.

"Oi!" an old lady shouts at me one day. I am in the common area, making a garden out of flowers and pebbles.

"Where did you get those roses from?" Her mouth keeps moving after she has finished talking, as if she is sucking a big gobstopper.

I point at the fence.

"Those are my roses."

"But they were outside your fence," I say.

"Don't be cheeky. Do you want me to talk to your parents?"

I shake my head.

"They're still my roses and you're not allowed to pick them. Hey? Hey?"

I nod.

"Now, buzz off."

Even the sun isn't as hot here. By the time it gets past all those buildings it is tired out, and we only have a little patch of grass to soak it up. There is no smell of hot earth, manure and cooking fires. Instead, everything smells of petrol and cut grass. I did not think I would miss the Bush, but I do. It was a scary place, but it was a scary place I

could see. Here there is nowhere I can point to and say there it is, or there it is. It could be anywhere. Somehow that is more frightening.

I sleep under a mosquito net which has a mosquito-sized hole in it. This means that I cannot relax and go to sleep; whenever I hear a whine, I wonder if the mosquito has found the opening or not. I am not used to sleeping in a room all by myself. I start having strange dreams where my bed is an operating table, or a boat, or a cage. The corners of the ceiling run away into the distance.

Mum and Steve are different here, too. In Chinhoyi they were always very serious, and at Granny and Grandpa's house they were worried all the time. Here, they are always having hushed conversations about things. Sometimes I hear Mum giggling, and I see Steve's hand creep down Mum's back. Sometimes they shut their door in the middle of the afternoon to take a nap, and no matter how much I knock on it or how much noise I make they will not open it. Mum has stopped wearing pyjamas to bed and started wearing silky things that are not as cuddly.

I miss Beauty. We don't have any servants here, and it feels strange having just us in the house. It is too quiet. When Steve and Mum are having one of their afternoon closed-door naps, I wander around the house looking at things. There is no Beauty, no Maxwell, no Poppy the dog, no Lucy, no Dad, no aunt and uncle and no workers to sit with. Just me.

There are lots of things I am not allowed to talk about. I am not allowed to talk about my dad, or Lucy. I learn not to mention them, because when I do Steve goes quiet and grim,

and then has a fight with Mum. I sometimes ask Mum how Lucy is, or what she is doing, but she will not tell me. Eventually we have a Talk.

“Steve thinks it would be better if we didn’t talk about Lucy anymore,” says Mum.

I am holding a My Little Pony. I concentrate on making it walk, and don’t say anything.

“Just pretend that Steve is your dad and don’t mention Chinhoyi or Lucy. Okay?”

She waits for a response. “Okay.”

“Good.” Mum stands up. “Do you want some ice cream?”

This is a treat. I am hardly ever allowed ice cream. “Yes please.”

The ice cream is good and sweet, but hard to swallow.

I try going into the servants’ quarters one day. I know I am not allowed there, but I do not think they will mind. After all, I used to sit with the farm workers. I wait until the little door to their building is left open, and go inside. It smells really bad in there, of sweat and shoes and old meals. I can see some people sitting in a little open courtyard in the middle of the building, and I go to join them. There is the skinny old woman who works for Mr Hewitt, and the gardener who does all the common areas, and the fat woman who works next door.

They are all talking, but they stop when they see me.

“Eh-eh!” says one in surprise. “What is that one doing here?”

I stop and stand on one leg, uncertain.

“Voertsek!” one of the maids shouts, and shoos me with her hands. That is what my Dad used to say to Poppy the dog when she got in the house.

I am acutely aware of my whiteness in a way I have never been before. I am the whitest of all white kids; fair skin and hair, glasses over washed-out eyes. I stand out.

I back away. “Sorry, sorry.”

I run back to our house. I do not tell anyone that I tried to get in to the servants’ quarters. Mum and Steve have already forbidden me from going there. I have a feeling that Beauty would be disappointed in me. Why, I am not sure.

I put up with Steve for a while, because I secretly think we are on holiday, and after a while will go back to Chinhoyi. After a few weeks, though, I realise we are not going anywhere and that Steve is going to be living with us for always. I start to be less polite to him. I do not like the way he is always touching Mum, and the way she ignores me when he is whispering things. When he tells me off one day for not putting my toys away, I fly into a rage.

“You can’t tell me what to do! You’re not my Dad! You’re not anyone!”

“Shut up!”

“I want to go home!”

He grabs my wrist to hold me still and smacks me hard. He misses my bottom on the first tries because I am wriggling, and catches me on the back and the arm before finally landing a hit. Three of those, and then he lets me go and I run out of the front door. I can hear him yelling at me to come back.

I run, trying to breathe and sob at the same time, and hide in the hedge. The guard doesn't like me to do that, but he is on a lunch break and can't see me. I sit and cry until I can't cry any more, and then I think.

I form a plan. I leave my hiding place and go into the neighbours' garden, where I know there is a geranium bush. When you crush the flowers they give off a red liquid that works like ink on the skin. If you put enough on, it goes purple and blue and looks like a very convincing bruise. I pick a few heads of flowers and run back to the hedge, where I pull my pants down and start applying the liquid. I can't really see my handiwork, even if I twist round and squint, but I put enough on that I am reasonably sure that I have a spectacular, colourful bruise.

When the bruise has dried, I go back inside. Mum is home now. I run up to her and start crying again. I am starting to believe my own story. I tell her about the bruise, and she glares at Steve. She takes me through to my bedroom and tells me to lie down until she comes back.

In a few seconds she returns, with ice.

"Show me where it hurts," she says.

I pull down my pants, displaying a bruise that I'm sure is worthy of a kick from a horse. She recoils. I bite my lip. Perhaps I have overdone it.

Mum is quiet for a minute, then lays the ice against my skin. This reveals a flaw in my plan. The pigment from the flower petals will come off when it's wet. I can feel the liquid dripping down my side, and I am sure it is already pooling in inky blotches. I glance up at Mum, and I can see in her face that she knows what I did. She doesn't say anything, though – just keeps pressing the ice against the fake bruise. We sit there for a

long time, in silence. Then Mum gives me a hug and leaves the room. She never speaks about it again.

I do try to run away one day, but I only get as far as the gate. I pack my stuffed cat in a bag along with a spare pair of socks, some biscuits and an apple. The security guard is not at his post at the gate, but a group of black men are sitting on the storm drains holding their tubs of Chibuku between their knees. They start to laugh as I approach. One says something in Shona, too quickly for me to catch.

“Come and sit on my knee,” says another, and sniggers. I hesitate in the gateway.

The guard comes up behind me and says something to the men. They laugh and turn back to their Chibuku.

“What are you doing out here?”

He is carrying one of his paperback books. I can see a pirate and a girl with long hair on the cover.

I don't reply, but he sees my rucksack and guesses. “It is not a good idea to go wandering by yourself.”

“I'm walking to my grandparents' house,” I lie.

“Oh-oh.” He sways back and forth on his heels, looking down at me. Then he asks, “Would you like to hear some of my book?”

“Yes please.”

He unfolds it so I can see the cover more clearly. The man I thought was a pirate is actually just a man with a sword and long hair in a ponytail. He is holding the

woman, and they are standing on the deck of a ship in a stormy sea. They don't seem too worried about the storm, however, because they are kissing.

“What is it called?” I ask.

“A Royal Kidnap.”

“Are there pictures all the way through?” I ask hopefully. He opens the book up and shows me. No pictures, just lines and lines of black. The book smells a bit funny, like it has been wet and then dried out. I don't know why adult books don't have any pictures in them. I notice he is missing a finger.

“What happened to your finger?” I ask.

He blows air out through his mouth. “I got in a fight,”

“With who?”

“I do not remember. It was at the shebeen.” He acts out the story. “I have drunk a lot of Chibuku, and I am saying things. Then this man, he come up to me and say stop talking all this rubbish. I say no, and he take me outside and hit me with a bhadza.”

I can see how the skin of his finger stub has puckered. It looks like a little pursed mouth. He does not seem to mind that it is gone. He is laughing at the memory.

“It came off ...” he makes a popping sound with one finger in his cheek, “and I go back into the shebeen and my friend says, what are you doing? You are bleeding all over the floor. Then I remember and I go to the hospital.”

“Oh. What did the hospital do?”

“They put a bandage on for me. I had lost the finger, so they could not sew it back on.”

I imagine a finger lying on the ground outside the shebeen, where anyone could pick it up.

“Do you want to hear this story?” Cephas asks. He opens to the bookmark that marks his place. He has a stool in his little hut by the gate, and an old kitchen chair that I can sit on. It is too high for me, and my legs start to go to sleep from dangling off the edge, so I tuck them up underneath me.

Cephas runs a finger along the lines as he reads. I don’t really understand the story, and there is too much talking in it for me, but I find his voice soothing. I sit there, nodding drowsily, until Steve and Mum arrive home. They pull up in their car and I can see they are puzzled.

“Why aren’t you inside?” asks Mum.

“I came to talk to ...” I hesitate.

“Cephas,” the guard supplies.

“Well, come inside and I’ll make dinner,” says Mum. She and Steve drive off towards the garage, and I jump down from the chair.

“You come and talk to me anytime,” says Cephas. “I have lots of books.”

Slowly Mum, Steve and I settle into a routine. Steve drives me to school every morning, early. It is only just getting light when we start the drive, and there is still mist hanging like spider webs between the trees. He likes me to sing on the drive, and I sing him the songs we are learning at school.

When everything has been nice for a while, a woman with a clipboard comes to the house. I am playing in the garden. She asks me questions about Steve.

“Is he nice to you?” she says. I can see Mum and Steve watching from the verandah. Their hands are clasped and they look worried. I shrug.

“Does he hit you?”

“Sometimes he gives me a smack when I’m being cheeky.”

“Do you like him?”

“Ja.” The woman makes a note on her pad. She is black, wearing a suit jacket and a skirt, and she has long braids that swing down in front of her face and smell like medicine.

Mum told me that I have to tell this woman I want Steve to be my dad. I wonder if Mum will ever not be my Mum, and then wish I hadn’t thought of that because it makes me feel sick.

The woman asks me some more questions, and I answer them. She wants to know all sorts of strange things. She is interested in the grazes on my elbows and knees for a while, which is silly, because everyone at school has permanent cuts and bruises in those sorts of places. She asks me about my other dad. I make my face blank and roll my toy car along the grass.

“I don’t remember.”

Chinhoyi.

“I don’t remember.”

And you have a sister?

I can see Mum at the window, looking out. Her arms are crossed and her freckles are standing out as they do when she is anxious.

“I don’t remember.”

I get ice cream that day, too.

Some papers arrive soon after that, and Mum shows them to me. She points out where my name is written, and shows me that there is now a different surname after it. Now I have to pretend that he has always been my dad, forever. We all go out to dinner to a special restaurant, to celebrate, Mum says. She puts me in my best clothes and gives me my golden bracelet to wear. I am only allowed to wear it on special occasions.

I go to show Cephas my good clothes.

“That is a very nice outfit,” he says after making me turn and walk around.

“Where are you going?”

“To a restaurant.”

He whistles. “And what are you going to have?”

“Coke and Spaghetti Bolognese,” I say firmly. I have considered this already.

Spaghetti is the height of sophistication. I know this because it is hard to eat. You have to twirl it around and around your fork until you have a big mouthful and no stray ends dangling, then pop it into your mouth quickly without getting flecks of red sauce on your face. “Then ice cream and chocolate sauce.”

“That sounds good,” says Cephas. He pulls out his latest book, and holds it casually with its cover facing towards me. This time there is a picture of a man in a white wig and a woman with a very big skirt.

“Is that a new book, Cephass?” I ask.

Cephass looks down at it as if surprised. “Oh! Yes. Would you like to hear some?”

“Yes.” I sit down on the stool. Cephass likes it when I come and sit with him. He has to be on his own all day, except when the men with the Chibuku come and sit outside, and they are not interested in his books.

Cephass starts reading from the first chapter of his new book. I sit picking at a scab on my knee, and listening. It doesn’t feel like very long before I hear Mum calling my name.

“I have to go,” I say to Cephass. He waves me off cheerfully as I run back to the flat. I arrive breathless and excited. Mum stares at me in horror.

“What on earth have you been doing?”

“What?”

She spins me around and examines my back.

“You’re filthy!”

I look down and see a film of red dust on my white shirt. From the way Mum is vigorously half-brushing down, half-smacking my bottom I assume the back is even worse.

“I was sitting with Cephass.”

“The guard?”

“Yes.”

Mum makes a small noise. “Well, we’d better get you changed. You can’t go like this.”

She marches me past Steve, who smells of aftershave.

“What are you doing?”

Mum explains in sharp words that hurt my ears. I am bundled into clean clothes.

We do not speak in the car on the way to the restaurant. When we get there I order Spaghetti Bolognese, but Mum makes me cut the spaghetti into shorter pieces so that I can pick it up with a spoon. It is not so much fun this way.

The next day, Steve finds my photograph of me and Lucy. “Why don’t I look after this?” he says, and takes it away. He does not give it back. Friends of Steve’s come over that afternoon. I hear the usual clink of glasses and ice on the verandah, and the usual talk of servants and how prices are going up. Then I hear someone ask my Mum, “How many children do you have?”

“One,” she says. “One girl.”

Chapter Six

Over the years we go to see Granny and Grandpa every week, on Sundays.

I like playing with the chickens, and when we visit, Granny lets me collect the eggs. I go into the chicken run, shut the door after me and sit with my knees drawn up until the chickens get used to having me around and peck comfortably at my feet.

I stay out of Jonah's way, but I still want to play with the two girls. I invite Susan to play Barbies with me in the garden one weekend. Mum is not too pleased about this.

I hear her telling Steve, "She always gets so dirty when she's been playing with Jonah's kids."

"Ja, but you can just tell her to be more careful."

"I don't like her messing about by the khaya. It's not clean, and she shouldn't become too close to those girls."

"Once she settles into school it will be okay."

Mum wants me to play with school friends and ask them back to our house, but I am embarrassed about what our flat would look like to a visitor. All the kids at school have big gardens and swimming pools or trampolines.

When we next go to Granny and Grandpa's house, I bring my suitcase of dolls' clothes and my three favourite Barbies. I spread out a tartan blanket on the lawn and open up the suitcase ready for a game.

Susan comes out from the khaya when she sees me. She is carrying a doll – not a real Barbie, just one of the plastic toys you can get that look a bit like the real thing. It is wearing a cotton dress and one shoe, and its hair has gone frizzy.

“What do you want to play?” I ask when she has sat down. “Shall we do a fashion show?”

“Okay.”

Susan keeps smoothing down the hair of her doll.

“Can I use any of these?” she asks, touching the clothes lightly.

“Of course,” I say, but secretly I don’t want the clothes to get dirty on the grubby body of her doll. I know I have to share, though.

We play in a half-hearted way for a while. I feel like I should offer to give Susan another outfit for her doll, to keep, but I don’t want to.

I think maybe Steve is right. Maybe I shouldn’t play with them. I don’t like feeling guilty all the time for what I have. I like playing with friends who have big gardens, swimming pools, lots of toys.

“Okay, well, see you,” I say when Mum calls me. I get up and start packing things away. I notice that Susan still has one of my Barbie dresses on her doll, but I don’t say anything. In a moment I am all packed, and she hasn’t started taking the dress off.

“Okay,” I say again. I know I should let her keep it. I have a whole suitcase full of clothes. But it is one of my favourites. I start to feel angry.

“Can I have the dress back?” I say.

“Oh.” Susan tears the Velcro fastening and takes it off. She holds it out to me. It is a wedding dress, white and silky.

I hesitate. "You can keep it."

"Oh." Susan closes her hand on it. "Thank you."

She does not sound as grateful as I would like her to be. I feel a mad urge to open up the suitcase and pile clothes up in her hands until she is forced to say thank you. How dare she not be overcome with gratitude. Now I wish I hadn't said anything.

"Only if you want it," I say.

"Okay." She puts it in her pocket. I want to shake her. I turn and go back to the house. In my bed that night, all I can think about is that dress.

The next time I come I see that the white wedding dress is grubby and some threads are coming loose. Susan's Barbie is straddling the end of the rain pipe, its hair sticking straight up. It looks like a mad bride.

That dress was a present from my grandmother in England. Doing nice things is difficult. I feel nothing but angry and Susan doesn't even seem to like it that much.

The next time we go to Granny and Grandpa's house, Grandpa asks me if I want to go and play with the girls.

"Not today," I say.

"They're going back to school next week," he reminds me gently.

"I know."

He shrugs, and ruffles my hair.

Soon after that, I make a white friend, and Mum is pleased. Her name is Leigh, and she lives in one of the Flats. She is in my class at school.

We are friends because we both want someone to play with, but sometimes we don't like each other very much. She has frizzy hair. Sometimes when she is being annoying I want to tell her so and pull her hair, but I don't. Even her name annoys me sometimes. She is always so careful to tell everybody that it is L-E-I-G-H and not L-E-A-H or L-E-E (worst of all). As if she thinks all those inaudible H's and G's and I's make her name special.

Leigh's father is quite young and has a red beard. He always has girlfriends around at their house, which has lots of glass and metal furniture and a whole wall of cassette tapes. Mum doesn't like me going into their house. They have a tabby cat and a little yapping dog, white and fluffy. When Leigh's mother comes round to visit you can hear the yelling from our house. She has frizzy hair dyed purple, and smokes cigarettes with big lipstick rings around them. I know this because she drops them in the driveway when she leaves.

Mum says Leigh is a Poor Thing.

“Why?” I ask.

“Because her parents are divorced.”

“But you had a divorce.” Should I be in the same category?

“Don't tell anyone about that.”

“Why not?”

“Just don't, all right?”

I think divorce must be something shameful. I do not mention it to Leigh.

Leigh and I play lots of games. We like to sneak down to the gate of the flat where Buster, the big dog, lives. We creep up and stay very quiet until we are right at the gate, and then we shout something. The dog appears out of nowhere and throws himself against the gate so hard that it rattles on its hinges, and then starts to bark. We run away. Every time he does this, my heart jumps and I feel so scared that I think I will never want to do it again, but I do. There is a honeysuckle bush running along the outside of the flats, and we pick the flowers and suck the nectar out of them. It is thin and tastes like sugar water.

After months of doing all the housework and working full-time, Mum decides that we need a servant. Everyone else has them, and white people have started giving us strange looks when we say we don't employ anyone. At least, that's what Mum thinks. I have heard the other servants in the flats complaining about Mum's stubborn desire to do the housework herself and take a perfectly good job away from someone who needs it.

“Just ask around, Steve,” she says. “It can't hurt.”

There is no need to put an ad in the paper. Steve just uses what he calls Jungle Drums. He tells next-door's maid that we are looking for someone, she tells her friends and the word spreads. Within the day we have people coming to our door to be interviewed.

“It's a bluddy full-time job,” says Steve.

I sit in my room and listen to the sound of people talking. I hope we find someone nice, like Beauty.

At the end of the day, Steve is exhausted. He calls Granny and complains about all the terrible people that turned up for the job. Apparently they were all unsuitable in one way or another. He hangs up with a sigh and comes back to the dinner table, but before he can start eating, the phone rings. It is Granny, saying that Jonah's brother has recently arrived in Harare and is looking for a job.

"Great, send him round," says Steve.

I am apprehensive. If Jonah's brother is anything like Jonah, I'll never dare to come out of my room again.

After dinner, Jonah's brother comes round on his bicycle. I do not see him, because they talk outside while Mum and I drink our tea, but when Steve comes in he is looking smug.

"I've hired him," he says.

"What's his name?" I ask.

"Clever."

That night I lie awake for hours watching my mosquito net shimmer and blur in the darkness. I do not want a Jonah in our house.

Clever starts work the next day. I pad through to the kitchen in my slippers, weighing my options. I can't run away. Perhaps I could talk to Mum.

But when I see Clever, I realise that he is not another Jonah. He has kind, tired eyes and clean overalls ironed into neat creases. He smells of soap. Mum introduces me and he shakes my hand as if I am an adult.

And so we have a new house boy. It seems strange to have a man working in the house, and I miss Beauty, but we only have a tiny garden and so we don't need two people working for us. I watch Clever for a few days as he goes about his business. When I gather up the courage, I ask him questions.

Is he married?

No.

Does he have children?

No.

I follow him around for a while. He has a way of polishing that is almost like stroking the furniture. He is careful to vacuum under things, rather than just around them.

Why is he called Clever?

Because his mother thought that if she gave him that name, he would live up to it.

Oh.

When he has his tea, he sits outside on the lawn. His tea is in a big enamel mug with a chip out of the rim, and he eats a peanut butter sandwich. I sit with him. His peanut butter is thinly spread and he eats neatly, without crumbs.

Steve buys me a bike for my birthday. It is pink, with little tassels on the handles. He and Mum watch anxiously as I walk up to it. I am not sure about this gift. On the one hand, all the other kids have one and I have felt left out. On the other hand, I do not know how to ride a bike, and so perhaps I would rather have had a Barbie.

“Should we get stabilizers?” Mum asks Steve. I have seen these on other bikes – little wheels on either side of the big ones.

“Nah,” Steve says. “She has to learn properly.”

“But who’s going to teach her?”

“I will,” says Steve. Weeks go by and the bike leans against the side of the house.

“Why don’t I put it in the garage?” says Mum. She is worried it will rust.

“No, I’ll take her out tomorrow,” says Steve, but he doesn’t.

Clever starts teaching me to ride the bike. He walks beside me for hours, one hand on the saddle, steadying me. We circle the car park – under the bottlebrush tree, past the garages. It takes several days of patient pushing and pedalling before I can wobble a few inches by myself.

While we are walking, Clever talks to me about his family in the village back home. He calls it the Rural Arias, like they do on the news.

“My mother lives in the Rural Arias with my father, my grandmother and many, many uncles and aunties.”

“Do you go to visit them?”

“I go when I can, but I like it better here.”

“Do they have TV?”

“No.”

“Or radio?”

“Yes, they have radio.”

“What do they do?”

“They farm things. They keep goats.”

“Can I go to visit them?”

“I do not think so. Maybe one day.”

“I have never been to a village.”

“It is very different.” Clever pauses for a moment, thinking. “They do not understand what it is like in town. They only come in when they have to go to the doctor. Sometimes not even then.”

“Do they go to the n’anga?”

“Sometimes.”

“I have been to a n’anga,” I say with pride.

“Oh-oh.” Clever does not seem very impressed.

“Do you go to the shebeen?” I ask.

That surprises him. He stops. “Why do you ask that?”

“That is where ...” I stumble over the word ‘workers’. “That is where people went in Chinhoyi.”

“No, I do not.” Clever looks very serious. “They are not good places. They are where people go to drink, and I do not drink.”

“Ever?” I am astonished. Everyone here drinks, and smokes.

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I am a Christian.”

I am sceptical, but looking at Clever I can imagine him sitting quietly home at night when all the other young men go out to the shebeen. I can hear them outside the

walls of the flat at night, sitting outside the bottle store at the shopping centre and drinking their sweet beer. The servants in the complex live communally, in their own little block of flats, and they have their own entrance to the outside world. All the other residents complain about their maids or house boys being sluggish and surly after late nights of drinking, but Clever is always neat, clean, alert and smiling. The whites of his eyes and his teeth are always clear and bright, and he smells of fresh ironing and soap.

We go out on the bike every day. Clever walks me around and around the driveway, stopping me when a car goes past. After a couple of weeks, I am pedalling along quite happily when I notice that Clever is several metres behind me and I am riding all by myself. As soon I realise this, I teeter off course and into the hedge, but soon I can keep my balance while riding alone.

I tell Leigh about the tokoloshe hunt I went on with my sister. She has never heard of tokoloshes.

“I don’t think we have them in Harare,” she says.

“You must have them.”

“Well, we don’t.”

“Yes you do.”

“We don’t.”

We glare at each other. Leigh stumps off and, after a minute, I go home too. I ask Clever about tokoloshes.

“Don’t they come into the city?”

“They do sometimes, but not as often.”

It is true that I do not feel there are many tokoloshes around. In Chinhoyi I was always hearing noises outside my window at night, or seeing something move out of the corner of my eye. Here, all I hear is traffic, and any mysterious snuffling or scratching at night is probably that stupid cat from next door peeing in Mum's flowerbeds again. No tokoloshe would live in a garden as small as ours.

"Have you ever seen one?" I ask Clever.

His eyes slide sideways. "No."

"But you know about them?"

"Of course." He relents, and sits down next to me. "They are friendly to children, you know."

"Really?" I did not know this.

"Oh yes. A child in our village had a tokoloshe as a friend for many years. He could see it clearly, but we could not. His mother had to make two dishes at every mealtime, one for the child and one for the tokoloshe."

"Did both dishes get eaten?"

"Yes."

"What did the tokoloshe look like?"

"He said it looked like a short brown man with one buttock."

"One buttock?" I am sceptical.

"That is what he said."

"So the tokoloshe only had half a bum?"

“Apparently so.” Clever gets up, brushing off his knees, and starts back towards the kitchen. I consider asking how the tokoloshe went to the bathroom, but decide against it.

“How did he get the tokoloshe to make friends with him?” I call.

Clever looked back over his shoulder. “He found out where the tokoloshe lived and laid out food for it every day until the tokoloshe revealed itself.”

My last encounter with a tokoloshe had been a mixture of excitement and terror. I want to see another one. And imagine if a tokoloshe followed me around all day! I could take it to school. No one would dare to tease me if I had a tokoloshe to wreak revenge.

That night, after Mum has kissed me good night, I climb out of bed and go to the window. I am always afraid of looking out the window at night in case there is another face pressed to the glass on the other side, but tonight I am excited. I don't know what I am hoping for. A pair of yellow eyes? I pull the curtain open quickly, so that there is no suspense. There is nothing.

The sooner we move out of here, the better.

Chapter Seven

School isn't too bad. The kids are not like the ones in Chinhoyi, and they do not push my glasses off my face. We have to wear a uniform – shorts and a shirt for the boys, a cotton dress for the girls – with long socks pulled up to just below our knees and a floppy hat whenever we go outside.

None of the other kids at school live in a flat. They all have proper houses, like whites are meant to have, with pools and gardens. They also have dogs and cats and brothers and sisters. All I have is Mum and Steve and a patch of grass.

I enjoy my lessons, though. For the first time, I see that Shona and English are separate things. I start to see letters, written out on the board, and I learn what shapes make what sounds. S is easy because it looks like a snake, and X is easy too because of X marks the spot, but the others are more mysterious.

We learn about vowels.

“Ay, ee, eye, oh, you,” says our teacher, and we say the letters after her. The confusing thing is that most of the time the vowels sound nothing like their name.

Shona vowels are different.

“Ah, eh, ee, or, oo,” says our Shona teacher. These ones are much easier. They always have the same sound. Just saying the Shona vowels over and over sounds like a song.

Soon, the letters start linking together and making words, and we start reading the Janet-and-John books. I have looked at the pictures before, but now I am able to pick out the words.

See Dick run.

Spot has a ball.

Run, Dick, run!

I am bored with them as soon as the words become clear. I take one home to Cephas, who snorts and gives me one of his novels instead. I struggle through the first sentence, then store the novel for when I know more words.

Clever listens to my reading homework in the evenings, while he is cleaning the kitchen. Although nothing happens in the Janet-and-John stories, he will look up from his work from time to time and give me a nod, or smile, as if I am telling him the most enthralling story in the world and he doesn't want to interrupt. The kitchen smells of Sunlight Soap and floor cleaner. I like to sit with my back against the fridge, feeling the thrum of the engine and hearing Mum and Steve's voices from the lounge.

I ask him if he knows how to read.

"I do."

"Do you like books like the ones Cephas reads?"

Clever smiles as if someone has told him a secret. "No."

"So what do you read?"

"I read some English books, and some Shona ones."

"Are there such things as Shona books?" I hadn't realised this. Shona is a language for speaking, not for reading.

“Not as many as there are English books, but there are a few.”

“Could you show me one some day?”

“Of course.”

“So what English books do you read?”

Clever pulls a book out of his back pocket. Even though it is shoved into his overalls, it looks tidier than Cephas’s books. I feel sure that Clever would never bend the spine right around like Cephas does.

I look at the book. It has a picture of a big fish on the cover, and a man in a boat.

“What is it called?”

“It is called Moby Dick.”

“Is that the name of the fish?”

“Yes.”

“Do fish really get that big?”

“That one is a whale.”

“Is that the same as a fish?”

“Almost.”

“I know the Shona word for fish,” I inform him. “It is hove.”

“Yes,” he agrees gravely.

There is a cardboard bookmark about three-quarters of the way through, with some writing on it.

“What does this say?”

“It says, ‘In God we trust.’”

“Do you like this book?”

“Yes, I do.”

Later on, I tell Mum that Clever is reading a book called Moby Dick. She smiles. “His mother knew what she was doing when she named him.”

I lie awake and think about this for a while. Did Clever’s mother know that he was going to be clever? And did Beauty’s mother know that she was going to be beautiful? And if so, what would happen if you named your child Ugly? I fall asleep before I come to any conclusions.

Our Shona teacher is called VaChihambakwe. Va is like Mister. When he comes in, we have to say “Mangwananai, VaChihambakwe.” When we want to go to the bathroom, we have to say, “Ndinokumbirawo kuenda kuchimbuzi.” If you don’t say it, you’re not allowed to go. This carries on until one of the boys in our class wets himself because he can’t remember the words. The headmistress comes to speak to our Shona teacher, and after that we are allowed to go to the toilet whenever we want to.

VaChihambakwe has little round glasses and his hair grows down the sides of his head in a neat beard. None of the other male teachers wears a suit and tie, but he does. His accent is not Shona at all – he sounds just like a white, except when he reads aloud from our textbook.

Everyone hates Shona lessons.

“They’re pointless,” says Leigh.

“It’s a waste of time,” says someone else.

Even some of the mums and dads don't like the Shona lessons. "It's hard enough to get them to do their English reading," I hear one say to the teacher. "Why do they have to learn all this Shona rubbish as well?"

"All they need is a bit of kitchen kaffir to use with the servants," says one man who is quickly shushed by his wife.

I like Shona. It reminds me of the farm, and Chinhoyi. When we are first asked to speak some words aloud, VaChihambakwe is impressed by my accent. No one else is, though. I quickly learn that you are meant to read Shona in your normal voice, without bothering to pronounce things properly. I do not stop reading it well, though, because I like VaChihambakwe. When I read, he stands and watches me with a big smile on his face, and when I finish he says, "Ah, it makes my heart happy."

He must be lonely being the only black teacher at the school. All the other blacks who work there are gardeners, cleaners and grounds-keepers. I see VaChihambakwe sometimes through the glass window of the staffroom – as the only dark shape in the room, he is easy to pick out. At lunchtime he is usually reading and eating sadza with a fork, while the other teachers chat.

Once I waved to him through the window. He seemed to catch the movement out of the corner of his eye, and looked up.

"Mangwanani!" I mouthed at him, and he smiled and raised one hand. I felt like we had a secret, and I ran off back to the playground, giddy with my own daring.

We learn the Five Green Frogs song for an assembly. It makes me sad to sing it, because it reminds me of Chinhoyi. We also learn the numbers in Shona, greetings and names of

things. For the first time I see that everything has two names, an English and a Shona one, side by side. This has not occurred to me before. Bread in Shona is chingwa. I had always thought that bread was something white and sliced that came in plastic packets sealed with a clip, while chingwa was brown and thicker and spread with peanut butter. Mombes are the skinny animals with mbira ribs that live on the bald, scrubbed lands in the Rural Arias. Cows are the fat, glossy things in paddocks. It seems strange that the two words really do mean exactly the same thing.

English words stand on their own. When you have learned an English word it stays learned, and it always looks the same no matter where it is. Shona words are more complicated than that. You can learn a good, solid word and then discover that all sorts of extra bits get tacked on the end or at the beginning to tell you whether the word is singular or plural, big or small, respected or not respected. English words stand upright in a straight line, not touching each other. Shona words are all blended in together at the edges, and you can't have one without having a whole family of others. Families are easier in English too. There is just a mother, a father, some grandparents, an aunt and uncle, siblings and maybe some cousins. In Shona there are all sorts of different kinds of aunt and uncle and cousin, according to how old they are, what their position in the family is, and who they are married to.

The kids at school have a language of their own, too. Lekker means good. Mushi also means good. Oens or oeks is what the boys call other boys. Lighties is what we are all called by the older kids. When someone gets into trouble, the whole class will shake their right hands as if they have just burned them on a hot stove and say "Ee-ee, ee-ee, ee-ee!"

When we have learned how to make enough letters and words in English class, we have to write a five-sentence story about our weekend. We write with fat red pencils, so that if we make a mistake we can rub it out. We will only get pen licences when we are older. If our story is very good it will get published, which means that our teacher will give it a cardboard cover and we will write the title on the front and put it in the bookshelf. I work hard on my story. It is about me turning into a hedgehog and meeting another hedgehog in our garden. When I hand it in, I hope the teacher will be pleased, but instead she sighs and crinkles up her forehead.

She taps the paper. “This is not what I was looking for.”

I can see the polish flaking off the top of one of her nails. It is pink, like a My Little Pony. She jabs it at my drawing of hedgehogs.

“What I Did On My Weekend needs to be true,” she says. “We do it every week. You must tell me what really happened on your weekend.”

But I don’t want to. I take my exercise book back and go to sit down.

What happened on the weekend was this: Mum received a letter from Beauty. It was written on a lined piece of newsprint torn from an exercise book, in blue biro.

Dear Madam

How are you? I hope you are well. I am very well. I have found new job working for a nice family in Chinhoyi since the Baas has moved away. Everything is good here but we miss you very much. I hope you are happy in Harare.

Love from Beauty

“Where did they move to, Mum?” I asked.

“I don’t know.” Mum’s freckles were standing out in sharp relief on her face.

She folded up the letter.

“Mum?”

She walked out. I felt like someone had opened a door in my head and a cold wind was blowing in. This would not make a good story to write for the teacher.

We go to visit a friend of Steve’s. He is also a teacher, at an old boys’ school in town. It is built of stone and surrounded by smooth green playing fields. There is a coat of arms on the gate. The whole place smells of rain, although we have not had any rain in weeks. This is explained when we see the dozens of big sprinklers spurting silver onto the lawns and fields.

It is a boarding school, so even though it is a weekend, there are boys around. They are in dark green uniforms and wear caps, and stare at us as we walk through them to the halls of residence.

Steve's friend is a gangly, tall man, a history teacher. He has glasses which keep slipping down his nose, and skinny wrists and ankles. He seems like the kind of person who would rather be barefoot – he walks awkwardly, as if his shoes are too small for him.

I am introduced. I am also instructed to call him Uncle Oliver. This is normal. Every adult friend of Mum's or Steve's is called Uncle or Auntie.

“Just Oliver,” says Oliver.

I give Steve an anxious look. It is unheard of to call an adult by their first name unless there is an Uncle or Auntie in front of it. That or Mr or Mrs Something. There are no other options.

To my surprise, Steve says nothing. I resolve never to call Oliver anything if I can help it.

We follow him as he finishes his inspection of the dorm rooms. He is one of the housemasters, unmarried men who live in the buildings with the boarders.

“They never make their beds properly,” he says, pausing in front of one. He looks at it for a minute, then lifts up the mattress and tips all the bedclothes out onto the wet lawn, two storeys below. I stare at him.

“That's how they learn,” he says.

I think Oliver is completely mad, but Steve is smiling. A little knot of boys has gathered around the bedding. They are laughing, and pointing upwards at us. I duck out of sight.

“Oliver's the most popular housemaster,” Steve tells me. “He chucks their beds out the window and throws the chalk duster at them in class, and they love it.”

Oliver went to college with Steve. They laugh together about things I don't understand.

“And old Digger, he was bluddy furious, man.”

“Do you remember the toilet brush incident?”

“Ja, I'll never live that one down, hey.”

After that, we see Oliver more and more frequently. He is always coming over to our house. His legs are far too long for any of our chairs so he sits with one outstretched in front of him and the other one crossed over the top so he can pick at his toes while he talks. His feet are brown and permanently dirty; he never wears shoes if he can help it. They are monkey feet. If he drops something he can pick it up using just his toes. I practise until I can do it too.

He often talks about how much he hates working at the school.

“Why don't you do something else?” I ask.

“Because I need the money,” he says.

“Why?”

“So I can pay for all the stuff I really want to do.”

“Like what?”

Oliver goes on digs in the Rural Arias and uncovers old bones that tell him about people who lived here long before us. He also visits cave paintings. He knows everything there is to know about the Bush – the names of all the plants and what they are used for, and the names of animals. When he comes to visit us, he spends a long time talking to Clever in Shona.

“He’s gone Bush,” says Steve when I ask him about this.

“What’s that?”

“It means he’s a black man in a white man’s body.”

I do not ask any more questions, but I wonder about this. Could Oliver really be a black man with white skin? He has a lot of Shona mannerisms – a limp handshake so that he doesn’t overpower the person he is meeting, a dislike of eye contact, a tendency to clap his hands together with loose-limbed enthusiasm when he finds something funny. And sometimes I see him looking at us with a kind of detached amusement, as if we are rare and exotic animals with strange habits.

We go to Mukuvudzi Woodlands one day – me, Steve, Mum and Oliver. It is a game park in the middle of the city where they have elephants, giraffes and all the exciting game that you do not usually see near Harare.

We join a big group of people who are going to take a guided tour. Most are locals, but there are a few tourists as well. Steve calls them Touri. You can tell them apart from the others because they have big, expensive cameras and they carry their money in a bum-bag. Most of them have takkies on instead of slops, and brightly-coloured shirts. If they’ve been here for a while they are hung with leather and wood jewellery. They usually don’t wear hats.

The guide calls us all together and welcomes everyone. He is wearing very short khaki shorts that have ridden up into his bum, and he stands with his feet far apart and his hands on his hips to show off. He has muscled legs with no hair on them that I can see, and he is wearing long socks with vellies. All the women in the group are staring at him. I

can feel a fly landing on my leg. I twitch my muscle to get rid of it, but it just buzzes around to the other side and lands there. The sun is making prickly beads of sweat on my upper lip.

“Stay close to me,” the guide is saying. “Some of these animals can be dangerous.”

Oliver snorts, then clears his throat loudly. The guide glances round at him, flicking his eyes up and down Oliver’s skinny frame.

Finally, we set off. The guide shows us plants first. There is the Wish tree, which is named after Wish toilet paper. It is soft and furry, and good to use if you are in the Bush and don’t have any toilet paper around.

Oliver starts muttering under his breath.

“This oek doesn’t know his acacias.”

And a little further on, “That’s fungus, not lichen.”

Mum pretends not to hear, but Steve eggs him on, asking him questions.

Oliver’s voice isn’t loud, but carries. Soon he has drawn a little audience of his own. The guide coughs.

“Sorry,” says Oliver, but he doesn’t sound sorry.

We keep going. Soon we come to an electric fence. The guide makes a clicking noise, and two baby elephants emerge silently from the bushes. The tourists get out their cameras. I reach out my hand to an outstretched trunk. It explores my fingers gently, and feels like the touch of an old woman’s hand.

“Careful,” says the guide. “They like to push people into the electric fence.”

The elephants’ eyes are small and cunning.

We move on from the elephants after all the tourists have taken their pictures. We startle a flock of birds in a tree, and they leap up with irritable screeches to claw the sky and wheel away.

“What are those?” I ask the guide.

“They are LBJs,” he says.

“What does that stand for?”

“Little Brown Jobs.”

“He means he doesn’t know,” Mum whispers to me as the other people in the group titter.

“Oh.”

“They’re a kind of thrush,” says Oliver loudly.

Soon we have two groups: the original one, consisting of an old American couple and the official guide, and the renegade one, consisting of Oliver and everyone else. At first Oliver and the guide follow the same path, but the groups slowly start to separate until we are having an entirely different tour from the old couple’s. They look at us with disapproval as we move away, mumbling their lips and clutching their water bottles.

“Disgraceful,” says the old lady. Her voice is loud, and she pronounces every syllable in the word with emphasis, the way Americans do.

Oliver is in his element.

“This is where you learn,” he tells me. “Out here.”

“What about school?” I say.

“School is only good for so much. You’ve got to get out into the Bush and learn about your country.”

“This from the man with the PhD,” says Steve.

“You remember that,” Oliver tells me. “It’s no good learning English and English history and finger-painting. You might as well be in England, then.”

He turns to answer a question and ignores me after that, but I remember.

After our day at Mukuvudzi Woodlands, I start to take more notice of the trees and birds. Mum has an old copy of a book about the birds of Southern Africa, and I copy some of the pictures and get Mum to read me the names. At school I ask VaChihambakwe for some of the Shona names, and he is so excited that I am interested that he lends me books as well.

A few days afterwards, I get a mysterious phone call at the house. Mum and Steve are still at work, and it is just me and Clever. The phone rings – *brrr brrr* – and I pick it up.

“Hello?”

“Hello.” The voice sounds crackly and long-distance.

“Hello,” I say again, puzzled.

“How are you?”

“Do you want to speak to Mum?”

“How’s school?”

“School is fine.”

“Good, good. And everything is going well?”

“Yes.”

“How’s your mother?”

“She’s good.”

A long pause. I can hear breathing.

“I am going to hang up now,” I say carefully, and put down the receiver. I wait, but it does not ring again.

I name one of my Barbies Lucy. She has blonde hair that has gone fuzzy from too much brushing, and she is wearing a pink shirt and dungarees. I sit her on the shelf beside my bed. I do not tell Mum or Steve her name.

Chapter Eight

We start going to a new church in Harare, and I start going to Sunday School.

“What’s the point?” says Steve.

“It’s good to go to church,” says Mum. She is zipping me into a pinafore dress.

I hate wearing dresses. “It’s good for her,” she nods at me, “to go to church and get some idea of what’s right and what’s wrong.”

“Ja ...” Steve is unconvinced.

“Would you rather she carried on with all this tokoloshe, magic muti hotch-potch in her head?” Mum taps me on my hair, which has been parted to the side. I don’t know if she quite realises I am underneath it, because it hurts.

“Ja, well, I suppose it’s only an hour out of the day,” says Steve.

It is Clever and Cephas’s day off, so I cannot show either of them my outfit. Clever goes to two church services on Sundays, he has told me, but I know Cephas doesn’t go to any. He will go and see his friends, and maybe spend the evening in the shebeen.

“Can I take a book to church?” I ask Mum.

“No.”

“Can I take a My Little Pony?”

“No.”

“Can I take ...”

“Agh, come on, man!” says Steve. “Just get in the bluddy car and zip it.”

I consider snivelling, but decide against it. Steve's face is red, which means it is not a good idea to push him. We pile into the car with our Bibles and set off.

The church is old and its spire is not quite straight. I stare at it for a while, and when I look back down it seems like everything is slightly off-centre. There are lots of people parking their cars, walking to the church and chatting. I feel shy.

“Come on.”

Mum grabs my hand. She takes me to the church hall, to Sunday school. There are lots of kids there already, looking well-scrubbed and brushed, like me. I stand feeling awkward while Mum talks to the teacher. When she leaves, she waggles her fingers at me and gives me a smile.

“Be good.”

I look at all the faces turned up to me.

“Sit down,” says the teacher, pointing to a spot on the carpet. I sit. The carpet smells like old people's clothes.

The teacher sticks felt sheep onto a fuzzy board. She is telling us the parable of the Lost Sheep. We all have paper, coloured pencils and glue, and when she finishes telling us the story we can draw our own sheep. I want my sheep to have glitter in his wool, and after a brief argument the teacher opens the cupboard and gets out the glitter. Of course, after that everyone else wants glitter on their sheep as well, so the pot is in demand.

There is a poster of Jesus on the wall. He is wearing a white robe and has a sappy expression, and kids are climbing all over his knees. I have seen this picture before. I notice that all the kids in the picture are white kids. I colour my sheep in black crayon, and scatter the glitter all around its edges. When I have finished, it is sparkling. I have drawn its eye at a funny angle, so it has a knowing expression.

“That’s a good sheep,” says the teacher. “Why did you make it black?”

“Because Jesus loves black sheep and white sheep equally,” I say. That is not really why. No one else was using the black crayon, so I didn’t have to fight for it. I know the teacher will like this answer, though.

“That is marvellous,” she says. She holds it up to show the others. “Would you tell everyone in the church about your sheep?”

“Okay.” I am regretting this now.

We troop into the church. All the adults look at us with aren’t-they-cute expressions. The old ladies make kissing faces. When we are standing right in the front, the teacher lowers the microphone down to my face and asks me to tell the congregation why I drew a black sheep. I tell them what I told her earlier, and everyone claps and smiles big white smiles, and I am allowed to go to join Mum and Steve in their pew.

The church is made up of equal numbers of white people and black people. When I look behind us from our pew, which I am not meant to do, I can see all sorts of faces looking forwards. The church is an old stone one with big stained-glass windows. The sun shines through the windows and throws coloured patterns onto the floor and the people in the pews. If I move my hand a little to the left I can turn it green.

We sing a few hymns which I have heard before. I find it difficult to sing the hymns, because the words are strange and old and fit into the tunes in odd ways. Heaven becomes heav'n. Every becomes ev'ry. The tunes are droning and I lag a note behind, trying to keep up. They are always too low or too high. An old woman sitting behind us sings in a thin, wobbly voice that is painful on the high notes. I start to giggle.

“Shhhh.” Mum is fierce. I try to hold the giggles in. If only the old lady would stop singing.

A group of people get up from the congregation and go to the front of the church. They are young – black people and white people. They stand in front of microphones, and a couple of them sling guitars in front of their chests. Someone sits down at a drum kit,

“What is this, a bloody rock concert?” whispers Steve. Mum hisses at him to shut up.

There are a few strokes on the drum, the guitars start strumming and words are projected onto a big screen. Then the people at the front start singing, and after a moment the rest of us join in.

Jabulani, jabulani, Africa!

Sing for joy, oh Africa!

All the Shona people in the church sing in perfect, throbbing harmonies that swell and carry the rest of the voices – the ones that are out of tune, the quavering old-lady voices, and the squeaky ones like mine. Every Jabulani echoes off the walls and back. I can feel my heart beating quickly in my throat, and I try to raise my voice up and

up, above the roof, up to the sky where God must be looking down at all of us. I have never heard anything like this before.

When that song is finished, we start another.

Tinofamba kudzira dzashe!

Tinofamba kudzira dzashe!

We are marching in the light of God!

We are marching in the light of God!

I sing loudly and enthusiastically. Lots of people have started to clap. Some of them have started to raise up both their hands as if they are carrying invisible trays. Some of them have their eyes closed. Steve has his arms crossed on his chest, and he is barely opening his mouth to sing.

Someone in the congregation starts to ululate. It is a thrilling noise, like a war cry and a shout for joy and a song all at once. When she has finished, others start.

“It’s like a bluddy shebeen,” mutters Steve. Someone in our pew starts to ululate and he turns his eyes up to the ceiling as if there is something interesting there.

“The insurance on this place must be astronomical,” he says.

I don’t care. I did not know that being a Christian could be this much fun. I can see why the Shona dress up in bright colours and lace to come to church.

After the singing, it is time to Offer One Another The Sign of Peace. This is where people have to clasp hands and say “Peace be with you.” In our old church Mum and Dad would shake hands with the people directly to the left and right of them, and that would be it. I wouldn’t have to do anything at all. But this church is different. People actually

get up from their seats and start walking up and down the aisles shaking hands and talking to people. Some of them even hug. Steve has started pretending to adjust his watch. I know he is pretending because he has his watch set to perfect time and he won't let anyone touch it, ever, in case it changes the time by a second or two.

“You must be new here!” The black pastor shakes my hand. He has twinkling eyes and a little beard, and smells of aftershave like Steve's. He reaches over my head to shake Mum's hand. Steve can't pretend anymore, and he hates being rude, so he shakes the pastor's hand as well. I hear them giving him our names.

“Good, good. Welcome,” he says, and moves on to the next row. Steve sits down. His face is red.

When the pastor stands up to give his sermon, he asks if the church has any visitors.

“Stand up, stand up!” he says, waving his arms. Mum and I get to our feet, but Steve sits there with his arms crossed.

“Bluddy ridiculous,” he says.

I look at all the heads swivelled to stare at us. Mum and I smile at them, but Steve stays resolutely seated. Everyone welcomes us. We say thank you, and sit back down.

“Agh, come on man,” says Steve.

I have never been so enthusiastic about God before. If we can dance and sing like this every week, I will not mind coming to church.

After this one visit, Steve refuses to come with us. He goes to Granny and Grandpa's church instead, which is full of old white people. Mum and I keep going, though.

Every week after church we go to Granny and Grandpa's for Sunday lunch. Mercy always makes a roast, and there are big bowls of carrots, roast potatoes, parsnips, broccoli and other vegetables. There is always a hot pudding for dessert, and the napkins are real cloth in special brass rings, not like the paper ones we use at home. The tablecloth is also white, with embroidery on it, and I have to be careful not to spot it with gravy. If I do, Granny sighs, "I'll have to put it in the wash, I suppose," and Mum glares at me. I wish we didn't have to use the tablecloth, or that it was a darker colour.

The windows in the dining room get steamed up with all this food and talking. Mercy smells of gravy as she carries each plate in, and when she reaches across me to put them down I can smell her sweat.

Today is a hot day, and the food is making me hotter. I wiggle my feet out of my shoes under the table. They make my feet feel like boiled sweets in a tight wrapper. Tickly rivulets of sweat run down the backs of my knees.

"How was church?" Granny asks me. I tell her the sheep story.

Grandpa almost falls off his chair laughing. I think he knows that I made up my explanation about the sheep. Granny doesn't, though, because she glares at him and shoves the bowl of potatoes towards him like she wants to jab him in the chest.

"Go on, have another one," she says to all of us. We have to keep eating and eating until everything is gone.

"It needs eating up," says Granny.

The sky is hot blue outside. The ground is baking and cracked like the crust on a pie. It is too good a day to be inside at the dining room table, and we will be here for hours.

Dessert today is a sticky toffee pudding, also hot. I wish we were allowed ice-cream, but Granny doesn't think ice-cream is a proper pudding. I pour lots of cream over it. Now it looks like a bowl of very strange cereal. Mum gives me a Look for using too much cream, but it is my favourite part. I feel the pudding settling into my stomach and blowing it out so it looks like a picanin's stomach.

The adults are talking about farming.

"I hear they're building a wind farm in Chinhoyi," says Granny.

I drop my knife. It clatters off the plate and onto the tablecloth, leaving a long brown smear of gravy. Granny sucks in her cheeks. Mum takes a loud breath.

"How about we take a constitutional around the garden?" says Grandpa to me.

"We haven't had tea yet," says Granny.

"No, but it's good to settle the stomach between courses. What do you say?"

I wiggle my feet back into their shoes and jump down from the table. Mum, Steve and Granny are going onto the verandah, where Mercy will bring the silver tea tray and a plate of shortbread. Grandpa picks up his stick, and we make our escape through the back door.

Outside, the air smells like mown grass and rotting fruit. The sun makes a round spot of heat on the top of my head.

“Ahh.” Grandpa breathes in. His stick lifts and falls from the grass, bringing a bit of dirt with it each time.

The chickens are out today, making lazy noises in the shade. Some of them have settled down, tucking their legs underneath them. They make little agitated movements when we pass by.

“I’d like to see your sheep,” says Grandpa. I tell him it is up on the wall at church.

“Is it indeed? Well done.” He stops. “Look at that.”

A chameleon is walking down a branch with slow, measured steps, its hands clasping and unclasping the wood. It is brown and dignified, a little old man with strange periscope eyes.

“Some Shona still believe it is poisonous,” says Grandpa. He puts out a finger and lets the chameleon walk onto it. Grandpa’s finger must feel a lot like a twig; rough, spindly and hard underfoot. The chameleon walks along his hand until it reaches his wedding ring, and stops in confusion.

“Have you heard the story about the chameleon?” he asks me. I shake my head.

“Well, they say that the Chameleon stumbled across a magic pool that cleansed everything that touched its waters. He went around telling all the animals and people he could find, and they all bathed in the pool. By the time the black people got there, however, the water was almost all gone. There was only enough to do the soles of their feet and the palms of their hands.”

“So that’s why they’re pink,” I say.

“Yes.” Grandpa lifts his hand back up to the branch and lets the creature trot off.

“Where’s Jonah?” I ask.

“At church, I would think. It is his day off,” says Grandpa.

“Oh.” I do not say Good, which is what I am thinking.

“Look.” Grandpa points at a rhino beetle. We kneel and watch it trundle past.

“I remember Chinhoyi,” says Grandpa. He is looking down at the beetle. His knees creak and crack as he shifts position. The hand resting on his Nyaminyami stick is knotted at the knuckles. “We drove there to visit Steve when he first moved there. Few years ago now. I remember the cockerel statue.”

I do not say anything, but I move a stone out of the beetle’s way.

“Do you remember it?” Grandpa asks me. I nod, but I still do not say anything. Grandpa stays quiet, watching the beetle. It has stumbled into a swarm of red ants, the tiny, vicious ones that will bite your toes if you’re wearing slops. Red ants have swarmed over the beetle. It rocks helplessly. I reach out a hand to help it.

“No, don’t,” says Grandpa, and I stop. “You’ll just get bitten.”

We watch as the beetle is tipped over. Soon it has disappeared in a red haze.

“Don’t cry,” says Grandpa. “It’s part of nature for things to end.”

I feel something warm and dry enclose my hand. It is Grandpa’s hand. I look down. The skin on the back of his hand looks like a map of a brown country. I remember sitting with Beauty in Chinhoyi and watching the rhino beetle struggle to right itself.

We walk back to join the others. We are still holding hands.

“I built this house myself, you know,” says Grandpa. “Well,” he chuckles, “I bought the land, and designed it. I always wanted to own my own piece of land. Have something to leave behind, as it were.”

I think of all the work that goes into a house. First designing it, then building it brick by brick. And when it’s built, it needs a Mercy to polish the floors and clean the silver, and a Jonah to cut the grass and trim the hedges, forever and ever.

“It is important to always improve things,” Grandpa tells me, very seriously. “If you are put down in the middle of nowhere, do something to make it better. The people may complain about us Brits from time to time, but we built roads, and hospitals, and sank wells. We made things better, as much as we could.”

He smiles, and lays an apologetic hand on my shoulder. “How is school?”

“It’s fine.”

“Good, good. Come along.”

School is fine. I have settled into the rhythm of classes, assemblies and playtime. We sing the national anthem every day before classes. It used to be “Ishe komborera Africa,” which is in Shona but turns into a string of sounds that we all mouth together, standing straight up in our cotton uniforms. I don’t remember ever learning the words, but I suppose there must have been a time when I didn’t know them.

Now there is a new national anthem. It is written down for us, in Shona and in English, and we have to learn to sing it. The tune is meant to be grand, but somehow it is sad.

“Simudzai mureza wedu weZimbabwe

Yakazvarwa nomoto weChimurenga

Neropa zhinji ramagamba

Tidziriri nekumba kudzhoshe

Ngai komborere

Nyika yeZimbabwe.”

In English, it means: Oh lift high the banner, the flag of Zimbabwe. The symbol of freedom, proclaiming victory. We praise our heroes' sacrifice, and vow to keep the land from foes. Oh God bless our country – the land of Zimbabwe. I don't know what sacrifice they are talking about, but it probably has something to do with the War that no one mentions. I don't know who our foes are either, but I assume that they are comfortably Out There, far away, and unlikely to come any closer.

Part Two

1996

Chapter Nine

It is my eleventh birthday party. I am sitting in the lounge with my friends when the phone rings. We are playing Pass the Parcel, and the parcel has just stopped at me when Steve switches off the music and answers the phone. For some reason, we don't go on playing. I know that beneath the newspaper wrapping there is a boiled sweet, but I do not tear it off. Instead I sit, listening.

There is the noise of the receiver being replaced. Steve comes through. Granny is very sick, and we have to go and see her. Right away.

I feel annoyed at Granny for making my party finish early.

I don't know what is wrong with her, but she is taken to Avenues Hospital and hooked up to lots of tubes. She turns yellow and waxy, like an old candle, and her eyes go runny. They look like my glasses when they are smeared.

When we go and visit her in hospital we bring all the magazines she likes, the ones with crosswords and stories about the Queen. We also bring a little box of chocolates from Mercy and Jonah, and a picture I drew of her in school.

The hospital room smells of cleaning, and of something sweet. Grandpa is there already, sitting by the bedside with his cane propped up against his knee and Granny's hand in his. Her hand looks like the scaly legs of the chickens, all spindly and rough.

We give Granny her presents. I thought the hospital visit might be fun – I have never been to a hospital before, and it does not seem so bad for Granny to be in bed because she is sick. I have been in bed sick before, and I quite enjoy it. You get special

food, and you are allowed to watch television. This is different, though. Everyone's eyes are red, and they speak as if they have sore throats. We stay there for a long time, and I am starting to get bored, but I know I cannot say anything. Steve keeps rubbing his hand over his short hair, over and over again, like he is polishing it. It feels like there is an extra person in the room, someone we cannot see.

I go over to the window and look out to the street, just visible beyond the wall. There are people selling vegetables and flowers out there. I want to fly down and sniff the overripe bananas, squeeze a mango in my hand until it turns to mush. I look at Granny. The box of chocolates we brought her is unopened. Maybe if we brought her something from the markets, a fruit pitted and squeezed by hands, ripened in the sun, just a little too soft? That would have to make her feel better.

When we leave the hospital, Mum holds my hand tightly. We pass people in hospital gowns and people in normal clothes. I see a woman walking down the corridor in a nightgown. She looks sleepy and confused, and is attached by a tube to a little machine on a sledge that she is pulling along beside her. The machine moves in and out, like it is breathing. I feel delicate in sympathy, aware of every breath and slight pang from my muscles.

The lift doors shut. They are shiny metal and I can see our reflections staring back at us.

Everyone is silent in the car on the way back. I have something important to say, but I am waiting until I decide how best to say it. The moment comes. We are at a red light, and Mum shifts position slightly, which means some of the tension has gone out of her body.

“Mum, is Granny cursed?”

Mum twists her whole body round in the front seat to stare at me, and Steve’s head flickers away from the road for a minute.

“What?” She sounds angry. I falter for a minute, then carry on. This could be important.

“Back in Chinhoyi, when Beauty’s aunt was ...”

“I’ve told you not to talk about that,” says Steve.

“But her aunt was sick, and no one knew what the matter was, and Beauty went to the n’anga and he said it was because of something her ancestors had done ...”

“How do you know about this?” asked Mum.

I am swallowing big gulps of tears, and I can taste snot. “The n’anga said ...”

Steve pulls the car over, turns in his seat and pushes his face up against mine.

“My mother has not got AIDS like some bluddy careless munt. She is not cursed, she has done nothing wrong. Do you hear?”

I am crying properly now.

“Just shut up, all right,” says Steve, and turns away. I can see his face in the rear-view mirror and it is snarled up as if someone has crumpled it in their hand.

I gulp and sob on the drive home, but Mum and Steve stare straight ahead. After a while Mum sneaks her hand around the side of her seat, and I slip mine into it. It is cool and dry.

Mum and I go to see a movie in town, at the Kine. Steve is visiting Granny in the hospital and although I love Granny I am glad we aren't going. Whenever we visit we say all the usual things, like how school is going for me, and how work is going for Mum and Steve, but the skin on everyone's faces is drawn tight and their voices sound like they have a cold.

"This is hardly the time to go to a film," says Steve.

"Nonsense," says Mum. "You can't expect the kid to sit there every bloody day staring at her shoes."

We drive into town, past the street kids at every intersection, and find a parking space. I am getting used to the smells and noises of the city now, and when we pass a beggar with no legs and a ragged blanket over his lap, I barely glance at him. That particular beggar is a regular. Mum tried to give him a loaf of bread once, telling me that if we gave him money he would spend it on beer, but he threw the loaf onto the ground and stamped on it. This was surprising as he was meant to have no legs, but explained why we would see him in one part of town and then a completely different part half an hour later. Even though he is only pretending to be crippled, I think he deserves credit for tucking his legs underneath him in such a convincing way.

The air smells of petrol, rotten fruit and dust. We ignore the stalls shoved up against the side of buildings and push our way through the crowds to the cinema's entrance. I am level with the tops of everyone's legs.

As we stand in the queue for the ticket office, we hear shouting across the street. A fat black woman is weaving in and out of traffic, stopping to swear and shake her fist.

“Don’t look,” says Mum. She puts her sunglasses on and stares straight ahead, putting an arm around my shoulders.

The black woman bumps into a pedestrian and spits on the ground at his feet. I am watching her out of the corner of my eye, which is hard because I can only see the bits of her that are moving. I turn my head. Mum hisses at me, but before I turn back I see the mad woman’s roving eye land on me with horrible intensity. Ignoring the traffic, she starts across the street. The people in the queue start to shift uneasily as she comes closer. Mum’s grip tightens on my shoulder.

Cars hoot and screech to a halt, and a bicycle wobbles almost off the road. A woman carrying a grocery bag on her head almost collides with the mad woman, but steps aside and balances her load just in time.

The mad woman has reached the queue and is still looking straight at me. In all this time she has not broken eye contact, and I find myself unable to look away from her. One of her eyeballs points straight ahead, and the other rolls in its socket.

She stops a few feet away from us. This close, I can see that she has beautiful skin, velvety and almost purple, like an eggplant, but that she is missing most of her teeth. Those that are left stick out strong and square.

She starts chanting something, pointing her finger at Mum and me. It is definitely not English, and it does not sound like Shona, or even Ndebele. Everyone else in the queue stays where they are. I can feel uncertainty passing through them. Should they intervene? The men, especially, look sheepish.

The woman is working herself up into a frenzy now. Spittle starts to collect at the corners of her mouth. I notice her lips are chapped. She lunges at me, her arms outstretched, and the orderly queue scatters like a line of ants when a heavy shoe comes down upon them. Mum grabs me and pulls me back. The mad woman sniggers and shuffles off.

I have never seen anyone who is mad before. It baffles me that someone can look like a normal person on the outside, but inside be full of chaos and empty spaces. I start to dream that I am outside the cinema holding my favourite stuffed animal, and the mad woman snatches it out of my hand and runs away, cackling.

I start to worry about Granny. Mum and the people at church have told me that when you die, your soul goes up to heaven. Your soul is the part of you that makes you a person. What if, when Granny dies, her soul goes up to heaven but her body stays down here and she turns into someone like the mad woman? There is something horrifying about the thought of her familiar, soft body lurching around, talking nonsense, spitting at our feet. My nightmares change, and now it is Granny's face that I see.

I ask Clever about it.

“Clever, when someone dies, what happens to their body?”

“It is buried,” he says.

“So ...” I'm not sure how to phrase this. “What if something else comes into their body after they have left it?”

“What sort of thing?” He is looking at me properly now.

“Just ... a bad thing.”

“Are you talking about zvipoko?” he asks.

“What are zvipoko?”

“Ghosts.”

“I thought that was ngozi?”

“Ngozi are vengeful spirits,” says Clever, “like the ghost of a murdered person.

They are different.”

“So zvipoko, then. Can they come into a dead person’s body?”

“Only a muroyi can make them do that. A witch.”

“Could someone do it to Granny?”

“Your Granny? No. It is something that happens to black people only.”

I can’t believe blacks and whites are as different as all that. We walk on the same soil, we breathe the same air, we have to gasp through the same droughts and swat the same insects.

“What happens to people after they die?”

“You go to church,” he says. “They will tell you there.”

“They tell us we go to heaven.”

“Then that is where you will go.” He is polishing the silver with broad, slow strokes.

“Do black people and white people go to the same place?”

“Yes.”

“Will you go there?”

“I hope so.”

“But what do you think?”

“I am a Christian,” he says.

I can see I am not getting anywhere with this line of questioning. “And your people in the village, what do they think?”

Clever sits back on his haunches and thinks about it. Then he says, “They believe that when someone dies, they go to a place where they can watch their children and make sure that everything goes well for them.”

“Where is that place?”

“I do not know.” Clever gives me one of his rare smiles. “But it is not far away.”

I want a cat more than anything, especially now that Granny is sick and everyone is so distracted. Whenever we go for a walk and meet a cat I stop and squat down so that I don't look too big and scary, and I hold out my hand palm up, making little cat-attracting sounds – *whisk whisk whisk*. Some cats come forward at once and press a cool nose against my hand, but most will hesitate for a minute. If I pretend to be looking at something else, and if I am patient, they will stretch and amble towards me as if they just happen to be passing. They will extend their small noses to my hand casually, and then lean up against me with their tail up in the air like a furry question mark. When this happens, I know I am allowed to run my hand down their spine and tail, feeling the fur lift and flatten beneath my fingers.

Steve will not let us get a cat. I don't know why, except that perhaps Steve doesn't like anything changing.

I bring up the question one dinnertime.

“No,” says Steve and keeps eating.

“But I’m so sad about Granny,” I say.

Steve chews, moving the sadza from one side of his mouth to the other. This is one of the nights when Clever makes us sadza and relish for dinner. I always look forward to it, even though I am not allowed to eat the sadza properly – squishing it into a little bowl in my hands to scoop up the meat.

Mum smiles at me across the table and I drop the subject.

A few weeks after Granny is taken to hospital, Mum comes into my room. She is carrying something. When she releases it from her arms, it spills onto the white bedspread like an ink stain. A cat, small and black. In a moment he has unfurled himself again and walks towards me daintily, lifting and dropping each paw with exaggerated care, his tail raised in greeting.

“Who does he belong to?” I ask.

“He’s yours,” says Mum, perching on the end of the bed.

“Really?” I stroke the kitten’s head, and he pushes up against my hand with violent affection.

“Really.”

“I can keep him?”

“You can.”

I uncurl my fingers towards the kitten and he touches his nose to them gently, then takes a swipe with his paw. He loses his balance.

“What are you going to call him?”

“Archie.” After the comics.

When Steve comes home, he and Mum go into the bedroom and lock the door. I can hear them arguing. Archie and I sit on the bed playing with a bit of string, and listening. He has angled one ear towards me and the other towards the raised voices.

“Another bluddy animal ...”

Mum talks in an angry hiss, but I can hear some of the words. “Dying ... cat ... just a bluddy ... make things easier.”

When Steve comes out, his face is grim and sulky. Mum’s lips are thin. I cuddle the kitten close and tell him that there’s no way he’s going back where he came from because he’s ours now, and I will always take care of him.

For a while I am worried about the other cats in the complex beating up my kitten, but from the beginning it’s clear that Archie is a bruiser. We hear cat fights late at night, eerie violin-string yowling, and in the morning we find him washing in the sun, surrounded by clumps of another cat’s fur.

“This one, he is a fighter,” says Clever with admiration. Archie presses himself up against the clean, pressed legs of Clever’s uniform, and keeps him company when he is on his break. He develops a taste for kaffir tea (that is what Steve calls the strong, tarry brew Clever makes), and we pour it into a saucer for him to scoop up with the back of his pink tongue. He also likes to lick peanut butter off Clever’s finger.

“That cat’s like a bluddy black,” says Steve.

“Well, he is black,” I say, and Mum and Steve laugh as if I have said something very witty.

When he has subdued the locals, Archie begins his slow, insidious seduction of Steve. He seems to understand that his future here depends on winning Steve over, and he sets about achieving it with furry determination. He sits on the edge of the basin while Steve is shaving. He runs to greet him with a chirp. He arranges himself in attractive poses on the carpet in front of the television. Gradually, Steve begins to relent; offering his hand for a sniff, giving Archie a cursory stroke or slipping him a bit of fish. Finally, it is Steve who protests when we push Archie off our laps or refuse to give him an extra helping of food.

I remember my conversation with Beauty in Chinhoyi when I was five years old and thought a cat would be my totem animal. I also remember her warning about killing your totem, but there is no chance of that. Archie has blended into me like charcoal smudged by a finger.

He seems to inhabit a different world from ours, slipping in and out of the daylight world through invisible doors. The flat comes alive for me as it hasn't before. Yes, it is small and there is no Bush, but there is more life here than I had expected. This is a great country to be a cat, and Archie makes the most of it. Even in our small flat complex he finds bats, chameleons and shrews, as well as an assortment of insects ranging from moths to rhino beetles, which he carefully lines up on the kitchen step. Lizards prove more difficult. He will pounce on a slender slip of green basking on the wall and be left with a wildly thrashing tail in his jaws. The rest of the lizard, tail-less, but

alive, has retreated to an inaccessible hideaway behind a drainpipe or stone. Archie will look at me and chirp, his black face furrowed with confusion and disappointment.

When I am sitting in bed, reading, Archie will sometimes stretch up on his hind legs and look out of the window, glaring at nothing. He reminds me that there are still things out there, in the darkness.

When Granny finally dies, I am sitting in the hospital waiting room watching cartoons on their tiny television. No one tells me she is sicker than usual; I think we are just coming to visit, as we usually do on the weekend. I laugh loudly at something on the screen, and Steve comes through. His face is red, and his eyes are screwed up and small.

“Shut up!” he says. “Show some respect.”

I am quiet. I still don't know what's happening. We drive home. In the evening, Mum tells me that Granny has died. I do not see her after she's dead, and I do not see her being taken from the hospital bed, so for a long time I imagine that she never left that room; that she's lying there, yellow and dried out, her hands folded on her stomach and her glasses propped up on her nose. I know it is ridiculous, but I think it anyway.

Chapter Ten

After Granny dies, the rainy season begins. The clouds empty as if Mercy is wringing out a wet cleaning cloth, and the air is charged with electricity. Mum gets her storm headaches, and lies on the bed with two slices of cucumber over her eyes. There is a blue crackle on Archie's fur when I stroke him.

I sit at my window and watch the rain. Storm clouds stalk the city on lightning legs, and I play the counting game between the lightning and the thunder. When I see the flash of light, I start counting under your breath.

“One chongololo, two chongololo, three chongololo ...”

The chongololos line up. Three means that the storm is three kilometres away. When you can't even get to the end of the word before the thunder starts, the storm is upon you.

Our garden becomes red slush, the grass uprooting and floating on the water like tufts of green hair. We can't help tracking mud into the kitchen whenever we come inside, and Clever spends hours down on his knees, scrubbing at the tiles. A slumped pile of muddy slops and takkies develops just inside the door, on a sheet of newspaper that soon becomes pulp.

Then come the flying ants, and Clever almost gives up on the kitchen floor altogether. When the rain touches the soil they come out of their underground burrows and corkscrew into the air. Archie dances in the garden, twisting his long body in

unlikely ways to claw them out of the sky. When he eats them, their wings stick out on either side of his mouth like a little moustache.

Flying ants have pointless lives – one dance in the rain, and then they lose their wings and become weak, squishable things crawling on their bellies. They come into the house through every window and door they can, and flop about for hours in long, melodramatic death throes. The wings are crisp, with wiry veins connecting the sheets of brittle skin. They float through the house in great drifts, piling up against walls and catching in the bristles of Clever’s broom. When he brushes them outside the wind sweeps them back in.

With storms come the power cuts. We are used to these. It usually happens in the evenings, when a power line is struck by lightning or hit by a falling tree branch. The TV screen folds to a tiny white square, then blinks off. The lights flare, then darken.

“Everyone stay still,” says Steve, as he does every time we have a power cut. There is a thud as he bumps into furniture, and a swear word. We hear him fumbling in the cupboard, and a pale cone of light appears as he switches on the torch. That is the signal for Mum and me to get matches and light all the candles we keep around the room. Clever starts to lay the fire, and Archie hovers near him, waiting for warmth.

Next comes the camping stove on its little gas cylinder. Mum starts heating up some baked beans for supper. Steve tunes his radio to the BBC World Service, and we sit with our food on our laps, hunched over and huddled, our faces glowing in the candlelight as if we are sunburned. The rain drums the roof like impatient fingers on a table.

After supper there is nothing to do but play cards. It is too dim to read, and there is no television. We pause only to let Mum call ZESA and ask about the fault.

ZESA knows Mum well.

“It is the mad white woman again,” we hear the operator saying when he passes the phone to a supervisor.

After five or six phone calls, we hear that someone has been sent to fix the problem.

“So it’ll be another four hours then,” mutters Steve.

It is almost a pity when the lights come back on. The shrunken world springs outwards again to touch every far wall. Interesting shadows become the same old furniture. Our eyes, dark and mysterious, return to their normal washed-out selves.

In the morning, the garden is flattened and swampy, the plants drooping and grey. The world is a jigsaw of puddles linked by slim sections of solid ground, and the storm drains have become bridges over slow-moving brown rivers. Dead rodents and insects float on the surface of the water. The sun looks rinsed and paler than usual; the air smells clean. I want to bottle the air somehow for those days when the world is stale and baked, but instead, I plunge my hands into the wet soil and smell the secret, mineral smell of plant roots and the burrows of insects. Worms slide away from my hands and down tiny tunnels.

“What are you doing?” says Mum. “Come and wash your hands.”

My fingers are red. Mum helps me scrub under my nails in the kitchen sink, but we can't get all of it out. There are red lines like veins snaking through every crack in my skin.

“Well, that was a bloody stupid idea,” Mum says.

I don't care. The soil feels different after the rain, and it is worth the mess to feel it.

The rains bring life. The yellow grass turns green and lush, and the plants swell and sprout to double their normal size. Birdsong sounds painfully loud in the mornings. The crickets scream at night. The cane rats Archie lines up at the door are fat and robustly healthy. The soil is a rich blood-red, writhing with worms. Everything is alive, moving and growing. Almost everything. After Granny's death, Grandpa seems to dry up. His hands get cold and his nose goes more pointed and white at the end.

“Poor bugger,” says Oliver. He has come over to show us his latest triumph. He has made a liquid from vegetables that he says will power a car.

“For how long?” asks Steve.

“Oh, you'd be able to drive it for at least a few metres.”

“Lekker.” Steve puts the can beneath his seat.

Oliver is concerned with saving the environment. He tells us about the endangered rhino, and the way the Bush is burned and desecrated. I am sympathetic, but Steve says it is hard enough keeping tabs on our family and our animals without worrying about all the other families and animals out there. Only rich countries like America and England have time to worry about these things. Here it is every man for himself.

“So how is he holding up?” asks Oliver. He has known Grandpa for years.

“Not too bad,” says Steve. Mum looks up from her tea for a moment, then back down.

“Ja, it takes a lot to kill off a Rhodie,” says Oliver cheerfully.

We visit Grandpa almost every day after Granny dies. He has no sense of time, and will start the conversation where it ended at our previous visit, as if we never left. He has become hard of hearing, and I have to talk slowly and clearly to him. I think he is not deaf, just distracted – listening to another voice inside his own head.

He starts to spend more and more time with Jonah in the garden. When we visit he asks Mercy to make us tea, and then halfway through a cup he stands up and goes outside without saying anything. The tea in his cup cools down, and gradually the milk separates from the brown and floats on top in little pale islands. We sit there as if nothing is wrong, although Steve will not touch his tea either once Grandpa has gone. Mum and I carry on sipping, and even eat a biscuit or two.

Out of the window we can see Grandpa in the garden. He stands up straighter out there, and points with his walking stick as he talks. We can't hear what the two of them are talking about, but Grandpa looks much more like himself. After a while, sometimes even as much as half an hour later, Grandpa comes back inside. He mutters, “Sorry,” and carries on with his tea.

He will drink it all, even though it has gone cold, unless Mum takes the cup from him and fills it up from the pot. I'm glad she does this. There is nothing more disgusting than cold tea.

Once, Mum tells me to go out after Grandpa. I'm not sure why she thinks I might be able to bring him back in.

I go out through the kitchen door. Mercy is there, humming as she gets things ready for dinner. Grandpa likes to have meat, potatoes and three vegetables at least. That was what Granny always made. Mercy is a very good cook, better than Granny, even, but at the moment Grandpa treats his meals like he does his tea – he sits and watches them, eats a forkful or two, then wanders off.

Grandpa is talking to Jonah. I normally keep well out of Jonah's way, but I have promised Mum and so I go up to talk to them.

"Oh, hello there." Grandpa ruffles my hair, but doesn't look at me. "Marigolds around the edge, I think, Jonah," he says. He stirs the earth with his Nyaminyami stick.

"Yes, sah," says Jonah. He looks different. His face is soft, and he speaks softly. I hold Grandpa's dry hand and look up at him. In his eyes I can see sadness.

"It is time for a change," says Grandpa. "Yes, a change. I would like to see new flowers in these beds. They have stayed the same for too long."

"Yes, sah."

I let go of Grandpa's hand. He doesn't seem to notice. He and Jonah walk away towards the end of the garden. From the back I can see that they are the same height. They lean together like two old trees, and they seem to be having an entirely different conversation from the one I hear.

I go back inside, passing through the kitchen again. Mercy is chopping carrots. She sees me looking out the window at Grandpa and Jonah, and she smiles.

“Jonah loves the Baas,” she says. “He loved the Medem, also.”

“Really?” I say. I can’t imagine Jonah loving anyone, although I suppose he must do.

“He has worked here since he was a boy,” says Mercy. She is rolling out pastry now. She must be making a chicken pie for Grandpa. The live chickens are wandering around the garden pecking at things, and I wonder what they think when they smell the cooking chicken from inside.

When I go into the lounge, Mum and Steve are sitting in exactly the same position – right on the edge of their seats, gripping their cups with both hands.

“Well?” says Steve. “Is he coming inside?”

“I didn’t ask,” I say.

Steve stands up and goes outside. Mum looks at me.

“Sorry,” I say.

“That’s all right.” She holds out a hand and draws me close. “After this, we’ll go home and watch a video.”

“Okay.”

Steve brings Grandpa back inside. He sits down and links his fingers together.

“Why don’t you finish your tea, Dad,” he says.

“Thank you.” Grandpa has an absent smile. He looks like he is behind glass, an old photograph fading at the edges.

“I’ve found out,” he says suddenly, “that you can stay warm in bed if you keep perfectly still.”

Steve’s face crumples.

“Yes, perfectly still,” Grandpa goes on. “Then you create a cocoon of warmth. You just have to be careful and not let any air in. That is what I have learned.”

He turns his attention to me. “It’s a skill, you know,” he says. “Learning how to do things differently. It is a very interesting exercise.”

He pauses and sips his tea. “Yes. Very interesting.”

Even though Granny is gone, there are flowers in the house. Granny loved fresh flowers and she would go out into the garden with secateurs in hand every few days, returning with a little bundle of colourful corpses to arrange in the living room. There is a vase of birds-of-paradise in the lounge.

“Where are the flowers coming from?” I ask Mum.

“I suppose Mercy must be picking them,” she says.

Granny’s clothes are still hanging in the cupboard next to Grandpa’s. Her silver brush is still on the dressing table, filled with strands of wiry salt-and-pepper hair. There is a Granny-shaped indent in the mattress. When I touch it, it feels warm. I try to conjure up an image of her. It seems wrong to be happy when Granny is dead and Grandpa is so sad. I close my eyes and remember her sour, baked-bread smell, her jar of buttons, her skill at knitting stuffed animals and dolls’ clothes. For a moment I manage to work up to a pang of loss and sadness, and then I feel less disloyal. But I really feel sadder for losing Grandpa.

“I got the art prize at school, Grandpa.”

“Did you now?” He summons a smile, but it slips off his face. His eyes drift past me to the garden.

“There’s actually a prize-giving ceremony coming up,” says Mum. She has started using a different voice with Grandpa, cheerful and singsong, like the voice she uses with other people’s babies. Steve calls it her Camp Counsellor voice.

“Is there indeed?” says Grandpa. I can see him trying to rouse himself, shake off the terrible sleepiness that descends on him when we visit.

“Would you like to come, Dad?” asks Steve

“Hmmm?” Grandpa gives me a sweet smile.

“To the prize-giving,” Mum prompts.

“Hmmm.” Grandpa gives something like a nod.

Steve is crying now, but Grandpa doesn’t notice. He just looks down at his tea and drifts off again.

Mum and Steve go to Granny’s funeral, but I stay home. Apparently Granny is going to be cremated, which means burned.

Clever says that burning someone after they die is wrong. “It takes a year for the spirit to leave the body and join its ancestors,” he says.

When I tell Mum this she tuts in exasperation and says, “But imagine what it would be like if everyone was buried. We would run out of space. Especially now.”

I know she is talking about the disease that no black person talks about – the reason we have to be careful around blood at school, even just a grazed knee or paper cut. The cemeteries are filling up with black bodies and white headstones.

We had our first Health Education class the week Granny died. One of the boys told me that it would have something to do with bananas, but I didn't believe him.

“What would we do with a banana?”

“I don't know, but my brother said they used a banana in Health class.”

“That's stupid.”

When the nurse came in, she was not carrying any bananas that I could see.

“Today we are talking about AIDS,” she announced. We all sat up. We had heard the word before, but no one had properly explained it. All I knew was that lots of the blacks had it; that it had something to do with the little balloons of condoms you see on the side of the road sometimes; and that it had something to do with curses.

We were given pamphlets of skinny, frowning people in hospital beds. We learned that AIDS stands for Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome and we chanted it together until we could remember it. We learned that it means your body can't heal you properly anymore, and that if you get it you will have it forever. We also learned about HIV, which is confusing, because HIV comes before AIDS but it doesn't mean you will necessarily get AIDS. There were a lot of letters floating about, and I think we were all confused, but we came away with the important knowledge that you can't get AIDS from sitting on a toilet seat that an infected person has sat on. Leigh had been telling us that for ages, and I was glad she had been proved wrong.

Clever has told me what Shona people believe happens after you are buried. When the person is buried, a stick is left sticking up from the grave to the surface, so a little bit is

showing. When the soil has settled, the family pulls out the stick and leaves a thin hole in the soil above the grave, which is an opening through which the dead person's spirit can escape. The spirit takes the form of a caterpillar or worm which will wander about for a year until the spirit is welcomed home in a special ceremony.

I do not say this to Steve or to Grandpa, though. Steve would tell me to shut up, and I don't know what Grandpa would say any more. He still looks like himself, but inside him there is a big empty room that I don't want to walk into.

Chapter Eleven

Mum gets a job on a farm, doing the accounts.

“You don’t need to go to work,” says Steve when she announces it. We did not even know she was applying for jobs.

“I know. I want to,” says Mum. She butters her toast and hums to herself.

“Ja, well.” Steve shakes out his newspaper with a snap, and disappears behind it.

It is the school holidays, and I am sick of reading, sick of playing and am almost looking forward to school, so when Mum suggests coming to help at her new work, I jump at the chance.

The drive to the farm is half an hour long. I slip into a pleasant daze, watching the white lines on the road whip past. Sky, yellow grass and electric fences; three ribbons of colour above the road. A dead, furry something that I don’t look at too closely. A small group of women walking in slow, stately steps with bags of mealies and flour piled high on their heads. A herd of cattle, and a skinny picanin flicking a switch at their flanks and kicking at stones.

The farm belongs to the Cooper family. Apparently there are two children. Mum tells me that I will like them, but I don’t think that I will.

“The girl is almost finished with high school already, and the boy is three years older than you.”

“Okay.” That would make him fifteen, intimidating, and not a potential playmate.

Mum tells me that the girl goes for horse-riding and tennis lessons, and that the boy has his own motorbike and will take over the farm one day. They sound golden and confident.

“Mr Cooper says he has some of Chelsea’s old clothes,” says Mum. “He thinks they might fit you.”

I have an uncomfortable vision of me wearing Chelsea’s old clothes and bumping into her one day on the farm.

“Here we are.” Mum turns into a dirt road. It is wide and rutted with lorry and tractor tracks. A buck standing at the side of the road gives us a wide-eyed, accusing stare before disappearing into the yellow-brown scrub.

We drive past one of the workers’ complexes. A Sweeper is busy outside, and a crowd of children in red and brown T-shirts jump up and down and wave.

“How are you? How are you?” they shout, and collapse in giggles.

“They don’t know my car yet,” says Mum. “They think I’m a visitor.”

Behind us I can see them dancing in the dust from the wheels.

The air smells almost like cigarettes, but fresher, sweeter. The green tobacco plants are waxy and poisonous-looking. Men in overalls walk between the rows as if they are wading through a green sea.

Mum pulls up to a row of low, white-washed buildings.

“These are the offices,” she says as she turns off the engine. Her cheeks are pink.

There are long runs covered in chicken wire next to the office.

“What are those?”

“The baby ostriches,” says Mum. “Mr Cooper has an ostrich farm as well as the tobacco.”

I get out to investigate the ostrich pens.

“I’ll be inside when you’re done,” says Mum. She takes a big key ring out of her bag and opens up the door.

The ostriches are divided into age groups; a row of incubators, a pen of fluffy chicks, a pen of slightly less fluffy and taller chicks, and then the gangly, moulting teenagers. I like these ones best. There is a smell of feathers and greasy excrement about the pens, which floats in through the office windows whether they are open or not.

Helping at the farm is a success, and Mum starts bringing me to work with her every day. I help with filing and writing addresses on envelopes.

“Could you get me a Diet Coke from the fridge, treasure?” Mum asks when we take a break.

I go to the fridge and open the door.

“Mum?”

A feathery, bloody mess. And a pot of yoghurt.

“Mum?”

Mum comes over. “Bluddy yell.”

“What are those?”

I am seeing more details now; bits of skin, scaly feet, veined eyelids stretched over bulging eyes.

“Baby ostriches,” says Mum. “They died in the pens. Jeans said he was going to get rid of them ...”

“I guess he needs to keep them cool,” I say. “Until he moves them.”

“I guess so.”

Mum and I stare at the fridge in silence for a while.

“Shut the door,” she says eventually. “No, wait, grab us a couple of Cokes first.”

I lift out two cans.

“Cheers.” Mum flicks the can open. It makes a sound like kissing. We drink.

The next day I come to the farm, I notice a complicated contraption of ropes and pulleys, on a little platform.

“What’s that?” I ask.

“I don’t know,” says Mum. “Something farmy.”

A group of men are approaching, dragging a cart behind them. Something big and brown is slumped on it. I watch in interest as they lift it off at the little platform.

Then in horror as they start to hook it up.

“Mum!”

“What?” Mum comes over to the window and watches with me.

“Well, that explains that,” she says finally.

The men have got out big cleavers. We turn away from the window, but can't stop the hot, metallic smell of blood from creeping in. The cow's head lolls from its shoulders, its eyeballs dusty and unseeing.

"Maybe I'll ask if my office can be moved," says Mum.

I feel sick, but strangely thrilled. I remember the time my uncle killed a kudu and brought it back to hang in the room next to the workshop. Lucy and I sat watching its blood drip from its neck for hours and hours, fascinated as it bubbled pink and pulsing from the vein to flush itself down a drain in the middle of the floor. The doors were shut to keep the dogs out, and the light was dim and eerie.

We stayed there all afternoon. I can still see the redness of it, like bright flowers blooming on the concrete floor, or the juice from a pomegranate squeezed too hard in a fist.

When I meet Mr Cooper for the first time, he is leaning against Mum's desk, smiling at her. I don't know why farmers all stand like this, but they do – legs apart, hands in their pockets or on their hips, thrusting their pelvis slightly forwards. He has a baseball cap on, so I cannot see his face at first.

"Oh, hi!" says Mum. She wiggles her fingers at me as if she has spotted a friend across a crowded café, rather than her daughter coming back with a couple of Diet Cokes from the farm shop. She has her phone voice on, which is how I know straight away that Mr Cooper must be good-looking.

"Howzit," says Mr Cooper, turning around. He is a tall, spare man, with dark hair greying in silver spiders at the temples. He is wearing a collared shirt and shorts with

long socks and vellies. I know that under his socks he will have a farmer's tan – pale shins giving way to red-brown knees the colour of the soil.

“Hello.”

We shake hands. His is covered in interesting whorls and bumps.

Mr Cooper asks all the usual questions adults ask. How old are you? What school do you go to? Ja, and how's it going? Good, good. Then he turns his attention back to Mum. I watch him as he points with long, brown fingers to the accounting books. His radio crackles, and he answers it.

“Ja?”

A stream of static Shona from the other end. Mr Cooper responds in fluent Shona. I am impressed. If you closed your eyes, he could be a black man.

“I have to run,” says Mr Cooper when he finishes his radio conversation.

He says goodbye to Mum, then to me. I notice that he has very blue eyes, creased with lines at the edges as if they are sewn on. “Cheers.”

I see a huge motorbike outside, the biggest I have ever seen. It is a monster of chrome and leather, plastered in dust. He fires it up, and I can feel my brain juddering against my skull.

He raises a hand. “Cheers!” he says again, and is gone.

“He seems nice,” I say to Mum.

“Mmm.”

“What's his wife like?”

“His wife?”

“Ja.”

“He doesn’t have a wife.”

“But ...”

“Oh, he did, but she died,” says Mum. “A while ago. It’s just him and the kids now.”

“Oh, okay. Do you know what ...”

“No.” She looks at me sharply. “And don’t ask.”

“I wouldn’t ask!”

“Okay, just don’t, all right?”

“I wouldn’t,” I mutter, but quietly.

“Oh, wait a mo,” says Mum as I start towards the door. “Mr Cooper asked if you wanted to do him a favour and earn a bit of pocket money.”

“Okay. What is it?”

“He wants someone to walk the dogs during the day.”

“How many dogs?”

“Three. Five dollars per walk.”

“Okay.”

“Ja? So you might as well start today. You know how to get to the Big House? Just ask Lettuce, he’ll tell you.”

And so I start taking the dogs for daily walks. The Coopers have three dogs – a big Labrador called Shumba, a schnauzer called Sergeant and a Rhodesian Ridgeback called Ian.

They live in a white homestead with a kidney-shaped pool that sparkles blue and green. Whenever I go there to collect the dogs, there is a servant slowly dragging a net through the water to gather all the leaves, insects and scorpions that fall into the pool. He is an old man with a beard and hooded eyes, and he stares beyond the pool into the far distance as he sweeps the water. I wonder what he is thinking about.

Mum has told me that Mr Cooper's parents were Afrikaners who left after Independence. Mr Cooper stayed on to work in the new Zimbabwe.

There are different kinds of whites: the Afrikaans, the British whites, and the Rhodies. We are British whites, originally. When I saw my first map of Zimbabwe, I realised that it was shaped like a teapot, and I imagined it filling up with all the cups of tea the British whites drink every day.

Rhodies are white people who lived in Rhodesia before it became Zimbabwe and want to go back to the Old Days. They know the words to 'Rhodesians Never Die', and they lean back in chairs and talk about the Bluddy Banana Republic and drink big glasses of gin-and-tonic.

'Poh Whites' are something else again. They have straggly hair and strange clothes. I call them Poh Whites because that is how the blacks say it. There is one girl in the Harare orphanage who is a Poh White. We see her playing when we take boxes of old clothes and toys there. She has dirty blonde hair tied back with a ribbon, and splotchy red cheeks.

"Poor kid," said Mum once. She watches her every time we go there. "Maybe, Steve ...?" and she looked at him.

“No way man,” said Steve, and I was glad. I do not want a Poh White sister. And how could Mum even think about adopting another girl? She has another one already, although I don’t know where she is.

It is strange seeing white people begging for money or offering to wash your car windscreen. We keep our eyes turned away from them.

I am taking the dogs for a walk today. When I arrive at the big metal gates of the Big House, the gardener lets me in.

“Thank goodness you come to get them,” he says to me. “They shuper me too much.”

The dogs jump all over me. Shumba drops a ball at my feet. It is caked in grass clippings and old saliva. It is the start of a never-ending game of fetch.

We set off along the dirt roads. The dogs don’t need to be on leashes – they know the farm far better than I do. When we pass groups of workers we shout greetings at each other in Shona, and smile. I collect a few followers at each worker compound I pass – black kids in shorts and bare feet, who clap their hands at the dogs and grin at me. By the time I reach Mum’s offices, I have a parade of about twenty kids following me, and an impromptu soccer game has started up on the dusty road.

“Good grief,” says Mum, looking past me. “Do you want a drink?”

“Yes please, and for the dogs.”

We pour tap water into bowls for the dogs, which lap it up with loose, lolling tongues. The water here is cloudy with minerals, and we can’t drink it – it has to be passed through a filter. We have one of those at home too. The only time I ever drank

from the tap, too lazy to fill up the filter, I had dysentery for a week, and now I am always careful.

I am bent over, filling up the water bowls, when I hear the gulping roar of a motorbike behind me. Mr Cooper? I turn around and shade my eyes.

“Howzit,” says a voice.

“Hi.”

“I’m Sean.”

He has brown skin and blonde hair that flops in front of his eyes. He seems adult-sized, but I know from Mum that he is only fifteen.

“Mr Cooper’s son?”

“Ja. Want to come for a ride?”

His accent is very thick. He rolls his r’s and clips off his words at the end.

“I’ll have to ask my Mum,” I say, and inwardly cringe for being so childish.

“Well, go and ask.” The way he says it, it sounds like ‘ausk’. I run inside.

“Mum, can I go on the back of Sean’s motorbike?”

Mum looks a little dubious.

“Please, Mum.”

“Has he got helmets?”

I have no idea. “Ja.”

“Well, okay. But you be careful, all right?”

“I will!” I skip back outside, my glasses slipping half off my nose. Sean is facing away, as if any second he will jump back on the bike and disappear.

“Ja, it’s okay,” I say.

“Lekker. Hop on.”

I climb on behind him. The seat is hot and smells like melting plastic.

“Hold on round my waist,” he says, turning around. He is impatient. “Look.” He grabs both my hands and pulls them around to his front. “Like this.”

I can feel the rough cotton of his shirt. He smells of sweat and Persil. I can see the backs of his ears, curved and glowing from the sun, and the tiny yellow hairs that run down the back of his neck.

“You holding tight?” he asks.

I nod. My cheek scrapes his shoulder.

“Okay.” He starts the bike up. It is even louder than it sounded before.

Mhuhdudhudhu is the Shona word for motorbike, and that is exactly the noise that this one is making. Mhu-dhu-dhu-dhu-dhu-dhu, shuddering and juddering. I feel like if I open my mouth my teeth will fall right out of my head.

Sean accelerates and we start moving. I start to think this was not a good idea. Everything goes past so quickly, and I am worried my glasses are going to fall off. I can't look ahead of us because my eyes water and insects zip into my face with a puzzled buzz – where is this human coming from so fast? – and I can't look to the side because everything has blurred into colourful stripes and it makes me feel sick. All I can do is lean my head against Sean's back and concentrate on the weave of his shirt.

He shouts something over the engine. I don't know what. I shout something back and he seems satisfied.

The bike coughs to a halt. Sean has seen a group of farm workers walking back from the tobacco fields. They are young men, for the most part, anywhere from sixteen to thirty, and they throw laughing remarks at the Baas's son.

Who's your little girlfriend, hey?

Playing with the toy bike again?

He answers them right back in fluent Shona with an impressive range of slang and swear words, to their delight. White teeth flash in their faces as they reply, and as Sean kicks the bike back into life they wave us off.

"Where are we going?" I shout in Sean's ear.

"Huh?"

"Where are we going?"

"Home."

"Where?"

"Home!"

"Your house?"

"Ja!"

"But I have to get back to Mum ..."

He doesn't hear this. I have no idea where I am. Does he expect me to walk back? We're miles away from the offices. We've passed the tobacco fields, the greenhouses and the ostrich pens. I feel like an idiot.

We speed through the gate and into the lush garden, where we come to a halt.

“Just going inside to grab something,” says Sean, taking off his helmet. He swings his leg over the bike and gets off. I stay where I am.

“Coming?”

“No, I’ll wait here.” I ignore the cramp in my legs.

“Come on. I’ll get you a drink.”

I slowly climb down. My legs feel like jelly, as if I have been running all this way instead of riding.

“Come on.”

I follow Sean to the Big House. That’s what everyone calls it. It is huge, with rough white walls and a big swimming pool out the front. Sean goes in through the French windows and I follow. The first thing I see is a buffalo head, hanging above the fireplace. It is easily bigger than my entire body.

“We call him Buffy,” says Sean. He has poured two Cokes. I sip mine and feel the fizz like little pins pressing into my tongue.

“You have a nice house,” I say.

“Ja, it’s all right, eh.” Sean throws himself into a chair, legs and arms hanging off at strange angles.

I sit holding my cup until he has finished. I dare not have too much to drink in case I burp from the fizz, which would be so embarrassing that I would never be able to look at him again.

“Well, I suppose I’d better take you back, eh?”

“Yes please. What was it you needed to get?”

“Oh, ja, thanks for reminding me.” He disappears for a second, then returns, shoving something into his pocket. “Okay, let’s go.”

When he drops me off at the office he gives me a distant grin, as if in his head he is already on to the next thing.

“See you later.”

I am in love.

Chapter Twelve

Mum and Steve go to a party at the Coopers' house one night. I beg to come too, but they say it is for the adults only, and I have to stay home with Clever. When they get home I run through in my pyjamas and ask what happened.

Steve and Mum have bright eyes and flushed cheeks. Mum is still holding a glass.

“Mum, is that one of the Coopers' glasses?”

“Oh.” Mum glances down. “Yes.” She seems surprised.

“It was a great evening,” says Steve.

“What's in the glass?” An unappetizing brown slush clings to the bottom.

“Hooligan juice.” Mum and Steve exchange glances and giggle. “Brandy and ice-cream.”

They collapse into the sofas. Steve gets up again.

“Shee-yit, forgot to pay Clever.” He meanders through into the kitchen.

“So, Mum, what did you do?” I am agog for details of the glamorous party at the big white house.

“Agh, we had a braai, we had some drinks ...” Mum thinks. “The farm managers played a game.”

“What sort of game?”

“They jabbed a toothpick into their foreheads and set fire to the end.”

“Wouldn't that hurt?”

“Ja. The winner is the person who lets it burn the longest.”

“Oh.”

Steve comes back and starts tickling Mum. She starts giggling again, and I think it is probably time to go to bed.

Mum is in charge of calculating and giving out the wages to all the farm workers. This happens once a month, and a long line of black men in bright orange, blue or green overalls snakes from Mum’s office. There is a festive atmosphere, as people laugh and joke and plan their trip to the shebeen after work, to spend some of their pay packet.

The workers’ names are Jeans, Lettuce, Hatred, Oblivious, Killer, Murder, Doesn’t-Matter, Enough, Lovemore, Loveness, Gift, and a thousand others. I like the Shona way of naming a child after a particular meaning, rather than just a fashionable name, but I think it is strange that they have started doing it in English. I know many Rufaros, but I probably know just as many Happinesses – the English equivalent. It does not sound as good in English, I think.

I am helping Mum by slipping the money into named envelopes and holding them out to the workers.

“Here you go.”

“Thank you.”

“Thank you, Medem.”

“Mazvita tatenda.”

A parade of faces, each one different. Steve sometimes says that all blacks look the same, but that is only when he is looking at a big crowd. He couldn’t look into each face, as I am doing, and say the same.

“Howzit.”

The voice is familiar. I look up. A pair of strong brown legs ending in dusty feet wearing flip-flops. A Zimbabwe cricket team shirt. Blue eyes.

“Sean.” I wonder whether to jump up or not. I decide not, because I have a hole in the back of my pants that didn’t seem to matter when it was just me and Mum. I try to remember what colour underwear I’m wearing. I realise I haven’t said anything else.

“Hi.”

“Ja, hi.” Sean steps over me and inside, to see Mum. He is giving her a message from his father.

“Could you get us some Cokes?” asks Mum.

The Coke fizzes in the glasses and shines red in the sunlight.

“Here you go.”

“Thanks.”

I’m not sure whether to stay in here or go outside again. I hover in the doorway. If I go in, I can’t come back out. It would look like I was coming back to see him.

Sean stays for a few minutes, sipping his Coke. When he leaves, Mum makes me come back inside to say goodbye to Sean.

“Agh, no, Mum.” I am whispering, hoping our voices don’t carry.

“Come on, don’t be rude.”

“I’m not being rude. I just don’t want to come and say goodbye.”

“What are you getting so worked up about?”

“Nothing.”

“You like him, is that it?”

“No way!”

“Well fine, then, come and say bye.”

I am dragged inside. “Bye, Sean.”

“Ja, bye.” He looks amused.

As soon as he is gone, I wriggle free from Mum’s grasp and back outside. I can hear her laughing, and I want to kill her.

The next time I go to the farm, I make sure to wear my nicest denim shorts. No holes. I hang around on the front steps, filing invoices.

“Why don’t you come inside?” Mum calls.

“I don’t want to.”

“But it’s hot out there.”

“I don’t mind.”

The terracotta steps are cool under my bare legs, and most of me is in the shade.

And my waiting pays off.

“Howzit.”

“Hi.”

Sean is standing in front of me. “Do you want to come for a ride?”

“I’d have to ask Mum.”

“Ja.” He is impatient. “There’s an elephant on the game farm.”

“An elephant? I thought there were just buck and zebra.”

“Well, that’s why I want to go and find it.”

“Is it a good idea? I mean ...”

Sean is losing interest. “It’s fine. Do you want to come or not?”

“I’ll come.” I scramble to my feet. I am wearing slops. “Are these okay for riding the bike?”

“Ja, you can ride in anything.”

Mum has told me to wear proper shoes when I’m on the bike, but hopefully she won’t notice. I go inside, but Mum isn’t there. She must have walked down to the other office to deliver something. I write her a note and stick it on the computer, where she can’t miss it.

“It’s fine,” I say when I come out.

“Good. Hop on.”

I am more familiar with the bike now, but the noise always surprises me. It fills up my ears so tightly that no other sound can creep in. Sean is still talking, but he could be saying anything at all.

The sand on the road is stinging my feet. It flies up against me and rattles inside the bike frame. There are two dark patches of sweat under Sean’s arms, and I worry if I am sweating as well. A tuft of hair is sticking out of the back of his baseball cap. It is shiny and almost white in the sun. Behind us I can see Shumba running, two lines of saliva streaming from each side of his grinning lips like the strings of a kite.

“Where’s the elephant?” I yell.

“What?”

“Where’s the elephant?”

“Jeans saw it by the waterhole.”

“What was he doing there?”

“Drinking.”

“No, I mean Jeans.”

“I don’t know.”

Jeans is a man with a rat-like face and small eyes. I do not like him.

“Has anyone else seen it?”

“Nah. I wanted to find it first.”

“Okay.” I am quiet for a while. The only other time an elephant wandered onto the farm, it was a rogue male who charged one of the workers. It had to be shot. I feel like asking Sean if he’s sure this is a good idea, but I can imagine him getting bored with me, dropping me back at the office and going by himself. So I say nothing. Even though I know we are not meant to go anywhere on the farm without taking one of the workers with us – one of the workers who is good at tracking and who will know if there is a leopard nearby.

My hat is whipped off my head.

“Hey!” I nudge Sean. “Stop.”

“What?”

“My hat.”

“Huh?”

I jab him with my finger. His shirt is damp with sweat. “Stop.”

He pulls over, and the world becomes miraculously silent and still. It was windy on the bike, but when we stop the hot air falls down onto us like a blanket, and I feel my body start to sweat all over. It is almost too hot to breathe.

“My hat.”

“What about it?”

“It’s not on my head.”

“Were you wearing a hat?”

Shows how closely he looks at me.

“Ja.”

“How far back?”

I gesture vaguely.

“Well, shit, man, we’ll never find it. It could have blown off anywhere.”

I suppose this is true.

“Look, I’ll grab you one of my sister’s old hats when we get back, hey?”

“Okay.”

We roar off again. I don’t even know what part of the farm we are in now. I don’t think Sean thought to bring a radio with him.

We stop by a big waterhole. I can see mosquitoes hovering above the flat, metallic surface.

“It was round here,” says Sean. He jumps off the bike and wades through the long grass to sit on a rock next to the pool. I follow him, shading my eyes with my hand. I wish we had gone back for my hat. I can feel the sun like an itch on my scalp – it will turn pink, and Mum will tell me off.

We sit there for a long time, waiting.

“What happened to your Mum?” I ask Sean.

He is picking at the dry grass at our feet. We watch Shumba snuffle around the base of a tree.

“She died,” he says. “Cancer.”

“Oh.” We sit for a while in silence. Sean has built up quite a pile of grass by now. He can’t seem to sit still. Even when he tires of pulling up the grass, his knee is jiggling and he is humming under his breath. He seems like a foreign country, strange and exotic and unimaginably far away.

“You’re good to talk to,” he says.

“Oh.” My heart inflates so much that I can’t swallow. It feels like it is right up under my chin.

“You’re almost like a boy,” he says.

“Oh,” I say again. I flick a fly off my knee. “Well, people have always said I look like a boy.”

“Ja, you do a bit.”

“Ja.”

We sit.

“Maybe I should have been born a boy,” I say. I am still hoping for some sort of contradiction.

“Ja!” He is enthusiastic. “We could go camping.”

“Well, we can still do that.”

“Not overnight, though.”

“No, not overnight.”

We sit for half an hour, slapping insects on our arms and legs. I can feel the sun sizzling deeper into my skin.

“I don’t think it’s going to come,” I say.

“Ja, no, hey.” Sean shakes his head. “Okay, I’ll take you back.”

“Thanks.”

He doesn’t help me to my feet. We head back to the bike.

There is a sound like a cough from the Bush, and a sound like tearing silk.

“Shush, man,” says Sean. I didn’t even realise that I had made a noise.

“It’s the elephant!”

“Ja, shush.”

Sean crouches down next to the bike, and I do too. The grass raises red welts on my bare legs, and it is almost unbearably itchy. An ant crawls over my big toe.

There is a crunch from the scrub and a deep, heartfelt sigh. An ancient, blinking eye emerges from the Bush, followed by wrinkled, tortoise-like skin. The elephant moves softly, lifting each foot and putting it down gently like a cat walking a narrow ledge. A fly is buzzing around its velvety eyeball, and a great fringe of lash blinks it away.

“Eesh, man,” whispers Sean. “Look at the size of that thing.”

“Shut up!” I’m sure the elephant has noticed us – no matter how quiet humans try to be, they are no match for an animal’s ears – but so far he does not see us as a threat.

“It’s a girl,” says Sean.

The skin on the elephant’s knees is creased into folds like the skin on my knuckles. I feel the same way I feel in church when we are singing Jabulani Africa and

our voices lift up to the roof. Even the ant on my toe pauses in its senseless exploration of my feet and looks up, as if it is worshipping the elephant too.

The elephant investigates a bush with her nose, running it over the leaves like a loving finger, then loops her trunk around them. For a moment she looks like a grey, wrinkled bride holding a ragged bouquet, but then she stuffs it into her mouth and chews with a great sloshing, grinding noise that echoes off the kopjes.

It could be five minutes or forty-five before the elephant leaves, I cannot tell. She moves away into the Bush, and vanishes. I am amazed that something so large can just disappear into grey-brown scrub without a trace.

“That was lekker,” says Sean. “Glad you came?”

“Ja.” But we have been sitting here for nearly an hour now. My legs are tingling with pins-and-needles, and my skin is itching from the grasses. “We should go back.”

“Come on then, let’s get moving.” Sean climbs on the bike and tries to start it. It coughs once, then is silent.

“Shit,” he says.

“What?”

“Bike won’t start.”

I think he is joking, but then realise he is serious. I am suddenly very aware of the noises of the Bush around us – twigs cracking, an eerie bird call, something sliding through the long grass.

“What are we going to do? Did you bring a radio?”

“Nah.”

Sean stands like his father does, legs wide apart, hands on hips. He looks tough and capable. I can tell he is worried, though.

“So what are we going to do?”

“It’ll start.”

He tries the bike again. Nothing at all this time.

“Shit,” he says again.

“What can we do?” I ask. The sun is starting to dip towards the horizon, and the shadows are splayed across the ground like lizards flat on a wall.

Sean sits down. “We can’t do anything.”

“We could walk.”

“It’s miles. And I don’t want to leave the bike here. And I don’t want to walk through the Bush, it’s not safe.”

“Sitting in the Bush isn’t safe either. At least if we walked we’d be getting somewhere.”

“I said no,” says Sean, drawing himself up to his full fifteen-year-old height.

“We’ll wait here.”

We sit in silence, watching the shadows move and lengthen. When the first cricket starts to shrill, I feel my bare legs getting chilly.

“What if no one finds us?”

“They will,” says Sean

“What if we have to stay the night?”

“What if, what if.”

“But what if we do?”

“We’ll be fine. I know all about camping. And how to make fires.”

There are jackals that roam the farm at night, and worse.

The sunset is an orange flare before the darkness, like someone striking a match that quickly goes out. The crickets are deafening. Every noise is magnified. The cold pinpricks of stars are no comfort, and make me feel dizzy looking at them. I drop my head onto my knees.

The bakkie judders over the gravel and sand and comes to a halt next to us. Sean jumps up.

“Howzit, Dad.”

“Don’t you bluddy howzit me. What are you bluddy playing at, hey?” says Mr Cooper. “You don’t wander off without taking a radio. You know that. Wake up, domkop.”

He claps Sean on the side of his head. Sean holds his ear with one hand and looks dazed in the harsh headlights. It must be ringing.

“You all right?” Mr Cooper asks me.

“Ja, I’m fine.”

“We’d better get you back to your Mum, hey.” His voice is gentle, but changes when he speaks to Sean. “Don’t you get too bluddy big for your britches, boy. You’re not

as smart as you think you are, hey? You think being the farmer's son is going to help you out here?"

"No, man."

"What did you say?"

"No, sir."

"Right. You could have got both of you killed, you know that?"

Sean is silent.

Mr Cooper blows out his lips in a loud sigh. "Right, hop in."

I sit in the passenger seat. Sean sits in the back, and doesn't say a word. When we get back to the offices, Mum is frantic with relief. Sean sinks further into the seat cushions.

"Ja, sorry about that," says Mr Cooper to Mum. "I'll make sure he never goes out without a radio again."

Mum tells me there had been a farm-wide search for us, with all the workers on alert.

Finally, Jeans had mentioned that he had told Sean about the elephant.

"He was bluddy furious," she says.

"Poor Sean," I say.

"Poor Sean my foot. Going into the Bush with no gun and no radio is just bluddy stupid."

When we get home Mum fusses over me, making me cups of tea and running me a hot bath.

I think about what Sean said. How I look like a boy. When I have my bath, I stare down at myself. I am partly submerged. The skin above the water is pasty, with a pink line where the hot water has touched it. Underwater my skin is green, with blue veins writhing through it. Blobby. Pale.

Mum bangs on the door. "Are you still in there?"

"Yes."

"Don't be too much longer. Steve and I still need to have one."

"I won't."

"And leave the water in."

"I know, Mum."

I like having first bath. If I have the last bath, I can't help thinking about all the things I am sitting in. Little bits of skin floating past like cornflakes. Hairs snaking along the water's surface.

I pull the plug out, and watch the water gurgle and sputter down the hole.

Mum bangs on the door again. "Are you letting the water out? Why are you letting the water out?"

"Sorry."

I stand on the mat and watch the water pool around my feet.

"But I said ..." Mum's voice moves away, until all I can hear is the faint sound of exasperation from the other side of the house.

Chapter Thirteen

Oliver is sitting cross-legged on his carpet. A tape is playing in the background – a man with an Indian accent.

“Breathe in – soooo. Breathe out – hummm. Sooo ... hummm.”

Oliver scrambles to his feet when he sees us, and switches off the tape.

“Hello. You’re early.”

Steve raises his eyebrows.

“Would you like some tea?”

He always offers it, and we always accept, even though it is the worst tea in the world. Steve calls it builder’s tea. It is gloopy and dark brown, in big cups, and it tastes like tar.

“Come and see.”

Oliver takes us outside. He has constructed an oven out of tin foil, and a steak is cooking quietly in the middle of it. It is covered in tin foil, but there are a couple of gaps that it doesn’t quite cover. As we watch, a fly circles down and lands delicately on the very edge of the meat. It washes its tiny hands with obsessive thoroughness.

“Great, isn’t it?” Oliver says.

“Bushed,” mutters Steve.

“Ja, it’s great,” I say.

“And it’ll save on electricity, too.”

Oliver marches us through his garden. The vegetable patch, the chickens, the generator he has built.

“I’m entirely self-sufficient,” he says.

“We can see that,” says Steve. “Are you really going to eat that meat?”

“Ja. What’s wrong with it?”

There are two flies on the steak now.

“Nothing.”

Oliver serves us lunch. It is a salad grown from his garden, and a plate of mopane worms.

“Are they really worms?” I ask Steve in an urgent whisper.

“Ja.” He looks a bit green, too, but Oliver is happily crunching his way through them.

“Taste like peanut butter,” he says.

I pick one up. It doesn’t really look like anything much – just a crisp, brown, curled-up thing. I pop it into my mouth and crunch. If I don’t think too hard about it, it doesn’t taste bad.

“I’ve found a place you’ll love,” says Steve. He is grinning. “Oliver is going to take us there.”

“Oh.” I’m not sure what to think. I know Steve and Oliver love to go to the Archives building and look out old documents and photographs from Rhodesia. “What is it?”

“I’m not telling you. It’s a surprise. Come on.”

Oliver’s car is parked outside. It is even older than ours. He drives barefoot, with all the windows down.

“Kurumidzai!” he yells out the window.

Oliver is playing Oliver Mtukudzi's music on his car radio.

"Do we have to listen to that bluddy racket?" asks Steve. I don't mind it. Mum says Shona music all sounds the same, and it does in a way, but it is rhythmic and full of wonderful harmonies. I think she doesn't like it because the radio is always blaring from the servants' quarters, and when they turn it off you can hear the same channel blaring from the shebeen across the road.

"Ja, man, he's great," says Oliver, and that is the end of it.

We are driving through a leafy suburb. It is one of the rich, white suburbs – you can tell it by the high walls and the well-established trees.

"Here we are," says Oliver. We are at a tall iron gate. He rings the bell, and it swings open, revealing a winding driveway shaded by trees that link fingers of branches overhead. A small parking area borders a wide pond, green and humming with insects. Broken masonry stands at the edges of the water.

"Is it a ruin?" I ask Steve.

"It's meant to look like one," he says. "It's not real."

The garden is overgrown and wild-looking, roses tangling with bougainvillea.

"There it is," says Oliver.

The house hunkers down into the landscape, peering at us from behind a veil of trees.

"What is it?"

"A bookshop," says Oliver.

We park on the gravel. All I can hear is birdsong and the clonking of wind chimes. I open the car door, but close it again when a dog the size of a small horse comes lolloping around the corner, dragging his tongue behind him.

“What’s that?”

“Her dog.” Oliver gives the monster a pat. It stands up on its hind paws to lick him. It is tall enough to put its front paws on his shoulders, and Oliver is a tall man.

I get out of the car cautiously. The dog sniffs me all over. Its head is almost level with my shoulder.

“Does it bite?”

“No. Though he might slobber you to death.”

The dog turns back to Oliver, a big happy grin on its black mouth. As it turns, its tail whacks me across the back of my knees, raising red welts.

To find the shop, a separate, smaller house, we walk down a looping pathway, past forgotten garden statues and dog droppings, to the heavy eaves of a smaller building. Wind chimes like the ones we have at home swing gently from the roof. There is a little cardboard sign: Ring for Service.

“Do we ring?” I ask.

“Not until we’ve chosen our books,” says Oliver.

Inside, the room is packed with books. Not just on shelves, either. They are piled up on old trunks, chairs and inside glass cabinets. There is no obvious system. Oliver disappears happily through one of the doors.

The books are priced with a pencil on the inside of the covers. They smell bitter, like stale coffee.

“This place is great, man,” says Steve, who has discovered a cabinet full of Rhodesiana books – history, wildlife, tall tales. I find lurid seventies paperbacks, hardbacks with age spots on the pages, ancient library books checked out and forgotten. I start a small pile.

“Am I allowed to buy some?” I ask Steve.

“Ja, sure. Not too many though, hey.”

I hardly ever buy books. We make a trip to the library every week instead, where index cards are stored in musty drawers and the books are all covered in brittle plastic with numbers on the spines.

Steve wanders over with a stack of books in his arms.

“What have you got there?” he asks me. He flicks through my purchases.

“Hmm, okay, she might do us a deal on all this.”

“What have you got?” I ask.

Steve holds it up. It is another book about old Rhodesia – the memoir of someone who grew up during the War. Mum will go mad. She thinks it is a waste of money, buying dusty old books, when if you saved up you could buy a shiny new one. But Steve and I both like the lived-in feel of older books. They look like the brown, crumpled faces of old Shona people out in the Rural Arias – worn and strong.

“Knew this guy.”

“Did you?” I am amazed. It seems like people in books shouldn’t be real.

“Ja. Knew him in the war.”

I know Steve fought in the War. He has mentioned it once or twice, but never answers my questions.

“How did you know him?”

“He was stationed with me out in the Bush. Here, look.”

Steve flicks open his wallet. It is an old brown leather one. Mum has bought him new ones for presents over the years, but he never uses them. Inside the wallet there is a picture of Mum from a few years ago (it is a shock to see her with a perm and brown hair – lately she has been dying it blonde), a picture of Granny and Grandpa in black-and-white wedding clothes, and one of Steve with a couple of other boys.

In the picture he is young, with a shock of curly hair and bony knees pulled up under his chin. His hand rests on the barrel of a long rifle, and he is in uniform. Actually, his uniform doesn't look all that different from what he always wears – a khaki shirt with a collar, shorts and long socks.

Steve never talks about the War. No one talks about the War. We don't study it at school, either.

I decide to ask him about it.

“How old were you here?”

“Seventeen.”

“What were you doing?”

Steve gives me a Look.

“Was it during the War?” I am feeling very daring. I don't know much about the War, except for a vague idea that it was blacks fighting against whites to rule the country. I know that a little while before I was born Zimbabwe was called Rhodesia after Cecil

John Rhodes, and Harare was called Salisbury. I know the War is called the Second Chimurenga or the Bush War, depending on who you ask. I also know that now we are in a better time where blacks and whites live together happily, or at least that's what my Shona teacher says. But the War feels like a death in the family before I was born – someone whose name is never mentioned, who is cut out of photographs.

“I was on an army base in the Bush,” says Steve reluctantly.

“Were you guarding it?”

“Ja.” Steve glances down at the photograph again. “It was my birthday.”

“Oh.” I feel like I should say Happy Birthday, but it is a bit late now.

“The boys sang Happy Birthday to me,” says Steve, “and I got a beer and a Rubik's Cube.”

“Do you still have the Rubik's Cube?” I ask.

“Nah, some other bugger nicked it. I didn't care, I couldn't figure it out.” Steve scratches at a little mark on the photograph. It is faded. “We had to sit like that looking out into the Bush. The bloody terrs moved like snakes on their bellies and you wouldn't see them until they were right up close. You didn't know whether there was no one around or whether they were all-bloody-around you. They were guerilla fighters, you see.”

“Gorillas?”

“Ja.”

“Like the monkeys?”

“No, man, guerillas, terrorists, Bush-fighters. We called them floppies,” he says.

He is looking down at the book again.

“Who?”

“The terrs.”

“Why?”

“Because they’d flop over when you’d shoot them.” He laughs a little. “Shit, man. I’d love to know what they called us. Seems like anyone would flop over if they were shot, hey?”

“Oh.”

“They’d sneak up on you. My sergeant told me to look for the whites of their eyes and teeth, and shoot at that.”

I am breathless. “Did you shoot someone?”

Steve’s eyes flicker up and down. “What sort of a question is that?”

“I just thought ...”

I don’t know what to say.

“Come on.” He straightens up. “You got all you wanted?”

“Ja.”

“Then let’s go.”

Steve collects shelves and shelves of books about Rhodesia. There is a whole series on hunting in Africa that have brown and orange covers. When we get them home, he lays out all his materials on the dining room table – plastic sheets, sellotape, scissors, a stamp. He carefully cuts out sheets of plastic and folds them around the book covers, then fixes them in place. When the book is covered to his satisfaction, he stamps his name inside the front cover. Then it is allowed on the bookshelf. They are organised alphabetically.

Some days he will take down a book and read it in Grandpa's old armchair. It is by the window and gets sun all day, and light that is filled with spiralling motes of dust and the wings of dead flies. He can sit there for hours. Mum and I know not to disturb him when he is deep in a book.

"Bluddy Rhodesia," says Mum.

"Why?" I ask.

"Well ..." she pauses. "We just need to move on, you know? Not keep harking back to the Bad Old Days."

"What was wrong with Rhodesia?"

"It was just different, all right?" Mum is polishing the brass vigorously. "And we lost the War."

"Why?"

"We just did."

When I ask Steve why we lost the war, he says, "We didn't lose the war."

"But Mum said ..."

"Well, we didn't exactly lose. We just didn't win."

"But what happened exactly?"

"It's not important."

I consider asking Clever, but I am afraid of what I might find out. Instead I ask Oliver. I walk round to his house, which I am allowed to do as it is just down the road, so long as I carry one of the ebony walking sticks. When I arrive, he is throwing a clay pot.

"I didn't know you had a pottery wheel."

“I just bought it.” Oliver looks down at the misshapen pot. “I’m not very good yet. I’m trying to use natural clay, but it doesn’t keep its structural integrity very well.”

We go into the kitchen, and Oliver makes tea. He does not bother to wash his hands first, and the cups are streaked with brown. I take a sip. It is too hot and too strong, so I stir in three sugars. Oliver stirs in five. This is something Steve frowns upon. It comes under the heading of Things We Are Not Meant To Do Because the Blacks Do Them: like picking our noses in public; sniffing loudly and luxuriantly so you can hear all the snot bubbling in your nostrils; taking a sip of drink while you are still chewing food.

Sniffing in particular drives Steve mad. He can hear a sniff from a mile away.

“Haven’t the bloody Affs heard of tissues?” he says.

I should think they have. There are lots of adverts on TV for toilet paper. There is one where a big roll of toilet paper is tumbling over Victoria Falls, and there is one where a black family eats too much fruit and gets diarrhoea on a bus and need lots of toilet paper to clean up. Mum and Steve hate that advert.

“Typical,” they say.

I like the adverts. At school we know all the lines, even the Shona ones, and we shout them to each other in the playground.

“Protector Condoms – a Friend for Life!”

“Sunlight Soap – Mazvikokota!”

“When you’re relaxing with your family ... or dancing with your friends ... you make Castle great!”

Oliver and I sit in silence, looking out at his overgrown back garden with its beehives, solar panels, rickety greenhouses and goat.

I ask if the goat is new.

“Got it the other day.”

We watch it graze.

“So what did you come here to ask?” says Oliver.

I ask him about the war. He is quiet for a moment. “You know, I don’t think there’s any use in talking about it.”

I stare. I did not think Oliver would be like this too. He is always holding forth on overseas politics, and seems to enjoy annoying other people with his views.

“Were you there?” I ask.

“Ja.”

Maybe that’s it. And so I leave it alone. I am left with a handful of faded impressions: Steve with his seventeen-year-old hair and his rifle. Terrors under the bed. Childhood horror stories of people with their eyelids and lips cut off. The idea that our high walls and razor wire are here not just because of how things are now, but because of how things were then.

Grandpa comes to our house for dinner. He is still driving his old green car, even though Steve says he shouldn’t really be driving at all. I don’t see why not. He is careful, and although he drives under the speed limit it is better than going too fast.

Mum gives him a hug and a kiss when he arrives. “Hello, Dad.”

He smiles at her. He seems to be looking right through her to the other side of the room, but his eyes are kind.

I step up to give him a kiss on his cheek. Grandpa obligingly leans down a little so I can reach. His skin is like paper. His bristles scrape across my chin.

“Hello Grandpa.”

“Hello there.”

We all stand around for a minute.

“Can I take your coat?” says Mum. Grandpa is wearing a winter coat even though it is hot outside. He is leaning on the Nyaminyami stick.

“Thank you.” He shrugs himself out of his clothes. They smell ferociously of detergent. Mercy must really be attacking the clothes these days.

“Look, Grandpa.” I show him the books I bought at the second-hand shop. One of them is an old hardback edition of *The Just-So Stories*, with big coloured plates. This is one of my favourite books, and I know it is one of Grandpa’s. He used to read them to me, smacking his lips over the line about the Great Grey-Green Greasy Limpopo All Set About With Fever Trees, which runs along the southern border of Zimbabwe.

“Mmm,” he says. He makes an effort to lean forwards in his chair, and fishes for his glasses in his shirt pocket.

“It’s really old,” I say. “Almost fifty years old.”

“That’s not all that old, young lady,” says Grandpa with a gleam of amusement. I see Mum and Steve exchange glances. Mum goes through to the kitchen to make sure Clever is getting on well with the dinner, and Steve leans back in his chair and watches Grandpa touch the pages of *The Just-So Stories* like a book lover does, with that special gentle, proprietary stroke.

Steve loves Rudyard Kipling too. He reads his books over and over. His favourite poem is 'If', and when he gets drunk and maudlin at parties he likes to recite it.

"If you can bear to hear the truth you've spoken
Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools;
And see the things you gave your life for, broken –
And stoop, and build them up with worn-out tools ..."

The line is "gave your life to", not "for". I told Steve. But he still says it the same old way.

When we sit down to dinner, Grandpa stares at the meatloaf on his plate as if he has no idea what to do with it.

"Are you going to the BSAP dinner?" Mum asks him.

"Hmmm? I haven't decided," says Grandpa. He carefully layers a forkful of food. A piece of meat followed by a scoop of mashed potato, with a bit of broccoli balanced on top.

"I'm sure they'll miss you if you don't go," says Steve.

Grandpa looks directly at us. His fork is still hovering in the air. "I don't really see the point."

"The point?" says Steve. "Well, you have friends ..."

"No, no." Grandpa waves his hand. "They're very nice fellows, but I simply don't see the point of going to a dinner for the retired British South Africa Policemen when we have so obviously failed."

This is the longest and most coherent speech he has made since Granny died. We have all stopped eating.

“We did our best,” Grandpa is saying. “We tried to be fair. I know I did. We wanted the best for everyone. But it hasn’t worked.”

“Don’t say that,” Mum begins, but I can see she isn’t sure of what to say next. Her eyes flick to me, then Steve. Say something, I can almost hear her think.

“Potholes in the roads, police accepting bribes,” says Grandpa. He is gathering steam. “The whole place is going to hell.”

Grandpa never says hell. Mum makes a movement as if to get up, but stays where she is. We are all fascinated.

“And d’you know what the worst thing is?” Grandpa is talking to me now. I shake my head.

“We are going to be remembered as colonialists who didn’t care about anything except staying in power. They won’t remember any of the good. They have forgotten it already.”

I was halfway through chewing a mouthful, but I don’t dare move my jaws. Grandpa is staring at me so intently that he deserves my undivided attention in return.

“Don’t know what we were thinking,” says Grandpa, and shovels his food into his mouth at last. He is shaking his head, and he is still shaking it when Mum gets up to pour him a glass of water.

When Grandpa leaves, I walk him to his car. I can hear the owls and the crickets, and something rustles in the bushes next to us. The moon is like a slice of orange rind in the sky, and the air smells like night-time.

He pauses before he gets in, and clears his throat. I wait.

“I have been meaning to say,” he begins.

His face is outlined by the moon. “Don’t worry about what I said, eh? I didn’t mean it. Not really.”

He rests a hand on my shoulder. I can feel it there, each finger. He grips my shoulder for a moment.

“Eh?”

He is waiting for an answer. “I know, Grandpa.”

“Good. Good.” He opens the car door. “I wouldn’t change this for anything, you know.”

We stand there in the dark. The stars are white pin-pricks, the air is humming with night-time noise.

“Not for anything.” He smiles and climbs back in the car. “See you Sunday.”

“See you Sunday.”

He waves to me as he reverses. Cephas jumps out of the way, and salutes to Grandpa as he leaves. Grandpa salutes back, a perfect one-two-three army salute. He seems happy, and awake, and alive.

“Come on,” says Mum from the kitchen door. “Come back inside.”

I inhale the night before going in. There is nowhere on earth like this, and I wouldn’t change it either.

The next day I am passing by the phone when it rings. It is almost as if the phone knew I was right there, and so I pick it up with an eerie feeling of inevitability.

There is a click on the line, and a voice. "Hello? Hello?"

"Hello?" I say.

"Hello?"

"Who is this?"

The voice sounds far away. "It is Jonah."

"Jonah? Grandpa's Jonah?" I know I sound stupid.

"Ja. I need to speak to the Baas. It is about the Big Baas."

"Hold on."

I call for Steve, and he comes running. "What the yell is it?"

"It's Jonah on the phone, about Grandpa."

"What?"

Steve gets on the line. He listens, then grabs his car keys. "Come on." He doesn't hang up the phone. I reach out to do it, but he says, "Come on, get in the bloody car," and I leave it hanging there like a snake twisting its heavy head this way and that.

Jonah meets us at the gate.

"Quick, Baas."

He is thin-faced in his terror.

Steve leaves the engine running as if he is planning to make a quick getaway.

He stumbles as he runs, and I follow.

“Quick, Baas!” shouts Jonah from ahead. Thirty years older than Steve, he is racing ahead of him. I follow the two men. My legs don’t feel as if they belong to me.

The garden is throbbing with the songs of birds and insects. It is indecently green, with overblown flowers and fruits hanging from every bush and tree. The colours have never looked so vivid – purple jacaranda, red flamboyant, pink bougainvillea, orange crane birds-of-paradise – crowding in from every side.

Grandpa is in the garden, baking in the sun like one of Oliver’s steaks. I know at once that he is dead, even as Steve grabs his hand and checks his pulse. I know the way you know sometimes when you phone someone that no one is home, or you look at a house and know that it is empty. I know because his Nyaminyami stick is lying beside him on the ground, and its eyes are dulled and unseeing. It has lost its magic. It is a crude carving on a piece of cheap wood.

Chapter Fourteen

Granny's illness was long and lurching. Each day seemed to pull a bit more life out of her. By the end she was exhausted, and we were exhausted, and when she died the whole world seemed to take in a big breath. Grandpa is different though. He has blown away like a dry leaf, unexpectedly. I can still hear the click of his cane on the floor, the unexpected hee hee hee of his laugh. It feels like he is in the next room. It seems obscene that someone with bright eyes, bony ankles and hair in his ears can just stop being, turn into a Thing lying on a bed, an unattractive collection of fibres and bones that should be tossed into a hole and covered up, or thrown into a fire and scattered over a flowerbed. He is one of those people who just can't die.

I am sent to a friend's house while everything is sorted out at home. It feels almost like I am on holiday. There is that same sense that normal service is suspended, and we could do things like eat ice cream for breakfast and stay up past midnight, and no one would mind.

When Mum and Steve come to pick me up, I am in high spirits. I have almost forgotten that Grandpa is really dead.

“We're getting fish and chips tonight,” says Mum. “And I've got a video out.”

This strange feeling that we are on holiday continues. We sit and watch an American comedy while I sneak bits of fish to Archie under the coffee table. Steve's eyes are red and dry looking. It looks like they could shrivel up like raisins. Although I am

having fun there is a hole just under my stomach that is filled with something black and runny. I try not to prod it. I know it will be bad enough in the morning.

When I wake up, I hear the sound of the Cape turtledoves. Three trilling, deep-throated notes. They are meant to sound like “Work har-der, work har-der,” but to me they sound more like “Not you too, not you too.” The sunlight hardens on the wall. No one has woken me up for school. Perhaps no one else is awake.

I get up and pad in bare feet through to the kitchen. Clever is sitting on the outside step. I open the door for him.

“Where is the Baas?” he asks.

“In bed, I think.”

I make two cups of tea, and take them to Mum and Steve’s room. I knock on the door.

“Come in.” Mum’s voice. When I push open the door, I see she is alone in there.

“Oh, thank you, darling.”

I drink Steve’s tea. “Where has he gone?”

“He went to sort things out at Grandpa’s house.”

“What kind of things?”

“Just things.”

When I get back to the kitchen, my stomach feels hollow. I put on two pieces of toast, cover them in peanut butter and eat them standing up at the kitchen counter. Then two more. I eat almost half a loaf of sliced bread, but I feel like I will never be full again.

“How are you?” says Clever. He is changing into his house shoes. Steve has hung a notice on the door saying “Shoes Off Please”, and he makes everyone obey it – even guests. Mum added the “Please”.

“I’m okay.”

“It is very sad,” he says.

It strikes me that Clever is the only one behaving normally. Steve has been doing nothing but organising and arranging since Grandpa died, and Mum is lying in bed till late. I haven’t seen either of them crying, and I don’t think I’m meant to cry either.

“Good girl,” Steve said last night when I almost started crying but stopped myself. He is so dry-eyed that his eyeballs look sticky and red, although I know he is upset.

“What happens at funerals?” I ask Clever.

“All the family comes to the church,” he says. “Then they will eat a meal together. And they will sing.”

This does not sound too bad.

“Would you like to come to the funeral?”

Mum and Steve are both staring at me. I am twelve years old now, which apparently means that I have a choice. I did not go to Granny’s funeral. I do not really know what to expect.

“Okay.”

I don't have many things that are properly black, so I wear a grey skirt and white shirt done up right to the chin. Mum brushes my hair so that it curls under at the ends and goes all shiny. I hate having a side parting, but she brushes one in anyway.

It is a grey day with a flat, washed-out sky. When we get out of the car we see other groups of people moving into the church.

There is Lynn, Granny's friend. She has always gone to the same church as Granny and Grandpa, but not many of the whites talk to her because she married a black man and has two coloured children. Her husband is here, too – he is a good-looking man who is wearing a suit a little too tight for him. His name is Shepherd.

“How are you?” she asks, clasping Steve's arm. Her eyes are wet, the lashes spiky like the legs of a spider.

“I'm holding up,” says Steve. His voice is funny at the moment. It sounds like he has a sore throat, and he breathes in all the wrong places. Mum takes his other arm as Lynn talks.

“Your parents were two of my dearest friends,” she is saying.

Even now, at the funeral, I can see people moving around Lynn as if she is a rock in a stream. No one comes up to greet her – no one even seems to look at her, or her husband. Their gazes slide away.

The two coloured children look up at me from Lynn's skirts. They are very young, with big coffee-bean eyes in their thin faces. I have learned from listening when no one knows I am listening that Shepherd's family don't talk to them either, because they don't approve of him marrying a white. Lynn has tried to fit in – learning how a married woman must sit, the words she must say, her duties to the extended family and

the proper way of addressing all its members – but nothing will work. It must be very lonely to be them. And the coffee-bean children must find it even harder, because they carry the sign of the marriage dyed into their skin, like colour soaked into cloth.

Lynn is talking to me now. “You must be very proud of your grandfather.”

“Yes,” I say. “I am.”

I see her smile and rejoin Shepherd. They link arms. She is a little taller than him, and considerably wider. They could look quite funny together, but somehow they don't.

The church smells of incense and worn clothes. We have to sit in the very front pew, staring at the coffin. It is smaller than I thought it would be.

“Is Grandpa really in there?” I ask Mum.

“Shush,” she says, “yes, he is. Where did you think he would be?”

It doesn't look big enough to fit him.

People keep coming up to us and shaking Steve's hand. Their voices are low and they use the same words. Condolences. Tragedy. A good life, at least. Quick and painless.

There is a lot of coughing and shuffling in the church before the service starts. Just when it gets quiet, someone else will cough or drop a hymn book and it all starts up again. I feel myself settle into that familiar church mode, ready to stand, sit, kneel, sing and let my mind wander.

I feel an urge to giggle as the hymn starts.

The Lord's my shepherd, I'll not want

He makes me down to lie ...

Everyone is mouthing along to the slow organ. They look like puppets, all moving their lips at the same time.

Mum gives my arm a pinch and I realise I have not been singing. I start to mouth the words along with everybody else. Looking to the side, being very careful not to let Mum see, I can see Jonah and Mercy and the two girls. They are in their best clothes, which are not black. Mercy is in bright orange silk with a frilly skirt, and the girls are in white and pink. I can see some of the congregation giving them disapproving looks. I do not think it is strange, because I know that this is what Shona people wear to church, and they are honouring Grandpa with the finest clothes they could find.

Jonah is not singing either. He is staring straight ahead at the cross above the altar. At least, that is what I think he is staring at until I see the little opening shrouded in curtains, to the left of the cross. I would ask Mum what it is, but I have the feeling that talking at all is not allowed today.

We sit with a great rustle of skirts and creaking of shoes on the polished floor. We listen to people talk about Grandpa – the priest, Steve, someone who was in the BSAP with him. There are a lot of old men here in uniforms. Some of them are asleep.

The priest's voice rises a little. It sounds like he is building up to something. The sleeping men shake themselves awake, and there is rustling and creaking as everyone sits up

straighter. The curtains to the side of the altar twitch open, and the coffin rumbles towards them on its little tracks.

“Mum,” I whisper.

“Mmm.” She is staring straight ahead.

“What’s happening?”

“Grandpa is being cremated.”

“What?”

The curtains are open. The coffin lumbers between them. I want to jump up and start yelling, pull it off the rails. It goes inside, and everyone watches as if this is perfectly normal.

I try not to imagine what is happening, but I can’t help it. I have seen meat cooking at a braai, and I imagine Grandpa scorching and curling up like a piece of boerewors. He is in his uniform, I know. I heard Mum talking about dressing the body up. Now that uniform is going to be burning up into ashes, and the warm-skinned, frail man inside it will be turning into cooked meat and then dust. I can’t believe we are sitting around nodding gravely and weeping dignified snot into our handkerchiefs while someone burns in front of us.

He loved that uniform.

“Once a policeman, always a policeman,” he used to say. “You can’t just switch it off.”

He belonged to Mount Pleasant neighbourhood watch. He and a friend would drive around the streets in Grandpa's old car with a big torch and walkie-talkies. If they came across someone who looked suspicious, they would turn on their headlights and the torch and yell out the window.

"Oi, what are you up to?"

I was allowed to go with them once. I had to sit in the back and stay very quiet. The car smelled musty and there was a sticky patch under my hand that smelled of ancient orange juice.

We came across a group of black men walking home from the shebeen. They were pushing each other and laughing loudly.

"Hey," said Grandpa out the window. "There's people trying to sleep out here, you know."

"Sorry Baas," came a chorus from all but one man. He leaned his face right up against the window and said, "Bluddy whites think they can tell us what to do."

A friend grabbed his arm and pulled him away, but not before the drunk man had spotted me sitting quietly on the back seat.

"Are you afraid of me?" he said.

I didn't know what to say, so I just moved my head a little. It could have been a nod, it could have been a shake.

"Come on, bhenzi," said the man's friend. "Sorry, Baas."

"That's quite all right," said Grandpa. "Keep it down, you hear?"

A chorus of "okay, Baas," filtered back to us through the night. I saw flashes of white teeth as the men grinned, and a pink palm raised in salute.

“They’re good chaps, really,” said Grandpa. “Just need a bit of keeping in line. But their hearts are in the right place.”

I think of Cecil John Rhodes, and the stories Steve tells us about Matopos. Rhodes loved it so much there, up among the old, bald rocks and wind-scraped hills, that he was buried there. I think Grandpa would have been happy somewhere like that, somewhere with a view out over the country. This way, it seems like we are sweeping him out of sight, like Mercy when she doesn’t want to clean the floor properly. I have seen her do it, lift up a corner of the rug and hum as she brushes the dust underneath. Now Grandpa will be piled up somewhere at the edge of Zimbabwe, not curled up sleeping in its soil.

I wonder why I cannot smell anything burning. Even though the doors and the curtains are closed, it seems as if I should be able to smell something.

Jonah gets up and walks out. Mercy, looking worried and apologizing as she brushes past people, follows him, bringing the girls.

“Typical bluddy munts,” whispers someone behind us. I hear it as clearly as if someone has struck a wrong note on a clear bell. I remember Clever telling me about cremation, and I hope that Grandpa’s soul hasn’t been broken up into pieces and lost.

We all troop outside and watch as Steve scatters the ashes down into the hole. One drifts over and lands on my face, then is glued there by a raindrop. The rain falls in plink-plonk rhythms at first, then more steadily. A member of the British South African Police starts

to play The Last Post. Even the rain smells dead. I feel the world lurch with every note of the trumpet, and instead of feeling sad I feel nothing but horror and fear. Everything is outlined with a fine white light, and the rain spirals down from an endlessly empty sky.

There are so few ashes. I imagined that there would be a barrow load, as big as Grandpa has been, but there are so few. Just a handful of handfuls.

Steve sinks his hand into the ashes and pulls some out. I feel sick, and my legs seem to disappear. How can those be Grandpa? How can Steve take a handful of his father's burnt body and put it in a hole as if it is potting mix? I wonder if there will be an eyeball in the ashes that somehow escaped the fire, or a fingernail. My stomach lurches and seems to rise up into my throat.

"Do you want to throw some ashes in?" asks Mum in a whisper. I shake my head. The priest is holding an umbrella over them, but some have already started to turn into little smudges of charcoal.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes!" I hiss back, a little too loudly. A few bowed heads turn surreptitiously in my direction.

"Fine."

The ashes are covered over. A plaque will be placed there, next to Granny's, and some flowers in a jam jar. Steve will come and visit it every week, like he does with Granny's grave.

Mum's tears have dried on her face and become white powdery lines. Steve's face is twisted.

“There are refreshments in the church hall,” says the priest in a suitably mournful tone. Everyone starts to drift towards the church again. Lynn and her husband smile at me.

That night I have dreams about Grandpa being trapped in the coffin. I see him, wide-eyed in the dark, scratching at the lid with his white fingers as the curtains open.

I know Jonah would have stopped it if he could.

Chapter Fifteen

I have dreams about snakes again. In my dream, I am at Granny and Grandpa's house, by the chicken run.

Grandpa is standing next to me, in his police uniform. He is covered in mud. "Look," he says.

A mongoose scuttles out from the compost heap, a snake hanging from its mouth. The snake's neck is broken, but its eyes are open and moving. A tongue slips out from between its blunt lips and tastes the air with a delicate, searching V.

"It's Rikki-Tikki-Tavi," says Grandpa, and laughs. The mongoose flicks its red eyes away, and disappears into the hedge.

I have this dream every night, and wake up with a start that dislodges Archie from my feet. He bites me through the blankets as punishment.

Grandpa always loved Rudyard Kipling. He gave me a beautifully illustrated hardback edition of *The Jungle Book* for my tenth birthday. The illustrations did not stay in tidy boxes outside the text, but snaked their way through in ribbons of bright colour. Even though the stories were set in India, they were closer to my life than any other children's book I had read. Snakes, elephants, monkeys – all familiar figures. We had a mongoose living in the hedge at the bottom of our garden, and Rikki-Tikki-Tavi was my favourite story. Now it seems sinister. How can one small animal protect its white family – face down three snakes with nothing but his own wits and tiny strength? It seems more likely that the snakes would succeed in killing the whites and overrun the house.

Mum tells me that we are moving.

“Where are we going?”

She is sitting down, and has put a serious expression on her face. “We’re moving to Granny and Grandpa’s house.”

“Oh.”

Stupidly, I had imagined the house going on as normal without Granny and Grandpa. Jonah endlessly trimming the hedges and pruning the plants. Mercy endlessly polishing the floors and the furniture. Hanging out the clothes of people who no longer wear them. Washing the dishes from which no one is eating.

“Grandpa left us the house,” says Mum. “He wants us to take care of it.”

Moving to Granny and Grandpa’s house is exciting, but I feel guilty for being excited. Finally we will have a big garden. I will be able to look after the chickens. We may even get a dog, or another cat. But as we lead the removal vans to the big iron gates, I feel the weight of all our memories pressing down on us, like heavy air before a storm.

Steve presses the intercom. I imagine it ringing in the empty house.

“Oh,” he says. “I forgot.”

He presses the button on his car keys, and the gate rumbles open.

“Come on troops,” says Mum, unloading the car. Steve and Mum have been sorting out the house all week – getting rid of some things, storing others, moving our furniture into the big house.

Steve doesn't want to use the front door. Instead, he leads us in through the verandah door.

"You'll have to use it sometime," says Mum.

"I think we should use this as the entrance," says Steve. He is jingling the keys in his pocket.

"Okay." Mum touches him on the arm. "Whatever you want."

Mercy and Jonah are waiting for us in the kitchen.

"Hello, hello," says Steve. His voice sounds put-on. He shakes hands with them both, and makes a little speech about how the Baas, um, would be very happy that they are still here and, uh ...

Steve found Clever another job.

"You must come and visit us, Clever," he said. He gave him an envelope with his name on the front. I did not know what was inside, but I imagined it was a bonus. And, I hope, a thank you letter.

"Why can't Clever come with us?" I had asked Steve the night before.

"Because we already have a maid and a gardener. Mercy and Jonah."

"But I don't like Jonah."

"For god's sake, he's just the bluddy gardener," said Steve. He was harassed, and I knew better than to keep questioning him.

Cephas gave me a card to say goodbye. He writes in a round, childish hand. I am touched, and sorry that I didn't think to get him a card as well.

“No problem,” he said, waving his hand. “You come back to visit, yes?”

Cephas has a girlfriend now. She doesn't look like the blonde, well-endowed ladies on the covers of his books, but he doesn't seem to mind. He walks taller now, and spends fewer nights in the shebeen.

“How is Mabel?” I asked.

“She is good. We are getting married,” he said.

“Congratulations!”

I sneaked a kettle out of our house as a wedding present. Mum bought a shiny new one, and the old one had been just sitting in a cupboard – I don't think they'll miss it.

As soon as we let Archie out of his cage, he ducks under a chair in the lounge and refuses to come out.

“It'll take him a while to get used to it,” says Mum. She is making busy, clanking noises in the kitchen, unpacking pots and pans.

I look under the chair and see terrified yellow eyes. I understand how he feels. Compared to the Flat, this house is huge and echoing, with new smells and strange creaks and groans. I don't blame Archie for hiding under a chair. I wouldn't mind hiding under a chair myself.

Mum and Steve promised me a second cat when we moved into the big house. We drive to the SPCA, just outside the city, and choose a kitten. It is a sad, smelly place – dogs throwing themselves against the chicken wire and barking, kittens with runny eyes mewling in corners. I am glad we can take one away.

Betty cowers in her cardboard box on the way home. She is tiny – tiny enough to sit in my palm. The people at the SPCA told us that she is still being fed with a dropper. That will be my job.

I poke a finger into the box and feel the coolness of a nose against it.

“Another bluddy cat,” says Steve, but he promised we could have one and so he doesn’t say any more.

It occurs to me that I get a cat whenever someone dies. I stroke Betty’s head with a finger and feel her press up against it.

When we get home, I organise Betty’s bed. A blanket, an old slipper of mine – I’ve heard that something with the smell of the owner helps them settle – and a couple of toys. She walks into the basket, shaking her paws as if she has stepped in water. I stroke her from her bony skull down to the incongruously fluffy tail, and feel a vibration underneath my hand. She has a strange, deep purr.

Archie comes in, tail raised in greeting. He stares in disgust at the new arrival. He stalks out.

“He’ll adjust,” says Mum.

Steve passes the door, glances in and mutters something before walking away.

“So will he,” says Mum. She scratches Betty gently under the chin, and the cat closes her eyes in bliss.

When I go to bed I fall asleep quickly, Betty curled under my chin like an uncomfortable furry beard. When I wake up, it doesn’t feel like it is much later in the night, but my head

is alert and fizzing with thoughts. There are no cats on the bed – they must be conducting mysterious night-time business somewhere else.

Someone is standing in my doorway.

“Mum?”

I can’t tell who it is – my glasses are off, and it is dark – but it looks more like a man’s figure.

“Steve?”

The person just stands there, turning his head slightly to look at me. Although I know it is someone else now, not Mum or Steve, I make no sound. The world has slowed down and congealed, and I have to consciously force my lungs to expand and contract, suck air in and blow it out. My heart feels sluggish and strained. I try to call out for Mum again, but it takes a lot of effort to force the tiniest sluice of air through my throat.

The figure is gone, and my voice comes out all in a rush, far louder than I had intended.

“Mum!”

Mum comes down the corridor. Her voice is late-night hoarse, with a thread of panic.

“What?”

I tell her about the man.

“You were dreaming. Go back to sleep.”

“I was wide awake.”

Mum leans against the doorframe. “You know you’re always talking yourself into seeing things. Remember the tokoloshe?”

“The tokoloshe was there too.”

“I’m not getting into this now, hey. Go to sleep.”

Later in the night, I wake up to the sound of someone talking. It sounds like a radio or television has been left on. I lie in bed for a while, trying to disentangle the voices into separate words.

Mum appears in my doorway with a torch.

“There’s a power cut,” she whispers. “Can you hear that?”

“Ja. What is it?”

“I don’t know. I thought it was coming from the lounge.”

“I thought it was coming from your room.”

“It must be from the khaya,” says Mum. “I’ll have to tell Jonah not to play his radio at all hours of the night.”

“What time is it?”

“After two.”

I come with Mum down the corridor. The radio voices fade out. I click switches automatically as we enter the lounge, then remember there is no power.

“Does it sound like it’s coming from outside to you?”

“Let’s not go outside.” Outside is snapping twigs, velvety darkness, spirits calling like owls across the night.

“Ja no hey, we’ll stay indoors.”

The lights come back on with blazing force. A bulb pops somewhere.

“Shit!” says Mum, then claps a hand over her mouth, giggling. “Don’t you start saying it just because I did, okay?”

“Okay.”

I start giggling too. We stare at each other. Neither of us is wearing our glasses, and our eyes look naked and hollow, bigger than usual, like the pale eyes of bushbabies.

“What the yell is going on?” says Steve from the bedroom.

“Nothing.” Mum clicks off her torch. “Do you want some tea?”

“Well, I’m awake now.”

The noises come the next night, and the next. Even Steve hears them. Archie’s tail is permanently half-fluffed.

“Jeez, man,” says Steve at breakfast, “this is getting ridiculous.”

He takes Jonah aside. I can only hear bits and pieces of the conversation until their voices become raised.

“Well, someone around here is playing a bluddy radio!” says Steve. “You must have heard something.”

Jonah replies, but he speaks softer.

“Then who is it?”

Steve listens to Jonah’s reply, then throws his hands up and storms over to us.

“He says it’s not him.”

“We heard.”

Mum and Steve are out to dinner. They have paid Mercy to stay later and look after me. I am lying on their bed watching television, and I can hear dishes clinking from the kitchen. When Mercy works late, she sits down in the living room and watches the TV there while I sit in the bedroom. Sometimes I go and join her, but she doesn't relax as much and keeps asking me if I want some tea. It is easier to stay in the bedroom.

Archie has made himself comfortable at the foot of the bed, and is washing. I can hear the *rssp rssp* of his tongue. Suddenly the rasping stops, and he is very still. The room is colder, and the television screen develops little uneven grey lines across the picture. The bedside light flickers.

I look over to the open door leading to the bathroom. I can hear a tap dripping. Archie sits upright, his eyes very wide and yellow. The hair is rising on his spine, starting from his head and moving down to his tail – I can almost hear a click as each hair slots into position. Finally his tail puffs up, and his ears flatten. I can feel something watching me from the doorway. I want to speak, but my tongue seems to have doubled in size.

The open doorway grows, looks darker and more gaping the longer I stare at it. The hairs on the back of my arm start to rise with a crackle and snap. Static. The television screen has gone fuzzy, too, and only vague shapes of people appear before being whisked away into a grey snowstorm. An arm. A hand. A face. A collection of letters, indecipherable. The air is thick and tastes like metal.

After a minute of this, Archie slowly starts to relax. Watching him, so do I. The television image clears, and the room seems warm again.

I am taking no chances, though. Hauling the duvet after me, I trot down the corridor to where Mercy is sitting in the living room, and without a word sit next to her on the couch.

The strange incidents are mounting up. Pipe smoke follows us from room to room, and even out into the garden. Pictures fall off walls, little objects go missing and turn up in strange places. Steve finds his car keys in the fridge. Glass objects fall off shelves and shatter. There are spots in the house that feel cold for no reason. The cats become skittish, jumping sideways down the corridor or suddenly bristling up.

“It’ll take a while to settle in,” says Mum. “It’s bound to be strange at first.”

It feels like the house doesn’t want us here. I walk in the garden and stand on thorns and biting ants. I get sunburnt. I trip over the tiniest fallen twig.

Jonah watches me with empty eyes as I trip and flounder. I feel like he knows more about what is going on than he will say. To get out of his line of sight, I walk down towards the back fence.

“Walk carefully,” Jonah calls out. “There are snakes down there.”

I walk faster.

I see a brown shape out of the corner of my eye, but when I look around it is has moved just out of sight again. This happens so often that I decide to try and track whatever-it-is down. When I see the flicker of movement at the edge of my vision, I start walking towards the place where it seems to be coming from, keeping my head turned away. Doing this, I end up at the far edge of the garden, behind the chicken run, near the

compost heap. There are so many flies here that their buzzing is not so much a noise as a throbbing in the air.

I step carefully over kitchen scraps – banana skins, avocado pips, potato peelings – and walk towards the strange movement. It is that time of day when the sky is leeched of colour and the first mosquitoes are starting to whine, just before the sun drops abruptly off the edge of the earth. This is the place where Archie comes to hunt shrews, and it is the only place in the garden where I have ever seen a snake. It does not really belong to us, not in the same way the lawns and flowerbeds and vegetable garden do. There is a whole world of little animals and insects that do not need any intervention on our part – just that daily topping-up of their compost hill.

I hear a crunch, and look down. I have crushed a chongololo, and it is not quite dead. Its body is flailing on the ground, spewing yellow liquid, and its little blind eyes are staring up at me. It has a fine fur of tiny yellow legs along each side, and they are starting to furl themselves into clenched claws of pain.

I notice that chongololos are emerging from all over the compost heap. Maybe it is going to rain – but I have never seen so many at once. The flies seem to hover in the air, watching me.

I catch the movement again, just on the edge of vision. I feel something tickling the back of my neck and put up a hand to brush away whatever flying thing has landed on me, but realise that it is not an insect. The air has thickened with static, and my hair has gently lifted itself off my scalp. I feel something snap my feet out from under me. Although the rest of the world stays still, the ground seems to rush up towards my face,

and my nose starts spurting blood. I do not realise I have actually hit the ground until the pain arrives, a couple of minutes later.

I lie there, watching the blood drip red onto the ground, turn brown and sink into the thirsty earth. My bleeding has somehow released the tension in the air, as if whatever knocked me down would only be satisfied with an offering.

Mum and Dad call in a priest from church to say a prayer in the house. He comes with his Bible, wearing full regalia. It is very exciting. I sit with my knees drawn up to my chest and watch as he starts to speak. He has a bottle of water that he sprinkles on the rug, and he says prayers in English and Latin.

“Thank you,” says Mum as he leaves.

“You’re very welcome,” he says. “I don’t think you’ll have any more problems.”

That night is worse than any of the others. As well as the voices, there are footsteps up and down the corridor and a painting falls off the lounge wall. None of us gets any sleep. “For Christ’s sake,” says Steve at four in the morning. He has stubble and his skin looks crumpled, like slept-in sheets.

“Maybe we could try something else,” I say.

“Like what?”

I ask Mercy the next day.

“Black man’s medicine does not work on white spirits,” she says. Her face is implacable.

“Please, Mercy.” I have great faith in the powers of the n’anga, but I have no idea where to find one in Harare. “Just ask.”

“I will ask,” she says, “but I do not think he will come.”

He comes. Our electric gate intercom buzzes, and Mum answers it.

“Who did you say you were?”

She looks at me. I jump up and press the button to let him in.

“It’s the witchdoctor, Mum,” I say.

“What witchdoctor?”

“I asked Mercy to ask the witchdoctor to come to the house. To get rid of the spirits.”

“You did what?”

“It’s worth a try, isn’t it?”

Mum looks at me. She picks up one of the walking sticks. “All right. But we’ll keep an eye on him, hey? And if he steals anything, it’s your fault.”

The witchdoctor is a small man, wearing jeans and a shirt. The only sign of something different is the string of wooden necklaces he wears, and the little bag of rattles, powders, feathers and stones that he carries.

As soon as he gets inside he stops and sniffs the air. “Ah yes,” he says, “there are definitely vadzimu here.”

He shakes a gourd rattle in the air and chants something in Shona. Mum gives me a meaningful look, then asks Mercy to make some tea for us all. She glances down at

where the witchdoctor's bare feet are leaving greasy marks on the floor and closes her eyes briefly. There is a faint smell about him; body odour, yes, and sweat, but also something spicy and unfamiliar.

“What are vadzimu?” I ask.

“They are the ancestors.”

“But it is usually good to have ancestors around, isn't it? These ones are causing trouble.”

“Ah, yes, usually it is good to have one's ancestors around, but not when they are not at peace. When someone dies, their spirit wanders until they are asked to come home and look after their family. Come with me.”

We walk from room to room. In each, the witchdoctor shakes his rattle and chants. Mum follows us looking anxious.

The witchdoctor stops at the door to my room. “It is strong here.”

I tell him about the man I saw in the doorway. He nods.

“That does not sound like the ghost of your ancestors. But when a spirit is unhappy, it attracts other spirits to the place.”

Mum makes a sniffing sound. The witchdoctor spends a few minutes cleansing the doorway, and then goes down the hallway into the bedroom. Mum stands in front of the cupboard where she keeps her jewellery. The witchdoctor spends some time standing over the bed, murmuring. Mum rolls her eyes.

“It is done.” The witchdoctor stands up. “I have asked them to come home. They are still here but now they are not wandering. They are happy because they know you are here and they can watch over you.”

“The priest tried to get rid of them,” I say.

“Ah.” He shakes a finger. “That was a mistake. That would just make them angry. You do not want a mudzimu to go away. You want them to stay and make your family stronger. No wonder they were shupering you.”

Mum doesn’t offer him tea, in the end. She does offer him money, which he does not accept.

“No, no. You tell your friends about me, yes?”

Evidently he imagines that there may be a run on exorcisms in the white community. We manage to give him some avocados and vegetables from our garden in thanks, and usher him off the property. It is getting close to the time when Steve will be coming home from work.

I am given the job of closing the gate behind the witchdoctor. Before he steps out, he turns to me and smiles.

“All they want is to be remembered. That is all vadzimu want. When you do not remember, you condemn them to wander.” He taps his nose as if he has shared a great secret with me, and steps out into the road.

After the witchdoctor’s visit, all the haunting stops. The nights are suddenly, disconcertingly silent. Even the crickets and owls sound muffled and further away.

“Peace at last,” says Mum. She starts a vigorous spring cleaning, throwing open all the doors and windows, washing every scrap of fabric, even sponging down the walls. She and Mercy use every cleaning product they can find, and hum as they work, with

identical satisfied expressions. I have the feeling that Mercy has been longing to give the house a thorough clean for years.

I am glad that things have settled down. The house feels more ours, somehow, without that other presence.

I do miss the smell of pipe tobacco, though.

Part Three

1998

Chapter Sixteen

We have settled into the new house, and Betty and Archie have developed an uneasy truce. I start high school. It is a chance to begin again, I think at first.

My new teacher is called Mrs Starling. She has dyed blonde hair that hangs straight down, dry and chemical-smelling like your hands after cleaning the floor. She has a husky voice and a squawky laugh that coughs out smoke with every Ha. There is always a cigarette in her hand, and one of her fingers is completely yellow from holding it. Her daughter is in the year below me, with straggling red hair and an air of grubby sexuality. Mum sets up a meeting with her before school starts, so that I will make a friend.

When I arrive, Mrs Starling is smoking a cigarette and lying in the sun lounger by her pool. She has brown, dusty feet with long toes. The nails are painted with pink polish that is chipped at the edges.

Her daughter is in the pool. She has a beaded bracelet around her skinny wrist, and a bright pink swimming costume with flowers on it. I am wearing my old navy-blue swimming costume under my clothes. It still has my swimming badges sewn onto it, little pictures of ducks to prove I could dive and tread water and swim a whole length.

We are introduced. Mrs Starling's daughter – Kelly – hauls herself half-out of the water. She smells of sunscreen and cigarette smoke. The water beads on her long brown arms as she reaches up to tighten her red ponytail. I stand in my clothes feeling clumpy and over-padded.

“Go and get changed and come swim,” says Mrs Starling. She tells me where the bathroom is. Mum leaves while I am changing. When I come back, crossing my arms over my chest, Kelly is doing handstands underwater.

I have left my glasses with my bag in the Starlings’ bathroom. Everything is a blur of colour, and people look like the little stick figures I used to draw and colour – a balloon of pink on top of a skinny body, with a scribbled head of hair and two dots for eyes.

I climb into the pool carefully, making sure of each step before I put my foot down on it.

“Can’t you see?” asks Kelly.

“Not really.” I have found the bottom of the pool. I am a good swimmer, and now that I am in the pool I am hoping to impress Kelly. Before I can do or say anything, though, there is another voice.

“Sarah!” says Kelly.

I squint and make my eyes narrow, which brings things into better focus. There is a dark-haired girl here now. She has just come out of the house.

Kelly introduces me. A friend from school. They talk, resting their elbows on the hot glitterstone edge of the pool while I flop my weight about in the water and try to put a word in here and there. I duck my head underwater and bring it up in time to hear Sarah ask in a low voice, “Who’s she?”

“New girl.”

“She’s a dork.”

“Ja, but she’s a funny dork.”

I push my head back underwater and feel the cool, pressing dark embrace me like a friend. I would like to stay here forever, blowing bubbles, watching my hair float out around me and my legs and arms make pale shapes in the water.

When I start school, I find out more about Mrs Starling. It is rumoured that at one of her daughter's parties she got blind drunk and walked through a glass door. The others in the class also tell me that she has a boyfriend who rides a motorbike and has a goatee. She doesn't like me right from the start, which is a surprise because I have always been a teacher's pet. Instead, she likes the pretty girls who crowd round her desk at lunchtime and talk about boys. Their names are Cheydene, Lamese, Tasha, Kerry and Dallas ... girls with breasts and periods and older brothers and mascara, named after characters from Dallas, Dynasty and The Bold and The Beautiful. Cheydene tells me her mother made the name up herself and thought it sounded pretty.

Dallas is assigned to me as a Buddy on my first day. She has white-blond hair and a hedge of dark eyelashes. She shows me around the school and introduces me to the harem of pretty girls that are her friends. I know already that I will never be friends with any of them. They are too popular, and they act like teenagers already. They pretend to be Americans, like the ones we see on TV who go on dates and to the Prom.

I have never been popular, I am too studious and plain for that, but I have always felt comfortable in the schoolishness of school; tests, homework, exams. Here, the lessons are

a half-hearted prelude to break time and lunch, when the real work happens, and alliances are formed and broken.

On my third day at school I realise that my New Girl status has disappeared and I am now a target. A black boy called Simba takes a dislike to me. He is one of the leaders of the class, lounging in his seat during lessons and making smart remarks. Bored and looking to cause some trouble, he tells Mrs Starling that I had called him a black pig. I am called to the front of the class.

“Is this true?”

“No!”

“It is,” says someone from the rows of desks. “I heard her.”

A girl I haven’t even spoken to.

“I didn’t,” I insist.

Mrs Starling sighs. She is bored with this already. “There are witnesses.”

“They’re making it up. I ...” My voice is getting gulpy like it does when I am about to cry.

“We have to take this seriously,” the teacher says. “You can’t speak to people like that.”

“I didn’t, I ...”

I burst into tears and run out of the classroom, away from a thousand laughing Os of mouths. So, I am made a racist, at least in name.

I have never been so aware of Blacks and Whites at school before. I do not know if it is just because we are all older now, but there is a very clear division between us. And after Simba calls me a racist, I am unwelcome in either camp. There’s no way to

defend myself against it, so I try to keep out of everyone's way and stare at my desk during lessons.

This is how I first notice Farai – from the corner of my eye as I am hunched over the desk. She is a tall and beautiful black girl, truly black, her skin dusky and shining blue in the light. I hear from others in the class that she has been battling it for years with lightening creams and moisturisers to leave it a polished latte brown, but they never work. The soles of her feet and the palms of her hand and her full lips are pink and vulnerable; her hair is short or long, in braids or close bound to the side of her head, black or red or brown, hers or someone else's, depending on her mood. Whenever I walk anywhere near her, she pulls out a ruler and brandishes it at me.

“What is she doing?” I ask Dallas, my supposed Buddy.

“It's because you're a racist,” says Dallas, flipping her hair. “She doesn't want you to come too close.”

“Thirty centimetres,” someone else chimes in. “That's why she uses the ruler.”

Mum picks me up after school every day.

“So, how's it going?”

“It's fine.” I am so relieved to be going home that I can almost forget that I have to come back here tomorrow. I don't want to tell Mum that things aren't going well.

When I get home I perform my usual routine – change into shorts and a T-shirt, pour a glass of iced water and then go to find Mercy in the garden. She is hanging out washing. I sit on the grass with a book and watch her. After a while Archie ambles out and flops down on the grass beside me. A thrush is hopping nearby, picking up the

crumbs from Mercy's tea, one eye fixed warily on the cat. Archie just twitches his tail slightly. It's too hot to hunt.

"How was school?" asks Mercy.

"Fine," I tell her, just like I told Mum.

She smiles and pegs a pair of underpants to the line. Steve's. I wonder what she thinks of all our underwear. I throw it into the laundry and forget about it, but it is Mercy's hands that clean it, fold it, peg it out and then put it back in the drawer. To me it seems to magically reappear, clean and ready to be worn.

"Did you go to school, Mercy?" I ask.

"Yes," she says, "But I left before high school."

I feel guilty. I am lucky, to get an education.

After a few weeks the racist incident seems to blow over. People still aren't talking to me, but Farai has stopped carrying a ruler and people have stopped hissing the word at me between lessons. Mrs Starling assigns me to look after the school shop for a week. It is really a large walk-in cupboard at one end of the classroom, and everyone in the class takes turns running it. It is February, and I misguidedly agree to help with making Valentine's Day cards that we can sell in the shop, thinking that this might boost my popularity. I draw about ten different cards with pictures on the front and little messages inside. One has a picture of a teddy, and the words 'I love you beary much'.

Stuart is a handsome, overgrown boy too old for our class. For the last few weeks he has been pushing me against walls and casually grabbing my almost non-existent breasts, but

until this Valentine's Day week he hadn't taken a real interest in torturing me. He can't believe his luck when he sees the cards. Teddy bears. Little poems I have written. He spits in my face while he talks, and breathes steam on my glasses, and tries to flip up my skirt. When I won't let him, he tells everyone that I am half-boy, half-girl. What makes it worse is that I have some sort of weird, half-formed crush on him, for no reason other than his good looks and popularity. I have dreams about him sometimes and wake up puzzled and ashamed, wondering why my body is betraying me when I hate him so much with my mind.

Stuart traps me in a corner with the teacher's wheeled chair, and he and the other boys chant "I love you beary, beary much" over and over again. My eyes start to swim and I feel like I am going to fall over, but I hear Farai yelling at them. I am suddenly outside, with a brand-new bruise on my wrist where she has grabbed me.

"Bhenzi," she calls me, idiot. "Don't you know any better?"

"No," I say, rubbing my arm. It is covered in scratches, from my new kitten's teething. Stuart had laughed at that, said that even my cats hated me.

"They'll tear you apart," she says. "Come sit with me, you shouldn't be wandering about on your own, you're certifiable."

I follow, minus my hat, which I had left behind in the classroom. The sun tears at my hair and bites my scalp. We aren't allowed outside without hats, even in the winter.

"Shit," says Farai, "I'll go get it. You don't want to go back there."

She disappears, and I scratch my legs and swat flies until she returns triumphant. She crams it on my head. "There. Come on."

We walk around for a bit, talking. Farai realises that I am not a racist. I realise that, although tall and blindingly confident, Farai is not that frightening – at least, not any more. She is a natural defender of the weak, although she is contemptuous of them.

“You have to stand up for yourself, sha.”

We become friends.

That is when we discover the secret place behind the classrooms. We need somewhere away from the others, playing football and reading imported magazines on the muddy, cruel playground – or, at least, I do. We pick our way over chicken wire and dead earth to get there.

“Maiwe, this place doesn’t smell so good,” says Farai.

“I think something died here.”

“Yes, those beans.” They flop depressingly over their metal fence.

“It’s disgusting.”

It is behind a classroom block, invisible from the rest of the playground, a patch of dusty red earth that coughs up a slimy weed now and then. Chickenwire separates it from the black caretaker’s vegetable garden; limp carrots and tomatoes that eat up the sun and guzzle the thick, solid raindrops of the big storms, but never actually grow any bigger or lose their yellow, frayed edges. There is a tap dribbling rotting water down the wall, and a Tupperware box floating on an ancient puddle, filled with green water, dead leaves and the tiny husks of insects. The air is a warm facecloth pressed over our noses and mouths; our schoolgirl legs, bare under ugly summer dresses, itch from the bites of invisible creatures with too many legs. We are forbidden to be here, hidden from everything but the tiny green eyes of beans.

“This is great,” I say.

“Are you kidding?”

“No one will be able to see us here.”

Farai sighs and sits down. She stands up again, pulls off her school jersey and sits on it. I know I have won.

We sit there every break-time.

Being friends with Farai raises my cool factor. I listen with awe as she tells me stories of six hours spent in the hairdresser’s, relaxing creams that burn her scalp and pull out her hair in angry tufts. Mine takes half an hour at the most. I feel cheated.

We create catchphrases, in-jokes, secret words. We talk about our futures.

“I want to be an executive,” Farai says one day. Her hair is braided close to her head, and shines greasily in the bright sun.

“An executive who does what?”

“I don’t know. Advertising? I don’t care. I want a corner office with a view. I want my secretary to have a secretary.”

Her mother teaches at a prestigious girl’s college; her father owns five companies. She has an older brother and sister who are both impossibly cool, like her. I am especially lost in admiration of her older brother, with his baggy clothes and heavy gold jewellery. He listens to loud rap, and calls himself T-Zone, although his real name is Tafadzwa.

No one bothers Farai or me after she calls Tafadzwa in one afternoon. The story is that Simba has called Farai’s mother a whore. Farai tears furiously at tufts of grass in our

secret place, and announces that she will tell T-Zone. The next day he comes in with two of his friends, black men in heavy jackets, with heavy rings on each finger and a heavy stride. T-Zone holds Simba by his collar and crunches him against the wall. I can't hear what he is saying, but I can see Simba's eyes; white and round, spinning in his anxious face. I can't help laughing.

“That sorted him out,” Farai says with satisfaction. She has worn nail polish to school, red and peeling. “No one talks about my amai like that.”

Farai emboldens me to have my own reckoning with Simba. He still makes life unpleasant for me, knowing that I can't answer him back for fear of the racism accusation being dredged up again. When I am walking downstairs from Shona class, I bump into him in the stairwell. He shoves me hard against the wall and keeps walking, but instead of picking up my books and carrying on, I shove him back just as hard. We stare at each other for a second, and then I turn away. I can feel him looking at the back of my head as I walk.

It turns out Simba isn't that bad. After I shove him into the wall, he becomes almost friendly. I am assigned as his maths tutor, and we get on surprisingly well. I explain fractions, and he cracks jokes. Things get easier at school. I am still not part of the crowd of girls, but I am happy on the fringes.

There is a school play. We all line up on the polished floor of the hall to find out what parts we have been assigned. I am hopeful. I don't want to be the main character, but I wouldn't mind being one of the princesses.

As it turns out, it is a very short process. All the girls with long hair (the Lameses, Dallases, Laras and Kerrys) are princesses. All the girls with short hair (me and two others) are going to be rocks, dressed in all black. The black girls get to be the front and back ends of the pantomime horses. Worst of all, the boys and girls have to pair up at the end for a dance number.

“Great,” says Farai, picking the polish off her nails.

I am assigned to partner Gary, a blond boy who is Evil Stuart's best friend, and shorter than me. He tries his hardest not to touch me at all, but it is a waltz and requires us to clasp our hands. I make a few jokes, but he keeps his head turned away from me and I can feel his fingers straining to get as far away as possible. If an extra millimetre of skin happens to touch, he flinches away as if I have given him an electric shock.

We are both terrible at the dance. The partners are meant to practise on their own, but I know that we won't. As we walk away from the hall, I overhear Gary talking to Stuart.

“That dance is gay, man.”

“Ja.”

“But at least you have someone decent.”

I laugh it off to Farai later. “He's a pathetic excuse for a human being,” she says.

But I worry about it at home.

Farai teaches me about music. She tapes the Top Ten hits from the radio and brings them to school in her Walkman. She likes rap and hip-hop. She especially likes Tupac Shakur, the murdered rap artist. She does a school project on him.

“He didn’t die,” she says. “He left clues in his lyrics. If you play the songs backwards they tell you where he’s hiding.”

She teaches me how to rollerblade. I wear her brother’s skates, which are too big for me, and I flop about like a dying bird for a while. Eventually I get good enough to follow in her wake, skating around the block with a practised swish and clip. We stop only to press an electric gate bell and run away when someone answers.

She tells me about the time her maid took her to visit her boyfriend.

“I was only about three,” she says. “I remember her taking me to this scummy khaya somewhere down the road, and putting me in a chair. She told me to sit there and face the wall. The chair was in the bedroom and I could hear them behind me, grunting and gasping away. It was disgusting.”

“Did you tell your parents?”

“No. The maid told me not to or she would kidnap me and take me away.”

“That’s horrible!”

“Ja, well, I was just stupid.” Farai sticks out her tongue and crosses her eyes, pulling a face.

She teaches me how to make popcorn, prank phone calls, and friendship bracelets. Her house is exotic, smelling of strange cooking and a body odour different to

my own, the kind that comes from black skin; musky, pungent, pleasant, sitting on the tongue like thin grease. Her family speaks Shona and English indiscriminately, and eats sadza at almost every meal. I think they find me exotic too, Farai's white friend with the glasses and fair hair, who sits quietly at their table being small and pale while white teeth flash around her, hands gesture, and voices rich as molasses talk in two languages.

Farai is at once fiercely loyal to and contemptuous of her family. Every month she, her parents and her siblings travel into the rural areas to visit their extended family, the country cousins.

"We're going to the gwash this weekend," she will tell me when I invite her over. "Sorry."

She sounds bored, as if she can't wait to get it over with, but these visits are important to her. She returns with dusty skin and stories of cooking freshly-killed chickens, pounding peanut butter, hoeing gardens to plant sorghum or maize. She has a mysterious air after these visits. Even though she tells me long stories about what this cousin said to that cousin, what the witchdoctor said to her aunt and what her aunt did to her grandmother afterwards, she knows I can never quite understand. I feel gauche, whiter than snow and boring. But then she is suddenly the Farai I know again, talking about chart music, clothes, and cars. I never know how to deal with the air of black magic and tribal secrets that hangs about her after her visits to the country.

One day she brings a little piece of the gwash home with her. Her grandmother comes to stay with the Harare branch of the family. She is a small, wrinkled woman swathed in

printed fabrics who doesn't speak much English but smiles and nods at me through dinner as if we are having a telepathic conversation.

We are eating supper – sadza and relish. I have mastered the art of hollowing out a space in the middle of the sadza for the meat and sauce, then scooping it up with a carefully curled hand. We only have sadza once a week at our house, when Mum has no ideas for dinner and asks Mercy to cook, and then we have to eat it with knives and forks.

The family speaks a mixture of Shona and English at the table. When they slip into Shona, someone always translates for me if they remember. I can still understand quite a lot of Shona, though, and the fact that they feel like they have to put it into English for me makes me conscious of my whiteness.

After dinner we watch TV for a while – the family is devoted to satellite television, and they have all the movie channels. Then Farai and I go to bed.

Just as we are drifting off, Farai's grandmother pushes the door open. She is a hunched, small shape silhouetted against the light from the passage.

“Farai?”

“Ambuya, tinorara!” We are sleeping!

“Oh-oh.” And she is gone, with another smile and nod.

“What did she want?” I ask.

I cannot see Farai, but I hear the whisk and crumple of the bedclothes as she shrugs in the darkness. “Who knows? She's always doing shit like that. Probably some gwash reason.”

Chapter Seventeen

I look down at my breasts. They are just a slight bulge under my T-shirt, but Mum has started making me wear a bra. She takes me into town especially to get measured and fitted, which is quite an occasion, as we hardly ever go into town these days.

“They’re not big enough,” I protest, but she just laughs and ruffles my hair, which makes me furious.

A fat black woman in the bra shop measures me with cold tape that tickles under my arms. She has terrible body odour and a sleeveless dress. I shift position slightly.

“Stay still,” hisses Mum.

“Stay still,” hisses the woman and pulls the tape tighter as punishment. I have to stand there, trying to hold my breath, the woman’s armpit only a few centimetres from my face.

“You are an A cup,” the woman announces.

“Is that the smallest?” I ask.

“Yes.”

“Told you, Mum.”

The woman wags a finger in my face. Even her finger is fat. Each joint is like a sausage on a string. “You still need proper bra. Everyone needs support.”

I hug my arms across my chest and leave the rest to Mum and the saleswoman. They choose two white bras and one black one – flaps of plasticky fabric with mysterious hooks and straps.

It feels strange having something between my skin and my T-shirt. I feel like everyone can tell I'm wearing a bra, although Mum has sworn faithfully that the outline doesn't show. I remember when Lucy and I used to run around the garden under the sprinklers in just our underwear. I remember when Mum told me I could no longer do that. I must have been about six years old.

“Why not?” I had asked.

“It's just not right for girls to do that.”

“Why not?”

“Just because. I'll tell you when you're older, hey?”

“But boys do it.”

“Boys are different.”

“Why?”

“They just are.”

I also have to start using deodorant. It comes in a little bottle with a lid and smells like talcum powder. I have to slide it around my armpits until they are covered in slimy white which dries to flaky white. And I have to start shaving the little prickly hairs on my armpits and my legs. I have little plasters all over my legs for the first few weeks, especially on my knees, where the razor catches on the knobby bits.

I also start getting spots on my face. This does not help matters at school, especially when one of the girls names a spot on my nose 'Old Faithful'. It gets to the stage where Mercy tuts in concern and makes me turn my head this way and that to see how it is progressing.

“This one, it won’t go away, hey?”

I pull my head away. “It’s fine.”

“What’s that?” says Mum, who has overheard. She comes over and peers at the spot too.

“Mum!”

“I think it’s time you started cleansing.”

I don’t want to start cleansing. I don’t want to do anything about it, except maybe squeeze it when I get the chance. But Mum overpowers me. She takes me to the chemist and buys me an array of Clearasil products, and a cover stick. This is the first time I have used make-up, and it feels strange. It turns oily in the heat and slides off my face like mud down a wall. It clings to the nosepiece of my glasses in little pink smears.

The girls at school know all about bras and makeup. I study them. Everything from their walk to the way they reach their hands up behind their head to adjust their hair is designed to make the boys look at them. Most of them wear perfume and mascara, and some of them wear lip gloss that smells like strawberries or bubblegum. Dallas even gets her mother to shorten the school uniform to show off her legs. My mum bought my school uniform a size bigger so that I could grow into it.

The black girls are different again. They do not giggle and flick their hair like the white girls do, but they have an easy grace in their bodies. They look like women already. They have big boobs, some so big that the girls have to wear bras with wire and upholstery to

keep everything pointing up and out. I see them when they are in the changing rooms after swimming or sports.

“What are you staring at?” says Kurai, one of the biggest girls. I realise I have been watching the mysterious bulge and jiggle of her breasts as she puts her shirt on.

“Nothing.”

The black girls don’t smell of perfume, but they smell of something musky that catches you in the back of the throat. They are much more comfortable in their bodies than the white girls – less clipped-in, zipped-up, nailed-down.

I bump into Kerry in the girl’s toilets. She is one of the prettiest girls, with freckles like brown sugar and eyes brown-and-gold like bees. She is reapplying her makeup. I head towards a cubicle quickly to get out of her way, but she starts talking.

“I have a spot.” She is dabbing at it energetically with a cover stick.

“Oh.” I hover. I want to get my reflection out of the mirror. It looks too plain next to hers.

“How do you get your skin so clear?” She turns around and shoves her face close to mine to examine it. “Oh. You use cover-up.”

She sounds disappointed, as if she thought I might be privy to some amazing plain-girl-with-good-skin secret. I stand uncertainly for a moment, but she turns back to the mirror and it seems like I am allowed to go to the bathroom now. I am too nervous to pee, so I just sit on the toilet and chew my nails until I hear her shoes click away. I can never go to the toilet at school, anyway. I hold it in until I get home.

When my period starts, I don't realise it at first. I notice a brown stain in my underwear. I throw away that pair and think I have had an upset stomach. When it carries on for another two days I start to get worried. It has a rusty, metallic smell.

On the third day, I sit on the toilet fully-dressed with the seat down for almost an hour. I don't know what to do. Mum isn't home yet. Finally, I ask Mercy. I explain about the brown stuff and how I think it might be a period because I've had it for a few days.

"Azwiite." It is forbidden.

"Oh." I feel worse now, and sorry for bringing it up. "Sorry."

"That's all right." She is biting her lip nervously. I can tell that she wants to help, but when something is taboo, it's taboo.

I wad several folds of toilet paper into my underwear and wait for Mum to come home. I feel grubby, but I don't want to have a bath until this is sorted out.

"Mum," I say when she gets home. She is busy putting down her car keys, pouring a drink, taking off her sunglasses. I follow her around.

"What?" She is not snapping, but she is preoccupied.

"Mum?"

"Ja, what is it?"

"Shhh." I feel my abdomen contract. "Mum, I've got my period."

"You've got what? Stop mumbling."

"I've got my period."

Mum's face has gone soft. She reaches out to touch my shoulder, but I jerk it away. I don't want mother-daughter bonding over this – not yet.

She seems to understand, and becomes matter-of-fact.

“Stay here.”

She comes back with boxes of pads, and tells me what to do with them. The whole conversation is excruciating, especially when she offers to come into the toilet with me and help.

“No!”

“Okay.” She raises both hands in front of her. “But give me a shout if you need help, hey?”

“Don't tell Steve,” I beg. I can't bear the thought of anyone looking at me and knowing what's going on in my body.

“Okay.”

I know she will, but I appreciate the lie.

The next morning I prepare carefully for school. I think I have mastered the equipment. It feels strange and bulky inside my underwear, and I know it is getting heavier with blood already, but I can't risk taking a spare one to school. Sometimes the boys take my bag and scatter my books on the grass. I can't risk something white and embarrassing coming out.

The school play is coming up, and our class is in charge of set design. I am up a ladder, painting trees on the backdrop, when I hear a voice from below.

“What’s that?”

I look down from my perch on the ladder. Tasha is staring up my skirt at something.

“What?” I put my hands down to clutch my skirt against my body.

“Oh my god!” she collapses in giggles. “Come and look.”

The others crowd round at the bottom of the ladder. I turn around awkwardly and try to sit on the top step.

“What?” I ask again.

“Are you wearing a pad?” Tasha asks, still giggling.

I can feel my insides curling up small, like a chongololo when you poke it with a stick.

“Why?” I ask, and my voice comes out too loud.

“Because,” Tasha is speaking very clearly so everyone can hear her. They are all waiting for the punch line. “The wings are meant to go on your underpants, not down your legs.”

The laughter builds like the sound of crickets, until the air is thrumming with it. I come down the ladder as quickly as I can. I bang my shin on one of the steps, and I know it is going to turn into a big inky bruise.

“There’s blood all over your pants,” says Tasha with relish.

“What’s going on here?”

One of the teachers has walked over.

“She started her period,” says Lara, pointing at me.

“Oh.” The teacher puts on an understanding face. “Come on, dear.”

I am taken to the nurse's office. They have a pair of spare underpants in the cupboard for occasions like this. They were white once, but now they are grey.

Farai sits with me in the girls' toilets while I cry. She is picking at old nail polish on her fingers.

"I don't see why you get so upset about it," she says. "You know it's stupid."

Easy for her to say. She is tall and magnificent.

"I can't go back to class," I say.

"Ja." She thinks about it. "Go sit behind the classrooms. I'll meet you after school."

I wipe my nose on my sleeve. "I'll get bored."

"I'll bring you a book."

"Okay."

Farai comes to meet me in our secret place behind the school. She sits with me in silence while I sniffle.

"It's not such a big deal," she says.

"I can't go back to class again."

"Yes you can."

The borrowed underpants are too big, and bunch up under my skirt.

"I'm going to go home."

"Call your Mum?"

"No, sneak out."

"You'll never get past the guards."

Security is tightening at school. There has always been a guard at the gates, but now there are two. New rules stop us from venturing outside the gates during the day. out in the suburbs somewhere.

“Don’t be stupid. Come on.” Farai hauls me to my feet. “It’s like ripping off a plaster. It’s better if you do it quickly.”

As we walk to the classroom, she says over her shoulder, “Besides, people like you more now.”

I shake my head.

“It’s true. I’ve raised your street cred.”

I poke my tongue out at her.

“You’re my entourage,” she says. “Under my protection.”

I feel better.

There are food riots in town. People can no longer afford things like bread and milk, and they are protesting. We start having Riot Drill at school. When the alarm sounds, we have to put our hands over our heads and crouch down beneath our desks.

“How is this supposed to help?” whispers Farai. She had braids put in yesterday, and so is not quite resting her hands on her head. They hover a millimetre or two above.

“I’m not sure.” I can see chewing gum under my desk. “This is disgusting.”

“Well if rioters run through here, do they really expect us to sit under our desks and stay still?” Farai is indignant. She was halfway through painting one of her nails with Tippex when the alarm bell rang, and it has dried into a strange shape.

“Why would they run through here anyway?”

“Get away from the police.”

I know that the riots are about food prices. Bread, sugar and Coke are really expensive now. I have also heard that taxes are going up, which doesn't make much difference to me but makes Steve stomp around the house glaring at things. Apparently the taxes are going to pay pensions to the War Vets.

“War Vets!” Steve snorts whenever he hears the term. “Half of them weren't even alive during the bloody war. Amazing how many war heroes pop out of the woodwork when it's all over.”

“Are you a War Vet?” I ask Steve. He laughs and laughs until I think he's going to wet himself.

“You have to be black to be a War Vet. Or a War Hero,” he says.

I used not to pay much attention to the news. Mum and Steve have always complained about Mugabe, but I almost felt affectionate towards him. He was like a hated headmaster who is overbearing and incompetent, but towards whom you feel a kind of loyalty. And we were always fine and the people we know were always fine, no matter what happened. Sure, someone might get burgled, we might struggle through a drought or have to pay more for petrol, but our lives were essentially unchanged. Mercy was still humming as she folded the clothes. The grass was still green; there was still tea in the silver teapot every day.

Now when I see a protestor on television holding up a sign saying “17 years of corruption is enough!” I start to realise that this isn’t normal. This isn’t funny. Mugabe isn’t a comedy villain, and the people that are getting hurt are real people.

There are pictures on the news of police using horse whips and sjamboks to hit people in the crowd. I see a shower of black come out of one man’s head, as if it has shattered into shards of skin, like a glass bottle. Then I see the dark specks are blood.

It is hard to believe this is happening in our city. Archie is purring in a dark, happy heap on my lap. I can hear the grandfather clock ticking, and I can smell the dinner that Mercy is making for us. She is humming in the kitchen. I can hear it above the roar of the rioting crowds. I wonder what she thinks about all of this, but I know I will never ask her.

Things are strange at home. At first Steve was very polite to Jonah, asking his opinion and mentioning several times that he knew how much the ‘old Baas’ appreciated him. But Jonah hasn’t been sufficiently grateful for Steve, and has made several changes in the garden without asking.

“I thought I said to cut that bougainvillea back?” says Steve to Jonah one morning. He is using his patient voice, the one that drives Mum mad.

“Yes, Baas.”

“Right.” Steve hovers for a minute. “And you haven’t done it.”

“No, Baas.”

“Why not?”

“The old Baas liked it all along the wall.”

“Right.” Steve makes a move as if to walk away, then stops. “Well, the old Baas isn’t here, Jonah.”

“Yes, Baas.”

“So could you cut it back?”

“Yes, Baas.”

Steve comes back into the house. He is red in the face.

“You shouldn’t let him get to you,” says Mum.

“Ja, I know.” Steve heads straight for his armchair and dives into one of his old Rhodesiana books. After a minute, Mum gets up and pours him a Coke. When she hands it to him, he lets his fingers rest on hers for a minute before taking it.

I still avoid Jonah as much as I can. When I am out in the garden I will sometimes feel his eyes on me, and it is like a finger sliding down my spine. I don’t know how Steve finds the courage to stand up to him. When he and Steve are talking, I follow Jonah’s gaze and see Steve the way Jonah sees him – a gangly boy, the son of the house who used to keep rhino beetles in his underwear drawer. Steve looks shorter, suddenly, and young, while Jonah’s face looks like a dark soapstone carving, definite and bitterly chiselled.

I keep an eye on the bougainvillea. It is profuse and lush with life, like everything in the garden, and it spills over the wall and hangs over the flowerbeds like a canopy. By the end of the day, it is still not cut back. I notice Steve is watching it too.

The following day, Steve takes a turn around the garden to “survey his kingdom” as he says – half-joking, half-not. He stops at the bougainvillea bush and looks at it for a while, then wanders off to the chicken run. After a few minutes he heads back to the bougainvillea and stares at it some more.

“Just tell him again,” says Mum when he comes inside.

“No, I’ve told him once. That should be enough.”

“He’s probably just forgotten.”

“No, he hasn’t. He’ll do it.”

The bougainvillea is not cut back the next day, or the next. Steve and Jonah are very polite to one another, and neither of them mentions it, but the bush seems to grow larger and even more luxuriant.

“This is bloody stupid,” says Mum.

The bougainvillea continues to grow. No one says anything about it. But Steve’s manner towards Jonah changes. He starts to bark out orders. He stops mentioning Grandpa. He starts treating him like a servant. For some reason it has never occurred to me to think of our servants as actual servants – people who serve us, Or Else. They have their own place in the family. When I see Steve shaking his finger in Jonah’s face, however, I realise that the relationship is not as cosy as I had imagined.

I am collecting the eggs from the chicken run one morning when I hear shouting. I know I should straighten up so they can see me, but instead I stay crouched and listening. The chickens crane their necks at me and cluck softly.

“Don’t speak to me that way!” Jonah. The deferential servant voice is gone. I didn’t even realise there was a special servant voice until I hear him speak without it.

“You are a bluddy employee in my house, living on my land!” Steve shouts back.

“Your father would never have spoken to me that way! I have known you since you were a boy. How dare you ...”

“Shut up! Shut up!”

“Machende arimuhapwa!”

“Don’t make me bluddy fire you, boy!” I hear Steve say to a man almost twenty years his senior.

I know what Jonah said. I remember it from Chinhoyi. It means ‘your testicles are under your armpits’, which sounds strange in English but is one of the most terrible insults in Shona. I don’t think Steve knows what it means, and I do not tell him.

The school sports day arrives. Farai and I have managed to avoid sport for most of the term, but we have to go along and support our houses. We pile off the bus and onto the field, which is looking festive with lines of bunting everywhere, fresh paint on the tracks and a table covered with a white cloth and dozens of trophies.

“Are you running?” I ask Farai. She hates exercise.

“No way. I told them I have my period.”

Farai wields her period to great effect. It appears every time there is a sporting event. One of the teachers told her that she was lying, that she couldn’t possibly have four

periods in a month, but Farai got her mum to come in and shout at the teacher. Since then they have left her alone.

We stand in neat rows, and the headmistress is about to start proceedings when something stops her. She turns to look at the road. We can hear drumming, and distant shouts. We look around at each other. Someone giggles. Someone else coughs. It has gone very quiet.

There is a crackle of static. A teacher has gone over to the bus and is urgently talking into a radio. She walks back to us briskly, her skirt snapping against her legs.

“Sit down, everyone.”

The teachers move around us in near-silence, making sure that everyone sits cross-legged on the grass. There are still some giggles, but my chest is throbbing with an unnaturally loud and painful heartbeat.

A crowd of black men with sjamboks and sticks are marching down the road toward town. The traffic tries to weave around and past them, but there are too many, and all the cars stop.

We watch as the crowd passes an elderly couple sitting in their car. The male half is gripping the steering wheel and staring straight ahead. The first few men pass by with cheerful whistles and a few bangs on the roof. The next few stop and start shouting things through the window. We cannot hear what they are saying from the field, but we can see the old man's profile staring resolutely in front of him. The wife looks more agitated.

Farai eyes them. “Must be scary.”

“My brother’s cycling home,” whispers Dallas. “I hope he doesn’t run into them.”

“If he sees them he’ll turn around and go back,” I try to comfort her.

She shakes her head. “No. He’ll call them bluddy kaffirs and get beaten up. That’s just the sort of thing he does.”

Now a crowd has gathered either side of the car. They start to rock the car back and forth rhythmically. Some of the people streaming past are carrying flaming sticks. It seems just a matter of time before someone decides to set fire to the car.

As I watch, I see the old man bang his head on the window. A dark line appears on his forehead.

“Don’t look at them!” a teacher snaps, and I force my eyes away again. We sit as quietly as we can, not even daring to brush the flies off our bare knees. My hand is in the grass, and I quietly tear off little blades and crush them between my fingers. Grip, crush, release.

After a long time, the shouts fade away. We sit surrounded by cheerful flags and trophies. The warmth of the sun has moved from my shoulder to the very top of my head. I hear sirens. I do not look at the road.

“Back in the bus, everyone,” says the headmistress, and we trudge back. My leg has fallen asleep, and I have a cross-hatch of red lines on my shins where they were pressed against the grass. The trophies are put back in their boxes.

“Oh well,” says Farai, “at least we didn’t have to run.”

“I guess so. I wonder what all that was about?”

She shrugs. “Bread, probably.”

Chapter Eighteen

I still go to the farm with Mum, but we are more cautious these days. Mum has her own radio for the first time. We are not worried, for the most part. The farm is always sunlit. The winds that blow across it smell sharp and hot. There is energy in the air – machines grinding gears, people working in the fields, animals running in the paddocks, everything working towards prosperity and wealth. The whole farm shines with money spent and earned.

“This place gives me hope,” says Steve when we visit. I can see why.

There has been a lot on the news lately about White Farmers and their land. Steve says that Mugabe wants to take the land away from them. I am in favour of resettlement, after hanging out with Farai and her friends.

“You think it’s really going to go to the poor people?” says Steve. “Bob wants to give it to his cronies, that’s all.”

“Then why is he doing it?”

“Because there’s an election coming up,” says Steve.

“Is he going to take Uncle Pieter’s land? And Mr Cooper’s?”

“Nah, it’s not going to come to anything,” says Steve. “It’s just a lot of spear-rattling before the election. Mugabe needs the white farmers. They’re the ones that keep the economy going.”

I can’t imagine anyone making Mr Cooper leave his farm. He is so fluent in Shona and so respected by his workers that he seems almost superhuman. I can’t imagine Lettuce and

Jeans and the other black foremen letting War Vets wander in and take over without a fight.

Although Mum protested about the meat hooks being right outside her office, they haven't been moved. Mr Cooper is in the office one day chatting to Mum, and I am sitting on the step outside, when a couple of workers come to the offices dragging a skinny mombe on a piece of rope.

“Sah!” They call from outside. They must have spotted his motorbike and known he was here.

“I'll get him.” I go inside. Mr Cooper is sitting on the edge of Mum's desk, as he always does, chatting. Mum is leaning back in her chair and patting her hair with one hand.

“Mr Cooper!”

He comes with me and sees the thin cow on the fraying rope.

“Sah, she is sick,” says one of the workers.

Even I can see she is sick. The cow is swaying. Every so often a shudder goes through her bony frame.

“Any chance she's going to recover?”

“No, Baas.” The worker shakes his head. “Sorry, Baas.”

“It's not your fault, man.” Mr Cooper gives the cow a long, considering look.

“Ja, okay.”

He strides over to his bakkie and pulls out his gun. It is an elephant gun. I fired one once, on a school camp, and it almost dislocated my shoulder when it kicked back.

“You might want to go back inside,” he says to me. “It’s not going to be pretty.”

“Nah, I’m okay,” I say, trying to be a blasé farm kid.

“All right, if you’re sure.”

His eyes narrow and he looks like a different person – someone cold and clinical. He swings the blunt, snake-like head of the gun around until it is almost touching the centre of the cow’s forehead.

The cow closes her eyes, as if in relief. Her legs tremble, once, and then the gun goes off with a crack that sounds more like a car backfiring than a gunshot, and she slumps to the ground.

I turn away, but not before I see the first worker start to hack at the animal with a bhadza. He lifts it above his head, and the sticky, red edge of the axe blade catches the light. I feel a shiver. I reach my hand up to my forehead to brush away a piece of hair, and when my hand comes away there is a dark smear on it.

“What’s that?” Mr Cooper looks at my hand. He sucks his breath inwards in a backwards whistle. “Look at that. Must have sprayed some blood out after all. What are the odds, hey?”

He gives me his big, white handkerchief, and I brush it across my forehead. There are only a few spots of blood.

“Now you’re one of us,” he says, and grins. He has a smear of blood on his hand too. Noticing, he wipes it with his thumb and imprints it on his own forehead. It looks incongruously like a lipstick stain, as if someone has kissed him.

“Blooded,” he says. “That’s what they do in the English fox-hunts, you know?”

I shake my head.

“They put some of the fox’s blood on the forehead of the new hunters.

Initiation. Stupid custom.” He smiles. “It’s sis, hey?”

“Ja,” I say. I offer him the handkerchief.

“Nah, it’s okay,” he says. “You keep it.”

I crumple the handkerchief up to hide the redness. Mr Cooper climbs into his bakkie and starts it up.

“Cheers.” The red blood on his forehead shines like a gummy smile. I feel a shiver of cold.

“Goodbye.”

The air smells like meat. On my way back to the office I catch a glimpse of the workers cutting the cow into pieces to be hauled away, even though I try not to look. They are humming as they work. One of them flashes me a grin, and raises his hand, palm flat, in a wave.

I throw the bloody handkerchief in the bin as soon as I get inside.

Three ostriches go missing from the paddocks one week. I am with Mum on the day she finds out about it, and calls Mr Cooper to tell him.

“Ja, three,” she says. “No, no one knows. I’ve asked Jeans. Ja. Okay.”

She hangs up.

“He’s going to talk to the workers.”

“Why?” I ask.

“Because one of them did it.”

“How do you know?”

Mum sighs. “The whole thing is too well-organised. It has to be someone from the farm who did it. They probably took them for the meat.”

Mr Cooper gathers all the workers together and asks them about the missing ostriches. His Shona is fluent and colloquial, and his speech gets a few laughs as well as the expected shame-faced shuffling.

“Come on, guys,” he says at the end. “I’ll be in my office all morning. Come forward and tell me who did it.”

He sits in his office all day, but no one comes to talk to him. Streams of workers pass by on their way to or from somewhere else, but the streams part and braid around the office like columns of ants avoiding an obstacle. At the end of the day when Mum and I are loading the car ready to go home, we see Mr Cooper come out of the office and light a cigarette.

“Good night, Baas.”

“Manheru, Baas.”

The workers greet him and smile as they pass. Their faces are empty of everything but friendliness. Mr Cooper lifts a hand to Mum and me as we drive off.

“I guess that’s that,” I say.

“No,” says Mum. “He has something else up his sleeve, don’t worry.”

She talks as if he is engaged in a war with the workers; a strange, amicable war of smiles and jokes that doesn’t disguise the fact that it is always Them versus Us. Respect and affection on both sides, but a healthy dose of suspicion and cynicism as well. I think Mum is right. Mr Cooper can’t let this one lie, not if he wants to keep up the rumour that he has eyes in the back of his head. He must have a plan.

Shona people often come across to uninitiated whites as being untrustworthy, because their ways of communication are so different. In Shona culture, it is rude to look someone directly in the eye. Direct eye contact is taken as a challenge. If you try and make eye contact with a Shona, their gaze will slide everywhere except your eyes.

“Shifty,” say people who don’t understand, and “Untrustworthy.”

Shona handshakes are also misunderstood. The kind of people who say, “You can tell a lot about a man by his handshake,” are the kind of people who grasp your hand firmly and pump it up and down while staring with great intensity into your eyes. Frank. Open. Firm. They will be disappointed by Shona handshakes, which are limp and slither out of your hand like a fish eager to get back to the water.

Mr Cooper waits, watching the workers’ eyes look everywhere but at his face. He sees the sheepish smiles. He hears the nervous laughs. When no one comes forward he smiles and tells them in perfect Shona that they will all be fined to cover the cost of the missing ostriches unless they give up the culprits. Still nothing.

“Oh well,” says Mum when we get back to the office. “At least you’ll get the money back.”

“Ja,” says Mr Cooper. He is frowning. “But I want to prove a point to these guys. They can’t expect to just have everyone else cover up for them.”

“What are you going to do?” Mum asks.

Mr Cooper calls in the local witchdoctor. He makes a big show of welcoming him into his office, making sure that all the workers see. The witchdoctor is a tall man with fat

cheeks like eggplants and a wide, white smile. He is also a showman. He makes a point of embracing Mr Cooper, and shakes his rattle (a gourd filled with seeds) enthusiastically. The workers slide their gaze over to him, then away.

After an hour, the witchdoctor emerges from the office. After another elaborate embrace and a lot of back-slapping with Mr Cooper, he leaves.

The next day, Mr Cooper calls the workers together again.

“I have spoken to the n’anga,” he says. Instantly, everyone looks worried. The mood falls like wood-smoke sinking to the ground.

“If the bodies of the ostriches aren’t returned,” says Mr Cooper, “I am handing over the matter to the n’anga, and he will deal with it.”

The following morning, there are three dead ostriches neatly laid out in a row in front of Mr Cooper’s office. They have not been touched.

“Magic,” says Mr Cooper to us with a grin. He leaves whistling.

At lunchtime I am sitting outside, reading and eating a naartjie. The naartjie’s skin is thin and tightly bound to the flesh, and it is a messy business peeling it off. I am so involved in the operation that I don’t see the woman walking past until she is right in front of me.

“Masikati,” I say, startled.

“Masikati.”

She is carrying a sack of mealie meal on her head. She has close-cropped wiry hair and skin glowing like expensive dark furniture, or the parquet floors after Mercy polishes them. Red earth is powdered on her feet and ankles. The long yellow grass sweeping at her knees makes her look as if she is walking through fire.

I watch her pass, fascinated. Her loose breasts sway like ripe paw-paws on a tree, and she has the same stride as the slow-stepping ostrich that eyes her from behind the fence through velvety lashes. I look down to my legs from the book I am propping on my knees, and I see knees scaly from scabs and grazes, and chubby white legs. My skin looks an unhealthy colour in the noon light, veiny and blue like old cheese. It does not have that polished-wood glow. Among all the colours – rust, gold, green, brown, blue – I am pale and colourless.

In reality, no one is really white (white like blank paper, or clean washing); people are pink, sunburnt red, sallow or brown. White is a state of mind. White is being shunted hurriedly to the front of a queue, watched by a hundred resentful eyes. White is money, swimming pools, two cars. It is glow-in-the-dark, marking you at once on a black street. All those poems we learn at school about skin fair as snow, fair as petals or milk or cream, don't take the other side of it into account – the lack of pigment, the sickly, greenish tinge that white skin can have, the way it makes us like ghosts in a vivid country.

I have noticed that we are suddenly 'whites' and 'blacks' in the news. Perhaps it has always been like this, but I have only just started to notice that some people mark out our colour as if it was a school uniform.

Sean roars up on the bike. It isn't the school holidays.

"What's he doing home?" I ask Mum. She is doing something on the calculator and frowning.

"He's home for the weekend."

"He never comes home for the weekend."

"Well, this weekend he did."

Mum looks up from her work and gives me a knowing look. I go out the back to sit with the ostrich babies. I watch one of them trying to run through a solid wall. They are even stupider than chickens, with long, adolescent legs that kick out at random and trip over each other.

There is as much difference between Sean and me as there is between me and the ostriches. It is like we are different species.

"Howzit!" He waves to me. His voice has properly broken now, and it sounds broken – gravelly and grinding, like someone shifting gears on a car until he finds the right one. "What are you up to?"

"Watching the ostriches."

"Okay." He stands with his hands on his hips, unconsciously (or consciously?) copying his father's pose.

"Hey, come here a sec," he says.

I stand up and make a big show of brushing the sand off my knees. "What?"

"Come on the bike. I've got something to show you."

"What sort of thing?"

"Just come, man."

I stand up, feeling the brand-new bra move with my body. I cross my arms over my chest as I walk, afraid he will see it.

“What do you think about this land redistribution stuff?” I say when I reach him. I want to show him that I am aware of the political situation now, that even though he is sixteen and starting to think about leaving school, I no longer think of him as a big hero.

“It’s stupid, man. They’ll never do it, ek sei? The farms are too important. We bring in all the money.”

Sean has started talking like this lately. “I tuned him this”. “What’s the gwan?” It is the way the black kids in my class talk. I can’t blame him – I have started wearing an Oliver Mtukudzi vest and wooden jewellery, and listening to the same music Farai listens to.

“So you guys are staying here?”

“Of course.” Sean grins suddenly. “I’ve got to take over the farm, hey?”

“Not yet.”

“Nah, but one day. Think I’ll make a good Big Baas?”

I look at him. I can imagine him joking with the workers like his father does, knowing each of them by name.

“Maybe.”

“Ja, you know it.”

He is still grinning. I suddenly feel irritated, like red ants are crawling on my skin and I want to jump and shout to get them off.

“Ja, well, there’s more to running a farm than speaking Shona.”

“Sure, I know.”

I shrug.

“Eeesh,” he draws his breath in through his teeth. “You’re like a bluddy porcupine today. What’s up?”

“Nothing.” I don’t know what’s up, except that it has something to do with bras and periods and seeing that beautiful African woman walk past. “I’m busy. I’m working with Mum.”

“Ach, fine.” He glares at me. “Suit yourself.”

He climbs back on the bike, gives me an exaggerated wave and kicks it into life. A few minutes later, Shumba comes lolloping up. He must have followed Sean from the house, and only just caught up with the bike. I pour him a bowl of water and watch as he messily gulps it down, smiling at me sidelong with his black lips and eyes.

“Dumb dog,” I say, and reach out to ruffle his ears. I can hear the motorbike in the distance, and I feel something watching me. A touch on the nape of my neck. I straighten up and look around – nothing but gum trees. The fur on Shumba’s back is standing out, and he has his lips pulled back in a half-snarl.

I feel like I have been warned of something. The sound of Sean’s motorbike has faded completely, but I feel an urge to run after him, call him back.

That night I lie awake for a long time. It feels like the land has taken a breath, and we are all waiting for it to exhale.

Chapter Nineteen

On the weekend, I see Steve talking to Jonah in the garden. They are both standing with their arms crossed, further apart than you would normally stand if you were having a conversation. Jonah is staring straight at Steve, and his eyes are completely surrounded by white.

“The bush is practically dead anyway.”

“It has been here ever since I have.”

Steve waves his hand at the bougainvillea bush. It is starting to look sad and straggly. “Look at it!”

“I can fix it, Baas.”

“I don’t want you to fix it. I want you to take it out. I have a cycad that I want to put there.”

“The old Baas planted that bush.”

“Ja, I know he did. He planted everything in this bluddy garden.”

“The Baas planted that before you were born.”

“I know he did. But I want it taken out.”

“The old Baas would not have done it this way.”

“The old Baas is dead!”

The word thuds in between them like a bird shot from the sky.

“Now, you go take that bush out quick-quick,” says Steve. He has, consciously or not, slipped into the accent of Kitchen Kaffir.

Jonah says nothing. He hoists his bhadza over his shoulder and walks to the bush. He strikes its trunk once, twice, three times. It comes away from the fence and starts to fall. Jonah stands back, and Steve makes an involuntary movement as if to catch it. Its leaves shiver and rustle as it hits the ground.

“Well. Good,” says Steve.

I can see the marigolds that edged the flower bed, crushed into juicy orange blood-clots by the falling bush.

Steve’s efforts to take over the house and garden start to be quietly sabotaged. Tools mysteriously go missing from our shed. This is not unusual – there is a complex barter system in our neighbourhood. The gardeners of all the houses in our street regard tools as communal property. Everything from the lawnmower to the hedge clippers disappears from our shed at intervals, to be replaced by something that very clearly doesn’t belong to us. When Steve needs something that is missing from the shed, he phones up one of the neighbours, and they roll their eyes ruefully at each other down the line, chuckling at the African-ness of it all.

Everyone has heard the story of the gardener whose Baas asked him to bury two cans of petrol. We are all storing extra petrol these days, just in case (of what? A flight to the border?), and so we can all sympathise.

“So this oek, he gives the two cans to his gardener and he tells him to bury it in the garden. The gardener says yes Baas and goes away. A few weeks later the Baas needs

the petrol, so he asks his gardener to show him the spot where it is buried and dig it up. The gardener starts digging, but there is nothing there.

‘Are you sure you put it here?’ says the Baas.

‘Yes, Baas, I buried it, just like you said.’

“The guy scratches his head. He just can’t understand it. Then he asks, ‘When you say you buried it, what exactly do you mean?’

‘I dug a hole, opened the cans and poured the petrol in, Baas.’”

Howls of laughter.

This time, however, the tools vanish and are not replaced. The hedge trimmers, the big spade, even the saw. Jonah comes to Steve every day with hands outstretched, palms up.

“Baas, I cannot chop the hedge because the clippers are gone.”

“Then use the secateurs.”

“Sah, they are gone too.”

There is a light in Jonah’s eyes as he says this. Steve knows that the tools had some help in disappearing, but he plays along. He buys new clippers. The new clippers go missing. For some reason he does not confront Jonah. Mum and I watch their complicated dance of servant and master, lies and false smiles, and do not get involved.

The chickens stop laying eggs – or, at least, there are no eggs there when I go to collect them. A hole appears in the hedge between our garden and next door’s, and the neighbour’s Rottweilers come through and terrorise the cats. A dead rat floats in the

birdbath. Slugs infest the rockery. Torrential rain blocks our gutters and pools water in the ceiling.

“Jonah doesn’t control the weather,” says Mum when Steve lists the problems.

I am not so sure.

I start finding dead things everywhere. A baby bird, fallen from a tree. A sticky ball designed to catch flies, covered in crawling things, dropped as if by accident just outside my window.

“The wind must have blown it there,” says Mum.

A neat line of shrews, their tiny triangular mouths open in shrewish laughter, lined up on the back doorstep.

“Archie must have been hunting,” says Mum.

Archie shows no interest in the shrews at all, after giving them a disdainful sniff.

“But there aren’t any marks on them,” I say.

“Cats can be so cruel,” says Mum, which doesn’t really answer my question.

“Don’t worry. We’ve had a run of bad luck, that’s all.”

A few nights later, Archie stumbles in through my bedroom window, his mouth filled with green froth. His eyes are wide and mad.

“Looks like he tried to eat a frog,” says Steve. He prises Archie’s jaws open.

“We’d better take him to the vet.”

“Good thing he came back,” says Mum, trying to comfort me. “When cats are sick, they sometimes just disappear.”

I know Archie wouldn't. He stares at me with milky, panicked eyes as I wrap him in a towel ready to take to a vet. His legs are stiff and his whole body is trembling. We wake our vet up at his house by banging on the door.

"What the yell is it?" he says out the window. He is the hairiest man I have ever seen, and tonight he is only wearing boxer shorts. His chest hair is fascinating, but Mum hisses at me to stop staring.

The vet forces something into Archie that makes him vomit. His little jaws work as he empties his stomach, and his ears are flat back on his head.

"What do you think caused it?" Mum asks.

"Poison," says the vet. "Could be he licked some rat poison one of your neighbours laid down. Or perhaps some insecticide."

Mum and the vet bemoan irresponsible people who leave these poisons lying around where anyone's pet could lick them up. I stroke Archie, seeing the familiar blue flicker of static along his black back.

The next morning we are pale and dark-eyed. Mercy has made us a big pot of porridge, as always, and we pour molasses and milk onto it. This morning the molasses seems to ooze even more slowly, the porridge seems even stodgier and more difficult to eat.

"Morning, Medem," says Jonah when he comes to the back doorstep to get his cup of tea. His eyes flicker to me, and then down to Archie in my lap.

"Archie was sick last night," says Mum. "He ate some sort of insecticide or poison."

"I am sorry," says Jonah.

“Have you laid any poison down anywhere, Jonah?”

“Yes, Medem. For the rats.”

“Well, I would rather you didn’t do that. Go and get rid of it, please, before the other cat finds it.”

“Yes, Medem.” He disappears.

“Well, mystery solved,” says Mum, and goes back to eating her breakfast.

I have an uneasy feeling all day. I watch Jonah working in the garden. He is whistling to himself. I watch as he takes a barrow load of compost to the heap at the end of the garden, then wheels the empty barrow back. It has a squeaky wheel that shrieks with every turn.

When it is Jonah’s lunchtime, he disappears for a while. Now that I can’t see him I feel even more uncomfortable. Archie is recovering from his poisoning, stretched out on a hot water bottle wrapped in a towel. But Betty is nowhere to be seen.

“Mum, Betty’s missing.”

“She’s probably just wandered off. Cats do.”

“She always comes when I call her.”

“Don’t worry.” Mum looks up from her seedlings and brushes a hand across her forehead, leaving a trail of mud. “Go inside and ask Mercy to make us some tea, hey?”

I go inside and sit, pretending to read, listening out for the sound of Betty coming in through the window. The light goes purple with evening, and cold stars punch holes in the sky.

“She’s still not here, Mum.”

“She’ll be back when she gets hungry.”

I can’t sleep. I am listening for the sound of paws on the windowsill, for a weight on my feet. They do not come. In the morning I am out on the dewy grass before anyone else is awake, calling Betty.

She does not come home that day, or the next. By now Mum and Steve are worried too, and we expand our search to include the neighbours’ houses and the road. Steve sets Jonah to searching as well, and he thrashes the hedges with a stick. He whistles under his breath as he does it.

We find her. A neighbour’s gardener comes running. He has seen a cat in a hedge at the side of the road. It looks like our little katsi.

Betty is limp, her black fur plastered with mud. Her tail is still fluffy, though, and it twitches in greeting.

“Do you know what happened?” Mum asks the gardener who found him.

“It must have been the boys, Medem,” he says. The blacks generally think whites are mad for treating their pets like people, but there is real sorrow in this man’s voice.

We have all seen the gang of local boys, ranging in age from eight to twelve, who wander around our area from time to time: ringing gate bells and running away; vandalising walls and gates; teasing dogs. It seems a logical conclusion. And yet ...

Betty's back is clearly broken. Someone has picked her up and snapped her as you would snap open a cream-of-tartar pod to get at the flesh inside.

I don't know whether to pick her up or leave her lying still. Her nose is dry and coated with mud. She would never put up with being so grubby if she was well. Her pink tongue comes out weakly, *whisk whisk*, tries to clean, but flops back into her mouth.

"Go and get Steve," says Mum. She bends down and picks Betty up. Her little cat mouth opens in a pained triangle, but she makes no noise. "I'll take her to the vet."

Steve is playing tennis across the road. I sprint there with a stitch in my side. He is on the court, in his whites, his fair hair almost invisible like a cobweb bleached out by the sun. I see him as if he is a stranger, just for a moment.

"Steve!" I yell. "Betty's hurt! Come quickly!"

Steve looks embarrassed. I see him glance at the others, who are sitting outside the clubhouse drinking something and laughing loudly.

"Steve!" I say again.

"I'm in the middle of a game."

"But Betty's hurt."

"Go home," he says. "I'll come later."

Someone laughs from the club house. It is probably nothing to do with me, but I turn and run back to the house. My panting becomes sobbing before long.

At home I wait by the dining room window for Mum to come back from the vet's. I can see Jonah working in the rockery. He is smiling, and singing something. All the darkness and fear of this day seems to cluster around him.

He looks up, and I duck my head down and pretend to be reading. When I lift my eyes again, he is still looking at me. He smiles, slowly, and lifts a hand in greeting. He has never done this before. I do not respond, and he turns back to his work, chuckling.

When Mum returns, it is with a cardboard box. I look inside and see limp fur and a paw, pink and dry. Steve is still not home.

We take the box outside, and Mum asks Jonah to dig a hole in one of the flowerbeds. He is still humming something under his breath as he digs.

I watch him as he leans on the spade. Mum lowers the box into the ground, then steps forward and shovels a spadeful of earth into the grave. It hits Betty's fur with a soft patter-patter, like rain. A grain of soil rolls down her face and settles in one pink nostril. I wait for her to twitch, and then remember.

Mum puts her arm around my shoulders, and I do not shrug it off. I look at Jonah, and he looks back at me with nothing behind his eyes. Then he smiles, and fills in the hole.

At night I sit with Archie on my lap, stroking his fur until that familiar blue crackle of static appears. I am on the back doorstep. Across the sea of black grass I can see the lights of the khaya, and hear a faint, tinny radio noise, and the hiss of a shower. I sit and I think about the day.

Jonah comes into the house on the weekend to paint the bedrooms.

“Will you keep an eye on him?” says Mum. It is Saturday, and she and Steve are going to do the groceries. Everything keeps going up in price, so the weekly shop is a long process, as you rummage at the back of the shelves trying to find something that the shop assistant hasn’t noticed. If you’re lucky, you’ll find something with the old price tag on it.

“What am I supposed to do?”

“Just keep an eye,” says Mum.

“What do you think he’s going to do?”

“I don’t know.” Her voice is sharp. “Look, just stay in the house while he’s there, okay? Just in case.”

I think that if Mercy and Jonah were going to steal anything, they would have had ample opportunity while Grandpa was in his dream world after Granny died. And even now Mercy could slip something into the pocket of her apron as she is cleaning. It happens. Theft by servants is a common complaint among the whites, and people almost assume that it is going to happen.

I think of Mercy’s sad eyes. She wouldn’t steal anything. And I don’t think Jonah would either. But an idea has settled under my skin like a putzi fly, coiling and curling.

Mum and Steve are going to a function at the farm that night. Mum needs her gold necklace.

“Steve.” Mum’s voice from the bedroom is distant.

“Ja?”

Mum comes through with a jewellery pouch. She unrolls it and we all stare at its complete lack of jewellery.

“Well, that’s that then,” says Steve. He looks relieved.

I do not hear Steve confronting Jonah. I stay in my room with Archie, listening to the silence and waiting. After a while I hear a door slam.

I hug Mercy when we say goodbye. She is in tears, but her husband is standing straight and ominous beside her. Her cheek feels soft and faintly greasy beside mine, and she smells of fresh laundry and peanut butter.

“Goodbye Jonah,” says Steve. He has a no-hard-feelings voice, and he holds out his hand. If Jonah grasped it, I know that Steve would give him a firm, no-nonsense handshake. Jonah stares at Steve’s hand until he drops it.

“I did not steal from you,” says Jonah as he leaves. He has his arm around Mercy’s waist, and they look small and shabby as they walk out of the iron gates. All their possessions are in one suitcase. It has Grandpa’s name printed on the side – it is the one he used when he first came to Zimbabwe.

Steve snorts. “Typical. Even after the fact.”

I know Jonah did not steal the jewellery. I know because I took it out of the pouch and hid it right at the back of the cupboard, where Mum would not see it. I stroke Archie’s head and bury my nose in the soft fur just behind his ears. Mum will find the jewellery eventually, but Jonah is gone.

He looks back as he shuts the gate behind him, and stares at me. His eyes are completely surrounded by white. He gives me a smile. And then, with a clang, he shuts it, and is gone.

“Good riddance,” says Steve.

I go into the khaya after they have gone. It smells of cooking fires and floor polish. Mercy has scrubbed the red floors so clean that I can see my reflection looking up at me from beyond my feet.

The last time I saw it was years and years ago, when I came to play with the girls. The house looks even smaller empty. Well, almost empty. There is an enamel pot sitting in the dead centre of the kitchen floor, upright. I wonder if they forgot it. Or just left it behind. It looks like an offering.

There is something pale in the dirt outside the khaya, by the gutter. I bend down to pick it up. It is the snapped-off arm of a Barbie, with its disproportionately small hand cupping a handful of dirt on the end of a gleaming tube of pink plastic. Susan’s Barbie. She is in high school now, and probably doesn’t need it.

I carefully scoop out a handful of ground, drop the arm into the hole and cover it up.

Chapter Twenty

After Jonah leaves, we do not search for a new maid and gardener straight away. Instead we live on toast and baked beans for a week, enjoying the peace and quiet. During the day, that is.

The first time I hear someone outside at night, it is just a slight crunch on the gravel. Archie is sleeping on the bed, but there are other cats in our neighbourhood, and cane rats the size of cats that sprint across the garden to their homes in the hedges. I think it must be an animal until I hear another crunch. It sounds measured, deliberate, as if someone is placing their feet very carefully and listening for a response between each one. There is a human mind behind those feet. I am absolutely sure that there is someone outside.

Silence falls again, and I lie in bed and feel stupid for worrying. There is a sort of thrill in the fear, though, now that it has safely passed.

I play a familiar game with myself. I will go to the curtain, count to three and pull it back suddenly. Then when I see nothing, I can relax and go back to sleep. It is better to do it quickly, like ripping off a plaster.

I do not turn on the light, because it will make everything beyond the window an impenetrable wall of black. I slide my feet out of bed and onto the floor, and stand shivering with one hand on the curtains. I can feel the chill from the glass. I count silently, and pull back the curtain with a clatter and ring of runners.

A face flashes into view, so close that if there was no glass I could touch it. I can feel the air rushing up from my lungs, and then I hear my own voice screaming,

slightly muffled by the swoosh of blood pulsing through my ears. The face is gone as quickly as it appeared, and now I can clearly hear footsteps moving away.

Mum and Steve run in. “What the yell?”

Steve has his old school cricket bat. Mum has brought a pillow. I tell them about the face at the window.

“Are you sure?”

“Ja.” This was a flesh-and-blood person, not a tokoloshe or a ghost.

“Oh well.” Steve lowers his bat. “There’s no point calling the police now. He’ll be long gone, whoever he is.”

The next night I hear footsteps again. I run through to Mum and Steve’s room in my pyjamas. This time, Steve goes out into the garden armed with a rifle and a torch. He finds nothing.

This happens every night for a week.

“Probably bluddy Jonah,” says Steve, “Coming to see what else he can steal.”

Once he has said that, I lie rigid in my bed waiting for the footsteps. Of course. It must be Jonah. He must know what I did. He is coming back to find me. I can’t sleep, and in the mornings I am grey and limp.

“What’s wrong with you?” says Mum, laying a cool hand on my forehead.

“Nothing.”

“These prowlers getting to you?”

“Ja, a bit.”

“Don’t worry,” says Mum, and ruffles my hair.

I try to remember if it was Jonah’s face I saw on the other side of the glass. It didn’t look like him at the time, but I wasn’t wearing my glasses and I was half-asleep. I imagine him coming into my room with his angular face and angry stare. I wake Mum up with my screams the next time we hear the footsteps.

“For god’s sake,” she says, “This is getting bluddy ridiculous.”

“What do you expect me to do?” says Steve. “Call the police? They’re worse than useless. I can handle them.”

Mum and I don’t trust Steve’s cricket bat and ancient rifle as much as he does. Oliver moves in with us for a few days to provide some added protection.

On the first night of Oliver’s stay, I wake up to the sound of shouting.

“A burglar!” I hear Mum shout.

I can hear bumping and banging from the study. Steve runs down the corridor in his slippers and boxer shorts. Oliver wakes up in the spare room and charges down the corridor as well, ululating. I poke my head out of the door at just the wrong moment and see that Oliver is completely naked. Mum is pursuing him with Steve’s ratty dressing gown.

There are so many of us now that I am not afraid of the burglar, and so I follow them. When we arrive in the study, it is a rather pathetic crime scene. The window is open, the computer is gone, and there is a perfect, red-dust shoe-print on the windowsill. The raw-onion smell of body odour hovers in the air.

“Agh, hell,” says Steve.

“I’ll get the bugger,” says Oliver, now wearing the dressing gown, and runs to the back door. It is locked with a complicated array of bolts and padlocks, though, so it takes him a while to open it.

Steve calls the police. Oliver returns from outside. “Couldn’t find anyone. I think he’s buggered off.”

Mum puts the kettle on and brews a pot of tea. We sit in the kitchen sipping it while we wait for Steve to finish on the phone with the police.

Steve comes in, jingling his car keys.

“What the bloody yell are you doing?” says Mum.

“The police don’t have a car available,” says Steve. “I’m going to pick them up?”

“You’re going to pick them up?” Mum repeats. She gives a snort of laughter.

“Back soon,” says Steve. Oliver gets up to go with him, but Steve waves him back down into his chair. “You stay here and look after the girls.”

And so the three of us sit and drink our tea. When we have finished, Mum pours us all another cup. It is from the bottom of the pot and tastes like tar. When we have finished that cup and are staring at the dregs, we hear Steve’s car in the driveway.

“About bloody time,” says Mum.

Steve comes in, followed by two policemen. One is obviously more senior. He is smiling, obsequious. His eyes slide around our faces, never quite landing on our eyes.

Steve takes them into the study. There are three policemen in all. They stand looking at the footprint making concerned noises.

“Eh-eh.”

“Oh-oh.”

One makes a few desultory notes. Steve is red-faced and desperate.

“Pointless,” says Mum under her breath. “The police are worse than the criminals.”

I don’t know if it’s just because she says this, but it seems to me that one of the policemen is eyeing our television in a suspicious way.

They accept tea from us. Mum has learned that this is the best way to get help from any sort of official figure. She even brings out the best biscuits. They sit and drink their tea, smiling at us, and then leave. Apparently one of their colleagues can pick them up now.

“Good night Baas, good night Medem.”

“Useless,” says Mum after they’ve gone. “Oh well.”

“Ja, well hopefully it gave the burglar a fright, if he’s still somewhere around,” says Steve.

Mum shrugged. “So why did it take you so long to get back?”

“The police station was empty.”

“The one you called?”

“Ja. All the lights were off.”

“So where the yell ...”

“Well, I thought they must have gone home or something so I drove to another police station and couldn’t find anyone there, either. Then on the way back I spotted a couple of them drinking a scud outside the shopping centre.”

“You picked them up from the shopping centre?” I say.

“Ja. Not like they were doing anything. Poor buggers,” says Steve. “You can’t blame them half the bloody time.”

The next morning, we examine the scene more closely.

“Shouldn’t we leave it for the police?” I say.

Mum snorts. “No.”

“But there might be fingerprints.”

“They won’t bother with fingerprints. Come on.” Mum studies the window. “It was Jonah,” she says.

“Effing kaffir!” shouts Steve. He actually shouts ‘effing’ instead of the real word. I think that if there was ever a time to use the real word, this would be it.

“Steve!” Mum shushes him. “You can’t say that.”

“Yes I bloody can.”

“How do you know?” I ask.

Mum fiddles with the window catch. “This was painted over. We never opened the window. But someone has chiselled the paint away and worked it loose. You could only do it from inside.”

Mum and I are not particularly surprised. It is what you expect from your servants – except Clever. Somehow Clever was different. But even Beauty used to take little bits and pieces from the kitchen.

“Shit!” Steve kicks the doorframe. He is very worked up. “I’m going to find him,” he says. “I’m going to track the bugger down.”

“Ja, you’ll get your pack of dogs and track him across the Bush,” says Mum.

“This isn’t bluddy Rhodesia, you know.”

“I’ve got my rifle.”

“Ja, and your father’s bayonets. So?”

Steve subsides. “Would be more trouble than it’s bluddy worth, anyway,” he says.

The police do not get in contact with us again. We did not expect them to. Mum superstitiously refuses to clean the footprint away, in case we ever find Jonah again. After a few weeks I don’t even notice it.

Even though Steve consults the neighbourhood Jungle Drums, he cannot find Jonah. No one seems to know where he has gone. I worry about Mercy, with her sad eyes, but there is nothing I can do.

“Good riddance to bad rubbish,” says Steve. He glances at Grandpa’s sculpture uneasily.

We get a panic button installed. It is big and red, as you would expect a panic button to be, and we put it on the wall just below the intercom. Steve instructs Mum and me in its use.

“What’s to teach?” says Mum. “You just press it.”

“Ja,” says Steve, “but there is a code to type in to cancel it.” He shows us. If we set off the panic alarm, the armed response unit will phone us. If we answer the phone and give the five-digit code, they will cancel the response. If we give the wrong code, or the phone rings and we do not answer it, they will send a team of men to the house.

“Better than the bloody police,” says Steve with satisfaction.

The next time we think we hear a prowler, Mum presses the panic button and the alarm goes off. Steve runs outside with one of the old guns and a torch to check the garden.

“No one there. Or he ran off,” he says.

We watch the phone for a while, waiting for it to ring.

“Should I call them?” says Mum, worried.

“Nah, they’ll call,” says Steve.

We wait a little longer.

“Something must be wrong with the transmission,” says Steve. “I’ll call them in the morning and get someone to fix it.”

We go to bed.

Not long after I fall asleep, I am woken up by shouts and barking dogs.

Something bright is shining through my window, and I can hear Steve saying “Shit, shit, shit.”

I put on my glasses and look out the window. About a dozen black men in uniform are standing there shining huge torches at the house. One of them has a megaphone. One of them is holding the leash of a snarling Alsatian. Behind them, our front gate is hanging off its hinges.

Steve appears in his dressing gown and slippers. He waves at the men, and I can see him gesturing and explaining. The men look grim.

Mum has appeared behind me at the window.

“They look angry,” I say.

“Ja.” She watches Steve. “Apparently they might fine us for a call-out.”

“Are they allowed to do that?”

“It doesn’t really matter if they’re allowed to. They can.” Mum leans past me and reaches in past the burglar bars to open up the window.

“Hello, guys,” she shouts, cutting Steve off. “We’re really sorry you came out here for a false alarm. Would you like some beers?”

A few smiles appear.

“Come round to the back,” says Mum. She shuts the window and pulls her dressing gown closer around her.

“It’s two in the morning,” I say.

“Ja, well, better than having to pay a thousand-dollar bribe,” says Mum. “Come on. You want a beer?”

I sit on the back doorstep of the kitchen sipping a Castle Lager while the men sprawl on the dew-soaked grass and laugh and chat. Mum and Steve are standing in the kitchen, also drinking beers. There is a festive atmosphere.

“Sorry again for calling you out,” says Mum.

“Eh-eh, don’t worry,” says one of the men, waving his hand. “It was a mistake.”

“Well, at least we know it works,” says Mum.

We start searching for a new gardener and maid.

“Why not try and get in touch with Clever?” Mum suggests.

Steve goes to visit Clever at his new house. I go with him. I am eager to see Clever again.

“Do you think he’ll come back?” I ask. I remember his patient hand on the seat of my bicycle as I learned to ride, and the book sticking out of his overalls pocket.

“Ja. Well, I hope so. We have to make him an offer he can’t refuse, hey?” says Steve, and winks.

We pull up at the house. We couldn’t phone and speak to Clever’s employer, because that would be underhanded, Steve says. Instead we wait outside for Clever to come out on his lunch break, which I think is pretty underhanded anyway. I don’t know how long we will have to wait.

Steve gets out of the car. “Wait here,” he says. I sit watching the plastic on the dashboard go soft in the hot sun.

I feel like I am waiting to see someone I love. I suppose I do love him. He is like an uncle, or a much older brother. It seems strange that I didn’t even try to keep in touch by taking his address, but there are different rules for servants, I think. Once they are gone, they are gone. It would be strange to consider him a friend.

Steve returns, looking smug. “I’ve alerted the media,” he says.

I am puzzled until I see a gardener from a neighbouring house go through the gate. In a few minutes he emerges and comes to the car. He has a bright white grin on his face. Steve rolls down the window.

“Ja?”

“Sah, there is no Clever here.”

“No Clever?”

“No, Sah.”

“Oh.” Steve pushes his sunglasses back on his head. “Where is he?”

“The new gardener says Clever has gone to school.”

“To school?”

“Yes, Sah.” The neighbouring gardener gives a funny half-salute and lopes back to his house, still grinning.

“Gone to school,” says Steve. “Well, that’s just sod’s law, isn’t it.”

I am glad Clever has gone to school. I wonder where he is, and what he is studying. But I also feel sad, and I feel selfish for being sad, and for wanting him to go on being a servant and stand in front of our kitchen sink smiling at me with kind eyes.

We start looking for new servants. Somehow the word gets out before we officially announce it – “Jungle Drums,” says Steve again – and applicants come to our door.

We like Saru at once. Her full name is Sarudzai, but the whites find this too hard to pronounce, so she is Saru or Sally. She is a round, cosy woman with a big smile and a wide repertoire of recipes.

“I want to marry her,” says Steve when he hears she can make Yorkshire puddings.

Our new gardener is a young man from the Eastern Highlands who has come to Harare to make his fortune. His name is Tatenda, and he is a goatherd.

“You realise we don’t have any goats,” says Steve.

“Yes, Baas.”

He is bright-eyed and smiling, and very new to city life. He tells us about the nice man he met who said he would get him a driver's licence without the need to take the test. Tatenda gave the man money and his identification, and the man disappeared, "to get the licence." Tatenda waited for hours, but the man did not return.

"He must have got lost," he says.

Steve and Mum exchange glances.

After we have hired both Saru and Tatenda, Steve hangs a sign on the gate: "Hapana Basa". No work. Signs you see all around town these days.

Chapter Twenty-one

There is a pothole in the road outside our house that is getting bigger and bigger. Steve talks about it almost every day.

“Sunshine City my ... foot,” he says, changing his mind when he sees Mum is glaring at him. “Whole place is going to pot.”

“Pothole,” says Mum, and they snigger a little.

All the roads are full of holes now, and I have got used to swerving around them when I go out on my bike. The city is fraying around the edges, and everyone is on strike. Like the rubbish men. For a week the whole city smells like rotten vegetables. And the rumblings about land invasions haven't gone away as Steve predicted – if anything, they've grown stronger.

We see the people called ‘War Vets’ every night on the news. They are meant to be veterans of the war for independence, except some of them are too young to have fought in the war. I ask Steve about this and he doesn't say anything, but I can tell that he has plenty of thoughts on the matter.

Although I know that things are going very wrong, there is excitement in the air as well as tension. There is a strange thrill in hearing the bad news, a sense of drama. Something has woken that has been sleeping for a long time. Steve would say it has been sleeping since the last war. But whatever it is, I can hear it circling the house at night and breathing in my ear while I sleep.

Kids start to vanish from the school, pulled out to go overseas. They leave without any warning, usually. The rest of us are trying to study for our exams, but it is difficult to concentrate. I find that my mind skitters like a flying ant, landing on something and then jumping somewhere else, leaving barely a footprint. I have to read the first line of a book several times before the meaning sinks in. Everyone else seems to have the same problem, even the teachers, and our lessons are disconnected and strange. When they happen at all.

Farai and I are lying on a blanket in the garden, talking. A storm is roiling up, eating the blue sky and moving towards the city. Clouds are piled like pillows to the east, and the air smells of metal.

“I’m trying to concentrate on my bluddy exams,” says Farai. “But some days the teachers don’t even turn up.” She is angry rather than concerned, and uproots grass in great green tufts as she talks. “All this political stuff is a pain. I just want to get into a good university.”

“So you can become an executive,” I supply.

“Ja. And have a corner office with a view.”

“And a secretary who has a secretary.”

“Exactly, sha.”

“Ja, Mugabe’s awful,” I say to Farai. I wait for her to join in. This is a familiar and much-loved game.

She pauses, then makes a non-committal noise.

“Don’t you think?” I say.

“Ja, well.” Farai doesn’t meet my eyes. “He wasn’t so bad in the beginning, you know?”

“He’s always been bad,” I say. I don’t know a lot about what happened when Mugabe came to power, but my voice comes out louder than I had intended and so I sound sure.

“So what?” says Farai. “You think you guys should still be running the show?”

“What do you mean ‘you guys’?” I ask. It takes me a moment to realise what she means. “You mean whites?”

“That bastard Smith,” she says. “Mugabe may be a dickhead, but at least he’s our dickhead.”

I laugh, but it comes out sounding not like a laugh at all. “You don’t think he’s doing a good job?”

“No, but I’d rather have him doing a bad job than some White doing any kind of job.”

“Some White?” The word has acquired a capital letter. I am suddenly very aware of Farai’s otherness – the way her skin is coloured and oiled differently to mine; the way her hair grows out of her head; the shapes and curves of her face. Her eyes look exotic and very, very dark. Looking into them I see no reflection of me at all.

We stare at each other for a moment, and I back down. “Sure,” I say, and “Okay.”

We start talking about school and exams and friends again, but something has changed. The air between us is a different colour.

Mr Cooper sends us a guard. I don't know anything about it until I see some of the farm workers building a guard hut by our gate.

"What's going on?" I ask Mum.

"It's for the guard," she says.

"What guard?"

"Our guard."

For a moment I think about Cephas, back at the Flats. I wonder what happened to him and his new wife. "When did we get a guard?"

"Mr Cooper gave him to us."

I feel something press at the back of my eyes, like the beginning of a headache before a storm. Mr Cooper hears things we don't. He talks to the farm workers. He knows about things before they happen.

"Why?"

"He just wants us to be safe." Mum smiles at me with just her mouth, not her eyes.

The guard who arrives that night will not be with us for long. He comes from a company that rotates its employees on a weekly basis. He seems nice enough, though.

I lie awake that night listening to the guard walking around the property. The crunch of gravel, the crack of twigs in the grass, a cough. And then again, crunch, crack, cough, around and around. Every time I drop off to sleep I hear a noise and jerk awake, my heart leaping in my ribs, until I remember that we have a guard and it is not another burglar or prowler. When I wake up in the early hours of the morning, as I have started

doing, I look out the window and see the quick orange flare of a cigarette from the guard hut. I find the small flame comforting.

Mr Cooper also sends us a parrot. Pedro.

“It’s an African Grey,” says Steve. He plans to look after the bird himself, but the parrot hates all men, including Steve, and has a vicious hooked beak that can tear off a sizeable piece of finger. With me, however, he flirts and croons, closing his eyes and inclining his head so I can scratch it.

Pedro has picked up all sorts of foul language from the farm, and shouts it across our garden. He knows swear words in Shona, English and Kitchen Kaffir, and he likes to use them when we have guests out on the verandah.

“Bluddy munts!” he shouts as Tatenda walks past. “Voertsek!” he yells at the chickens when they come too close.

He soon learns how to call Tatenda in Steve’s voice.

“Tatenda! Tah-TEN-dah!” he shouts, sounding irritable. When Tatenda comes running, he collapses into cackles and claws the air with one foot.

He also learns how to imitate the phone. I run to answer it only to hear the ringing stop and Pedro’s voice say “Hello-o?” in a singsong three-note call.

He calls the chickens with the special, clicking call that Saru makes when she feeds them. They cluster around the base of his cage and stare up at him with beady, accusing eyes while he struts on his perch and rings his bells.

“Why did Mr Cooper give him away?” I ask Mum. I know that African Greys are extremely valuable, especially on the black market, and sell for thousands of dollars.

“Because he doesn’t know when to shut up,” says Mum.

“He was annoying Mr Cooper?”

“No. But he can’t have a parrot shouting out words like that where the workers and servants can hear. Not now.”

I wonder how the parrot learned those words to begin with. I have certainly never heard Mr Cooper use them, but Pedro must have picked them up from somewhere.

“Can I spend the night at Farai’s house on Saturday?” I ask Mum.

“No,” she says.

“Why not?” I am all ready to argue.

“Lucy is coming to stay,” says Mum.

“What?”

The world seems to shift and the shadows change as if the sun has suddenly jerked out of position. Then it rearranges itself, almost the same but not quite.

I haven’t even been allowed to talk about Lucy before, not for years, and now she is visiting our house. There has been no warning at all. I look at Steve. His lips are pressed tightly together as if he is trying not to say something.

“When?” I ask.

“Tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?” I repeat. I am not sure how I feel about this. Lucy and I haven’t seen each other for years.

“Where is she sleeping? I’m not sharing,” I say.

“She’s sleeping in the spare room.”

Mum is looking at me with her face all bright and alive. I can see her willing me to be excited, but I'm not sure how I feel yet.

"But, why ..." I begin.

"Why what?" asks Mum quickly.

"I wasn't meant to talk about her, even ..."

"Nonsense," says Steve. "No one said that."

"But ..."

"Of course you're allowed to talk about her," says Mum.

They have come to some sort of strange agreement.

"Is Dad ..." I start, and then stop.

"No," says Steve.

"He's dropping her off," says Mum.

I think about asking if I can see Dad. I don't know if I would even recognise him. I remember things like his moustache, and the story he used to tell about being attacked by a swan in England, and the way he would sit with his legs crossed and his slop hanging off one foot, and the medallion he wore, but I can't piece these things together into a neatly framed picture.

"Think of her as a cousin," says Mum.

"Okay."

"I have a letter for you."

"A letter?"

Mum hands me a pink envelope. It has a My Little Pony in the corner, and a smiley face drawn over the seal.

“Who’s it from?”

“It’s from Lucy.”

Mum and Steve stand there as if they are waiting for me to open the envelope now.

“Oh.” I let the hand holding the envelope fall by my side. “Can I go outside now?”

“Of course,” says Mum, but she looks disappointed. I see her eyes flick down to the letter, then up again.

I go outside and sit on the tyre swing. Tatenda is whistling as he works in the rockery nearby.

“Hi, Tatenda,” I say.

“Hello.” He grins, showing a mouth full of teeth yellow as lemon rind.

I open Lucy’s letter. It is covered in glitter and little drawings, and there are lots of exclamation marks. There is also a photo. I examine it. It looks like someone has taken a picture of me and pulled and prodded it until it is just slightly different. Her eyes are bluer than mine, her face is rounder. There is a ‘Best Sister in the World’ badge in the envelope as well. I turn it around in my fingers. It feels cold.

“Hi Sis!” the letter begins. It rambles through what Lucy is up to now, what she’s doing at school, and her horse-riding lessons. It finishes, “Can’t wait to see ya!!” She writes her name with a big loop on the capital L and the Y, and follows it with a line of XXOXXOOXX, like a manic game of noughts and crosses.

“You have a letter from your boyfriend?” says Tatenda.

“No.”

He is still looking at me with a grin on his face.

“From my sister,” I say.

“You have a sister?”

I am silent.

“I have four sisters,” says Tatenda. He shakes his head sadly and gets back to his work. Evidently having four sisters is a hardship.

“I only have one,” I say, but quietly. I spin on the swing so that the rope gets twisted round, and then let it unwind. The garden turns into streaks speeding past me. Green, green, the orange of Tatenda’s overalls, green, green, orange.

Lucy arrives while I am still at school. When I come home she is sitting on the back step of the kitchen door, my favourite spot. She looks bigger than I thought she would. She is wearing dungarees and a pink shirt. Archie is pressing his head against her side.

“Hello.”

“Hello.”

She has a pudding-bowl of dark brown hair, like mine, and Siamese-cat-blue eyes. She is prettier than me, with pinchable cheeks and a round face.

I don’t know what to say. I have missed you. I wish you weren’t here.

“Where’s Dad?” I say instead.

“He dropped me off then went to stay with a friend.”

My stomach growls as if I am hungry, but I'm not. Dad was here. He didn't wait to see me.

"Is that my shirt?" I say.

"Ja. Mine got dirty when I was playing in the garden." Her voice is so much older than I remember. The picture of the little Lucy I have been carrying in my head flutters and is gone.

The day is strange. All the plants in the garden look like they are subtly different colours. Lucy sits with Mum and chatters. I wonder what she is thinking. Her face is so open and so sunny that I can't imagine her harbouring any resentment. But she must also think this is strange. She must have thought all kinds of things over the years.

I do not ask. I watch them, until Mum hisses at me to "join in, make her feel welcome," and then I try to do that. And when I can't do that any longer, I go to bed – earlier than I have since I was very small.

I wake up and hear Lucy laughing with Mum in the kitchen. I don't want to get up. I lie there watching the light change on the ceiling and listening to the wind chimes. A flock of birds flies past the sun and I can see them flapping shadow-coloured on my wall.

After a while, I look at the clock. It is half past eight. I never lie in this late, but I don't want to get up.

Mum opens the door. "Come on, sleepyhead. We've made pancakes."

I can smell them. I can hear Steve talking now. He is talking to Lucy. I can't imagine him talking to Lucy. I feel like they should be separated by something impenetrable, like a force field that bounces sound away so they are just mouthing silently at each other.

I climb out of bed and put on my dressing gown. Everyone is sitting at the dining room table. Lucy's face is round and shiny like an apple, and there is a smear of batter on her forehead. We sit pouring golden loops of syrup onto the pancakes and talking normally, as if nothing at all is out of the ordinary.

Steve's face looks fat with smiles. He has a special voice on when he talks to Lucy, like someone on television doing an interview. I find it very hard to talk to Lucy. When she says something to me I can feel my face numbing into a mask as I mumble back. I try to pull my cheeks up into a believable smile and put some kind of warmth in my expression, but it doesn't work. My hands seem twice as big as normal, as if I am wearing big fleshy oven gloves. I can't be kind, I have tried. I can't touch her at all without feeling my body straining away in the opposite direction, and when I ask her a question I have to remember to raise my voice at the end and not speak the whole thing in a monotone.

Mum is talking to me.

"Sorry?"

"We're going to go shopping this morning, and have lunch out."

"Oh." I know I sound sulky, but I can't control it. "Okay."

Lucy and Mum are looking at me expectantly. I don't know what to do with my face.

We go shopping in town. Mum buys Lucy all kinds of clothes, and makes her try everything on. She fusses over her. I walk a few steps behind, watching. I wonder if Mum is swapping us over. Perhaps it is Dad's turn to have me, and she will have Lucy. Mum spends a lot of money. She keeps touching Lucy – stroking her hair, brushing her arm, letting her hand rest on her back as they walk.

Mum leaves us alone. I concentrate on sucking the last few drops out of my milkshake. Lucy is folding up the paper her straw came in.

“Look,” she says when she finishes. She has made it into a concertina shape. When she flicks it with a fingernail, it pops out and inflates into a long worm of paper.

“Cool,” I say.

“So what do you like doing?” Lucy asks awkwardly.

“I like reading.”

“Do you like living in the city?”

“Yes.”

“I like the country better.”

I have found a way to hurt her. I don't know why I want to. It is like that mad urge to hit a small animal when it is trusting in your arms. You would never normally give in to it, but I do.

“The country's stupid,” I say. “I'd hate to live there.”

“But you loved Chinhoyi.”

“I didn't. Anyway, I like it better here. There's nothing to do out there.”

“There's the horses, and the Bush.”

“*Ja*, well, that stuff’s for kids. I grew up.”

“Oh.” Lucy plays with the chips on her plate.

I want to ask her about Beauty, and whether she’s heard from her. I want to ask her about Dad, and say isn’t it awful how we haven’t seen each other for so long. I want to ask her how things are going. But I don’t. And some hidden part of me, the part that wants to shut her out and send her back home, is glad.

Lucy leaves that evening.

“That was nice, wasn’t it,” says Steve, and I want to hit him. He is smiling as if he has done something great, like he does when he brings home a present for Mum or takes us out for dinner, as if this weekend was one big treat for his two girls.

“Wasn’t it?” he says again.

I force my neck to nod my head.

“We’ll have to do it again,” he says, as if he hasn’t stopped me and Mum seeing Lucy for years and years. I think he is surprised that Lucy is just a little girl, who likes helping with the baking and playing on the swing. I can’t bear the way he is so smug about it now, so secure and sure that he has done the right thing.

It worked, what they did all those years ago. We are neatly severed, Lucy and I, right down the middle. I don’t know what I expected to happen when I saw her again, but it wasn’t this.

“Why did you ask her to come?” I ask Mum.

Mum has a smile all ready to jump on her face, but something in my expression stops it.

“I thought it might be our last chance before they go,” she says. And she will not tell me where they are going, or why.

I hear Mum and Steve arguing in their bedroom when I am supposed to be asleep. “Why did you make me leave one behind?” Mum is saying. Her voice is high and childish.

What if she doesn't think she chose the right one?

Mum shuts herself in her room for a while.

I get out the letter Lucy wrote me and look at it again. I see wistfulness in it now, and I notice the way the letters slope backwards like sad pairs of eyebrows. The phrases that annoyed me at first (“Can't wait to see ya!! Kisses!!”) now seem brave, the exclamation marks little waving flags.

As soon as the visit is over it is forgotten. We do not sit at the dinner table saying, “Remember when Lucy was here?” or chuckling over jokes we made all together. It just slides away like scenery from a car window, glimpsed in a second and then gone so far behind that you cannot see it even if you crane your neck over your shoulder to look.

Chapter Twenty-two

After Lucy has gone, I find that my head is filling up with memories of Chinhoyi, so much that it feels more real than real life. Snatches of memory take me prisoner at peculiar times. We can be watching War Vets shouting and gesturing on the news, and I will suddenly be chasing the farm workers' scraggly rooster through Auntie Mary and Uncle Pieter's farm, or running with Lucy through the sprinklers in our old garden. I call Saru 'Beauty' and Tatenda 'Maxwell.'

"Are you all right?" Mum asks me over breakfast. She has not mentioned Lucy's visit since she left.

"Ja, I'm fine."

"You seem funny."

"I'm fine."

I watch Steve as he eats his toast. I watch him slowly chewing it, staring into space, taking a sip of his tea now and then. The longer I look, the angrier I feel. I can see every line on his face, the tiny hairs in his nose, and these things make me angrier and angrier until I have to push back my chair and stand up.

"Ask if you can be excused," says Mum.

"Please can I be excused."

"What's the bloody matter?" says Steve. I don't want to look at him. I go to my room.

Mum said it was the last chance for us to see Lucy before they go. Where are they going? I don't feel like I can ask Mum. It feels like we have all silently agreed not to mention Lucy's visit.

It has never occurred to me before that I could get back in touch with Dad and Lucy. It felt like moving house and leaving the servants behind – once you leave, they don't exist. Now I realise that, all this time, they have carried on living. Walking to the corner shop for Penny Cools and wems. Playing with Poppy. Without me. And now they are in Bulawayo, and Mum must have a way to contact them.

I get Mum's phone book and look for Dad's name. I do not find it in the alphabetical section, but when I turn to the inside back cover I find it pencilled in the corner, as if she scribbled it down during a phone conversation and never copied it out neatly.

I dial the number. I hear three rising tones. Bing bing bong. Over and over again. The phone number doesn't exist. I sit there listening to the tone for a long time.

These days, Mum and Steve are always talking about the points we need to go overseas. They spend hours adding up points for their degrees, their years of experience and the amount of money they have. I don't have any points, because I am a Dependent. It turns out that Mum has hardly any points, either. Steve does. Steve is our only key to Overseas, and he is the one of us who least wants to go.

After one morning of adding up the numbers, Mum comes through to my room and tells me that I am moving schools.

“Why?”

“So you’ll have a better chance of getting into schools Overseas.”

And that is that. I am not heartbroken to leave my current school. The only person I will miss is Farai, and we can still see each other after school and on weekends.

“So you’re going to the Convent?” says Mrs Starling when I tell her I am leaving. “I went there.”

“Oh.” I am surprised.

“I hated it,” she says. She blows a stream of thoughtful smoke in my face.

“You’ll probably love it, though.”

The Convent is in the centre of town, behind a tall red-brick wall. Outside there are cars, beggars, fruit stalls, pickpockets, everything you would normally find on the streets of Harare, but inside the walls the buildings have a calm, gracious air. Girls in uniform walk in snaking lines, two-by-two, wearing long skirts and straw boaters.

. It is run by an order of German nuns, all very old, with accents straight from a black and white film.

“Don’t mention the war,” says Steve, and snorts.

I meet the headmistress. She is tall and teetering on skinny legs, with a long, horsy face. She is very old.

“We believe in discipline,” she says.

She smells of mothballs and chalk. She takes me to my classroom, one hand resting on my shoulder. It is uncomfortably bony, and one of her nails is digging into the skin of my neck.

The whole school is female, of course, and the difference it makes is hard to define. I have never had male friends at school, and I am more relieved than anything to be taken away from the boys in my class, but Convent girls have a fearsome reputation. They wear lacy underwear under their uniforms, and tattoo boys' names in biro on their pencil cases and the underside of their blazers. On the rare occasions that someone's brother comes to the school, all work stops as we rush to the windows.

“You know Mugabe's daughter goes there,” says Farai when I call her to tell her the news.

“No. Really?”

“Ja.”

I'm not sure if this is protection or a threat. I suppose it depends on who manages to break through the gate first.

We have a Religious Studies class every day, which opens with a prayer. The classes are very dull. I have started drawing a comic I call Super Nun, which I circulate through the class when things get boring. It is about a nun with super powers who fights crime, and is not very well drawn, but it has earned me some popularity and so is worth the risk of getting caught.

I carefully fold up the bit of paper and pass it across the aisle. We have started packing up our books ready for the next class, but Schwester Cordialis spots me.

“What is the joke?”

“What?”

“There is obviously something funny about that piece of paper. Read it out so the whole class can enjoy it. Go on, stand up.”

Everyone is quiet now, and has stopped shuffling their books. I stand up. I wonder if I can possibly chew and swallow the piece of paper before she comes over. Perhaps that will just cause more trouble. If they search my desk or my bag they will find all the Super Nun comics.

“Are you going to read it out?”

I shake my head. Maybe she will just make me put it in the bin.

“Bring it up here.”

“Ve haff vays of making you talk,” murmurs one of the girls as I stand up.

The teacher for the next class is hovering outside the door. Everyone is watching me. I am deeply envious of them, occupying bodies that are not mine, safe and smug in their desks.

I make my way through the desks to the front. I wonder what would happen if I ran out the door.

“Is this it?”

“Yes.”

The nun reads it. Her lips compress into a pursed, pious line. I wish I had swallowed the note.

“I am very disappointed in you.” She folds up the paper and gives it back to me. “And in Religious Studies class too.”

I hate Religious Studies class, but saying this will not help my case.

“Take this to the Discipline Mistress,” she says.

The Discipline Mistress moves her lips as she reads.

“Why did you do this?”

“I was bored.”

“Bored.” She crumples up the note in her hand. “And you drew this in Religious Studies class?” Her contempt makes me want to take my glasses off so I cannot see anything. I am sentenced to a month’s Manual Labour, which means I have to clean the sinks and brushes in the art room and scrub the toilets in our block.

The fact that it was an offence in Religious Studies class makes me a pariah. All the teachers hear about it. The demand for Super Nun comics dries up, and I am no longer a teacher’s pet. Conversely, though, I have gained a reputation as a bit of a troublemaker, and therefore become more popular. I decide it is a good trade.

The school is meant to be full of the ghosts of dead nuns. I wonder how their wan, veiled forms fare when they run into a tokoloshe or zombie spirit. Surely all these spirits must exist in the same, strange parallel world? Or perhaps they are divided by something as effective as the big stone wall that separates the Convent from the street vendors, beggars and thieves just outside our gates. If we living whites don’t belong here, the dead whites must have an even harder time of it. After all, they can never leave.

I have only one encounter with a ghost. I am in the props room, below the stage. The room is cold, and cluttered with old masks, costumes and fake swords.

When I reach the bottom of the stairs, I hear breathing. Rasping, laboured breaths, with a rattle behind them. I know what it is straight away. I don't fool myself with excuses of rusty pipes, the wind, or the 'building settling.' I know what it is.

"Who's there?"

Nothing speaks. The air in the room thickens, and everything is haloed with a faint blue line. Something brushes past my face. It smells of old books, closed rooms and stale old-lady breath. It does not scare me. This insipid spectre with its loud breathing and grasping hands is a pale nothing compared to the full-blooded reality of a tokoloshe or muroyi. I brush it aside with one hand as I would brush aside a mosquito.

"Poor ghost," I say loudly. "Forced to stay down here. I bet the Shona ghosts would beat you up if you went outside."

Poor old nun. Maybe she is still trying to convert them somehow. Blowing the Shona ghosts towards God with her dead old-lady breath. She doesn't stand a chance. I leave her down there, taking the props I need. I will not visit, either. If she wants to stay down there and breathe on visitors, let her.

I tell my classmates about the encounter. Most are sceptical.

"You would have been scared," says one. "You would have wet yourself."

I shrug.

When I arrive at school in the mornings, I have to walk through a small crowd of beggars and con-men. There is one black man who stands there every morning and tells people that he is trying to get to his family in Dizvarasekwa, but has lost his bus fare. He is very convincing, wringing his hands and squeezing tears out of his crinkled eyes. Mum fell for

it on my first day at school, and gave him some money for the bus. Then we saw him there the next day. And the next.

“Well, at least he’s enterprising,” says Mum, who doesn’t begrudge him the money. “He made up a good story. It’s better than just sticking your plate in someone’s face and saying ‘no legs, no food’.”

Mum does not have much patience with street kids and beggars. She says that the street kids will be forced to give any money they earn to their pimp, and anything left over will go to buy glue. When they crowd up to our window at traffic lights she presses the button to roll the window up, and we sit there in silence and sweltering, smelly heat until the light goes green again. Once a beggar chased us for almost two blocks from the intersection, shaking his fist.

“What does he want?” Mum wondered. Then she noticed that she had shut his begging bowl in the window.

We sit in the courtyard to eat our lunch. We are not allowed to go outside the school gates onto the street, but we do it almost every day anyway. There are always two ice cream men out there, waiting for girls in uniform to sneak out, buy an ice lolly and sprint back before anyone notices. The guard at the gate is meant to prevent these raiding parties coming through, but he will turn a blind eye if you smile at him nicely and give him a few dollars now and then.

Today we are surprised by a brown head appearing above the wall. It is a boy, with the white crust at the edge of his lips that so many street kids get, from heat and the lack of fresh water. His hair is rusty from malnutrition.

“I love you! Want for sex?” he yells. He does not wait for an answer, but disappears behind the wall again, and we can hear him cackling with his friends.

We shift uncomfortably, not sure whether to laugh. I feel hot and overdressed in my uniform, with its heavy blazer and woollen socks. It is a uniform designed for a different country, as all the private school uniforms are.

Going to school in the middle of the city is a mixed blessing. Riots are great when the news predicts them the night before and we don't have to go to school, but when they suddenly boil up in the middle of the day, we are trapped. We are not allowed to go anywhere near the walls in case someone throws something over – a bottle? A fiery stick? A hapless passer-by? – so we stay in our classroom, sitting on the floor and picking at loose fluff on the carpet. Our parents can't drive through town to pick us up.

One day we get a bomb threat at the school. There have been bombs going off in some buildings around the city – they sound dull and thudding from where we are – and the sirens wail all day. Whether they are police sirens, ambulance sirens or Bob and the Wailers, we don't know.

Someone calls the school anonymously to say they have planted a bomb somewhere on the property. We are taken out of our classrooms and marched over to the old boarders' hostel. It is a creepy place, cold even in summer, with creaking wooden stairs and beds that are no longer slept in now the Convent is a day school. We climb to the very highest floor, which has a view over the whole city. Looking down, I can see buildings bleached white in the sun and purple jacaranda flowers coating the streets like spilled paint.

“Why are we up here?” I whisper to one of the girls.

She shrugs and widens her eyes, but doesn’t say anything.

I think it is ridiculous to come to the highest floor of the highest building if there is meant to be a bomb in the school. But I don’t say anything, either. Instead, I sit on the rough carpet with the other girls and work on that night’s homework while a nun watches over us.

The police arrive after an hour has passed. I am getting carpet burn just from sitting still, and so I stand up to look out of the window. The nun tells me to sit back down, but not before I see a policeman poking half-heartedly in a bush with a long stick. I don’t have much faith in their bomb-finding or defusing abilities.

We are there for five hours before the police tell us there is no bomb. We troop back down in two long lines, and it is time to go home.

Mum is waiting in the car outside the school gates.

“Hi. How was your day?”

“There was a bomb threat and we spent the whole day on the top floor doing our homework.”

“Shit, man.” Mum starts the car. “I don’t know what we’re paying these bluddy school fees for.”

Farai has been moved to another school as well, for the same reasons that I moved.

Everything is about points, Plan Bs, contingencies.

I go to Farai’s school sports day, wearing my Oliver Mtukudzi vest over a long-sleeved shirt and baggy jeans. I have a beanie on my head and wooden beads around my

neck. The white girls are puzzled when I arrive – firstly, who am I? And secondly, why am I dressing like a black girl? I am trying to be black, as hard as I can. I want to show that I belong here, that I understand, that I'm not aligned with Them – those white people who really do feel superior.

I avoid the white girls and head for Farai.

“Hey, shamwari,” she says, punching me on the arm.

“Hey.” I smile.

Farai's friends are loud, with big mouths full of teeth. They seem looser in the joints than my white friends, more prone to sway as they walk, to stand with their weight on one hip, to push out their boobs and bums and clap their hands when they laugh. They have names like Rufaro, Tsitsi, Yevedzo and Tarasai, but they call each other Rofi, Tsi, Vedz and Tee. They hijack the school's music system and start playing hip-hop.

“You like this?” asks one, laughing in my face so I feel each breath from the Ha Has.

“Ja,” I lie. I don't really understand it, and I can't hear the tune behind the words and beat.

“Sure.” She turns away. The girls seem to have accepted me as a harmless oddity. I stick close to Farai.

There is a girl standing nearby – not part of the crowd, but not apart from it, either. She looks familiar. A neat, well-shaped head and long, graceful limbs. Jonah's daughter.

“Susan.”

She turns and recognizes me, I know she does. I feel a surge of something like anger.

“What are you doing here?”

“I go to school here.”

“Oh.”

We look at each other. She is wearing an unattractive, brown-paper-bag uniform similar to the Convent’s. I stand there in my vest and Black Power beanie wondering why I feel so angry. I want to ask, how did you get in. I want to ask, how are you paying for it.

“So,” I say, “How did you ...” and stop. “How are your parents?”

“They are good,” says Susan.

“Good.”

I have to ask. “So how did you ...”

This time Susan interrupts me. “I got a scholarship.” She is looking at me with pity. Or is it contempt? She knew my first question would be about money. How have you, the maid’s daughter, managed to get into a school as good as – better than – mine?

“I have to go.” She turns neatly on her heel and clacks away across the concrete.

I remember the white wedding dress I gave Susan for her Barbie, and I want to run after her and demand it back. I don’t know where it is now, but I imagine it crumpled in her pocket like a used handkerchief.

Chapter Twenty-three

Whites, whites, whites, is all we hear on the news these days. We are being blamed for everything, but especially for taking away land from the blacks back when we were British and not Zimbabwean. I know I am White, but I am a Zimbabwean too. Mum was born here. Steve was born here. How long do we have to be here before we are properly Zimbabwean? Blood has to count for something.

The Shona say that killing a person ties you forever to the place where you committed the murder. The blood spilled on the soil has a power that will draw you back, and ngozi – the vengeful spirits of the dead will follow you. It must work with birth as well as death. There must be some primitive magic that ties you to the place where you are born, where you slide out of your mother bloody and gasping, mouth open like a dying person gulping for air.

Munyu is a smiling, blue-black man with teeth too big for his jaw. He is the janitor at Steve's workplace, to begin with, but is soon promoted to tea-boy because of his smile and easy friendliness – a friendliness that does not step over the line of proper respect, and makes everyone feel good.

“He knows his place,” says someone.

“He obviously loves his job,” says another.

“He's a bluddy good guy,” says Steve when he comes home.

It occurs to me that white people often say that black people obviously enjoy their jobs, because they are so often smiling and laughing, or humming as they work.

Tatenda sings all day in the garden, so much that Mum has started closing the windows on whatever side of the house is closest to him. When he shifts to a different job in a different part of the garden, she will get up and open those windows, and close others, without a word of complaint.

“Why don’t you just ask him to stop?” I say.

“It’s nice that he sings,” says Mum. “I just don’t want to listen to it all day.”

“Why is it nice?”

“Because it shows he’s happy.”

The Shona sing all the time. I do not think it means that they are always happy.

It is Mum who suggests asking Munyu and his girlfriend to our house for tea.

“Ja, maybe it’s a good idea,” says Steve.

We are all treading warily at the moment, trying to prove we are proper White Zimbabweans, not left-over Rhodies. Steve issues the invitation, and a date is set.

It is strange seeing Saru serve tea to Munyu and his wife. Munyu is himself a tea-boy, but he takes the china cup with gracious thanks, and holds it delicately. Saru is clearly disgruntled. She sighs heavily and deliberately clatters things on the tray as she places it on the table.

“Thank you, Saru,” says Mum.

“Mazvita tatenda, Amai,” says Munyu. Saru gives him a heavy-lidded, expressionless stare, and stalks back to the kitchen with a stiff back.

The tea is awkward. Mum makes bright conversation with Munyu's wife, Nyasha. So what do you do, Nyasha? Really? How interesting. And how long have you been married? The men perch right on the edge of their chairs, with their legs apart in a manly way, nodding and smiling more than is required. When the cat walks past we all fall over ourselves to pick him up and fuss over him.

We have to avoid so many subjects. When we have white guests, Steve can relax in his chair and complain about the servants, that bluddy munt in charge of it all and gossip about the farmers we know. We can't talk about any of those things.

I notice Mum is wearing a colourful print skirt, vaguely African, and Steve is in his Lake Kariba shirt. Even I am wearing my wooden giraffe necklace. Munyu and Nyasha are in carefully Western clothes – polo shirts, slacks. When Tatenda comes round to water the beds by the verandah, we all sit and watch him. Whistling. Dousing the plants with far too much water. Normally Steve would tell him off, but not today. We sit and watch Tatenda and feel a sense that the world is wrong, that things are not aligned properly today. Eventually Steve sends him off to the back of the house instead, which should make things easier, but now we have nothing to look at but each other.

Soon Munyu clears his throat and gets to his feet. He is still holding his teacup, and has to take a step forward to put it down, almost colliding with Steve who has got up to shake his hand. The china looks delicate and too pretty in his big black hand, and he sets it down far too carefully. He and Nyasha make their excuses. Thank you, thank you, lovely, must do it again, come to our place. Nyasha claps her cupped hands before shaking Mum's.

When they are gone, the whole house takes a breath of relief. We sit down for another cup of tea on the verandah.

“Six sugars, she had in her tea,” says Mum as if she is talking to herself.

“Ja, well ...” says Steve, letting his sentence trail off. Everyone knows that blacks have lots of sugars in their tea.

“Nice couple,” says Mum.

“Ja, very.” Steve heaves himself out of his chair. “Did you see Tatenda soaking those poor bluddy plants? I’ve told him a hundred times.”

“I’d better tell Saru about dinner,” says Mum.

Everything is all wrong. I feel a painful tenderness towards Munyu and Nyasha. I want to run after them and tell them not to worry, it is our problem. We are the ones who can’t seem to get rid of our old ideas.

Perhaps Mugabe is right. In some ways.

“What is the Baas thinking?” Saru says to me in Shona as she does the washing up. She has broken a glass already, as she tends to when she does the washing up in a heightened emotional state.

I am lounging against the bench, drinking a Coke. If Mum was here she would tell me to do the drying up, but when I do Saru and I spend all our time apologizing whenever we brush against each other and it is much less stressful just to let her get on with it.

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“Bringing such guests.” Saru knows by now that I don’t report any of our conversations to Mum and Steve, which means that I hear a lot of the neighbourhood gossip as well as some interesting insights into my own family.

“I don’t know.”

Saru tuts to herself. I can see she is genuinely upset.

“Why ...” I think of how to phrase it. “Why didn’t you like the guests?”

“It is not right,” says Saru. “I should not have to serve them.”

Saru and Tatenda have their own world within ours – their secret jokes, their Shona conversations, their good-natured pilfering of small items – like students passing notes behind a teacher’s back.

Maybe we are not the only ones still clinging to old ideas.

We see blacks on the news saying, “These whites treat us like dogs. We won the war for Independence, and they lost. They should not be allowed to treat us like this. They should behave like people who lost a war, instead of like British Imperialists.”

We have heard stories of the workers on white farms turning against their masters, just as we have heard stories of the workers rising up to defend the big Baases as well. I can’t imagine Tatenda and Saru having the same thoughts about us. Saru smiles, constantly – the first thing I see in the morning is her smile, and as she leaves in the evenings to go back to her family, her teeth are a white slash in the darkness. Tatenda sings, whistles and hums all day, cracks jokes, flirts, plays with the cat. Do they wish us dead?

Once I have had this thought I start to notice things. I notice how Saru will sometimes look at us with a cold, absent gaze, as if a mask has slipped for a moment. I

will notice the way she smiles unapologetically after Mum has (awkwardly and unwillingly – Mum has never learned the regal white way of dealing with servants) reprimanded her for some error. I listen to the songs Tatenda is humming, and I'm sure I can hear some of the pro-Mugabe tunes in there. But I could be imagining that.

White farmers have become the bad guys on the news and in the papers.

Oliver thinks that the land should be redistributed. "We did take it away from them," he says, "and we need to give it back if we're going to move forward as a nation."

"Bluddy ridiculous," says Steve. "Half that land wasn't even arable until the whites sank wells and cultivated the soil."

"That's not the point," says Oliver. "They were here first."

The word 'they' sits strangely in his mouth, and I feel like he would rather be saying 'we'. Oliver wears his whiteness like a badly-fitting suit.

"Ja, well, the farmers now aren't the bluddy first settlers who took the land. They inherited it or bought it legally and they shouldn't have to give it up."

"I'm not saying they shouldn't have compensation," says Oliver. "And they wouldn't have to give up all the land."

"Ja, and give it to people who'll grow five mealies for their families and export nothing. The economy will collapse, man."

"Not if people are trained properly," says Oliver. "I think this is a good thing."

"I'm sure Mugabe will keep the whole thing legal and above board," says Steve with heavy sarcasm.

"All I'm saying is that if they do it properly I think it is a good idea."

“Bluddy kaffir-boetie,” says Steve. He says it jokingly, but I see Steve twirling his glass, watching the ice melt into the gin, and I wonder if he will be a bitter old Rhodie one day, when the harsh African heat and the dust and the relentless struggle have worn him down.

We hardly ever go into the central city these days – our lives revolve around our house, friends’ houses, the shopping centre, work and school. The rest of the country may as well not exist for all we see of it.

One day I bike down to the shops. I am not paying attention when I ride up onto the footpath, and I almost hit a little black girl who is walking with her dad. The girl’s hair is braided close to her head and fixed with little pink ribbons at the end of each stiff ridge of hair. Someone must have spent hours getting her ready. She squeals and jumps aside, and I swerve.

“Sorry!” I say, but her father has already started shaking his fist.

“You bluddy white kids, you think you own the place!” he shouts. “You could have killed my daughter!”

“I’m sorry!” I have stopped a few feet in front of them.

“You think you can do whatever you want, but this is our country! Go back to Britain!”

I feel like I should stay there and debate this with him. Convince him that I am a real Zimbabwean, despite my skin, and that I’m not going to run away to a country that isn’t truly mine. But instead I jump back on the bike and pedal as fast as I can, feeling shaky.

The next time I realise that I am now a White with a capital letter, I go with Farai to get her driver's licence. She is desperate for the freedom of a car.

“Sha, imagine being able to go wherever you want, whenever you want,” she says.

I can't imagine dealing with police roadblocks, potholes and car-jackers on my own. I don't even really understand the need for freedom. Our world has shrunk so much that it is difficult to think about going somewhere new.

We go to the licensing office and join the queue. It snakes out of the main buildings, out of the iron gates, and out onto the road. There are over a hundred people in front of us.

“And, of course, I need to pee,” says Farai. “Typical. See a loo?”

“No.”

“Typical.”

We stand in line with the others. I notice that I am the only white person there, and people are giving me strange looks. There is a group of men a few metres away, not in the queue. They are pointing at me and talking rapidly amongst themselves in Shona.

“What's going on?” I ask Farai.

She shrugs. “No idea.”

One man splits away from the group and comes over to us.

“Hello,” he says with an ingratiating smile. He is missing his two front teeth.

“Hi,” I say. Farai just raises her eyebrows. She hasn't been cursed with the politeness gene.

“You want driver’s licence?” he asks me.

“Um ...”

“I get it for you, cheap-cheap.”

“Uh, no thanks.”

“Five hundred dollars,” he says. His face is close to mine, and I can see the shine of sweat on his upper lip.

“We’re not interested,” says Farai. He goes back to his group, waving his hand at us in what I hope is a friendly way.

An official pokes his head out from the office and spots us. A couple of minutes later, a man in uniform comes down the line.

“Are you queuing for a driver’s licence?” he asks.

“Yes,” says Farai.

“Come.”

He leads us into the office, past a row of accusing faces.

“Is it just because I’m white?” I ask Farai in a whisper.

“Ja.”

“That’s not fair.”

“No, but it’s better than standing in that queue for another two hours. I still need to pee.”

When we get inside, the officials are smiling and friendly. Farai fills out the forms without any trouble.

“Have a nice day,” says one of the men when we leave. We walk past the accusing faces again.

My skin has such power, good and bad.

A few weeks later, I ask about Munyu and his wife.

“Oh,” says Steve, “I thought I’d told you.”

Told me what?

“Munyu died a few days ago, suddenly. Turned out he had AIDS.”

“What about Nyasha?”

Steve shrugs. But we both know.

That night I am watching the news by myself, in the lounge, when I hear the phone ringing. I press the mute button and watch Mugabe’s thin slice of mouth open and shut as I answer the call.

“Hello?”

There is a crackle.

“Hello?”

“Hello, howzit,” says a voice with a Zimbabwean accent. It is a male voice. I remember the phone call I got all those years ago.

“Hello?” I try out the theory I have. “Dad?”

“How are you?”

It is not a confirmation, but it is not a denial either. “I’m good. How are you?”

“We’re fine, hey.”

It must be Dad. I feel sick, and a little shy.

“Where are you?”

“We’re in Canada. I wanted to call and ...” the voice breaks up. Our stupid phone line never works properly.

“I told your Mum, but I wasn’t sure if she would tell you,” says Dad, suddenly clear as a bell. His voice is familiar, but in a way that is unsettling. I had almost convinced myself that he never existed.

“Canada?”

“Ja,” I hear, and “Sorry.”

“Can I speak to Lucy?” I ask, but the connection has been lost. I don’t know their number. I run to Mum’s desk and pull out her address book. I flick through the pages until I get to my old surname, and I find a number in Chinhoyi, but nothing else. I stare at her neat, rounded handwriting. She has tidily recorded Dad and Lucy’s birthdays next to their address. I wonder if she sends Lucy a card and present every year. In some ways I want her to, but in other ways I feel resentful.

“Your Mum,” Dad had said, as if she wasn’t anybody else’s Mum.

I sit on my bed for a long time, and think. I can’t believe they have gone. They are the first people close to me who have left – although, after all these years, I suppose they aren’t really close to me at all. They have always felt distant and half-remembered. Now that they have left Zimbabwe altogether, it feels like something stretched tight inside me has stretched too far and broken.

I try to picture Lucy as I saw her only a short while ago, sitting on our back doorstep in her dungarees. The picture is already fading. When I try to see her face, all I see is my own.

We celebrate the year 2000 in our backyard, with fireworks. Steve props them up on the lawn, lights the fuse and then runs backwards saying “Shit, shit,” as they start to fizz and crackle sooner than expected. Mum is indoors comforting the cat. She has washed her hands of the whole thing.

“If you set the hedge on fire, don’t come running to me,” she says.

The adults are drinking on the verandah.

“Here’s to a better year,” says Steve.

“Cheers.”

I hear the glasses clinking. An owl flies above me, white and dusty as a moth, and lands on the roof of the house with a clatter of claws. Owls are a bad omen.

“Happy New Year,” says someone from the verandah, and drunken voices start singing what they remember of Auld Lang Syne.

Part Four

2000

Chapter Twenty-four

We get a call from Uncle Pieter and Auntie Mary, from their farm.

“Ja, hi,” says Auntie Mary in a bright voice when I answer the phone, “Can I talk to your Mum?”

I pass the phone over. I can still hear Auntie Mary’s voice, higher than usual. Mum says lots of yeses and noes and nods her head as Auntie Mary talks.

“Don’t worry, Mary,” she said. “I’m sure it won’t come to anything.”

When she hangs up, I ask her, “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” she says. “Auntie Mary just had a visit from some people saying they were going to take over the farm.”

“That’s not nothing.”

“Well, it’s going to come to nothing. Don’t worry.” Mum touches my hair.

The farm invasions have begun. Unofficially. At least, officially unofficially. Everyone knows that Mugabe supports them, but he is still insisting that the War Vets are acting on their own. Police are slow to respond to distress calls from white farmers, and the squatters are cocky and unafraid.

Auntie Mary keeps in touch on the terrible Chinhoyi phone lines. She sounds like she is shouting from the bottom of a well.

“Ja, everything’s fine,” she says every day.

From five in the morning till eleven at night, a gang of War Vets have been beating their drums, singing revolutionary songs and waving clubs and bhadzas outside the gates of the farm.

“They’re a bluddy nuisance,” says Auntie Mary.

“Aren’t you scared?” I ask.

“No, I’m not scared.” And I know she isn’t. “I’ve already been through one bluddy bush war, I can cope with this. But I’m worried about the kids.”

I pass the phone to Mum. I can still hear Auntie Mary’s voice through the receiver.

“What are the workers doing?” asks Mum.

“Getting on with their jobs,” says Auntie Mary. “We don’t want them to get involved. Pieter thought about getting some of them together to throw the squatters off, but I think that would just cause more trouble. And he doesn’t want them to get beaten up because of us.”

“Are they sympathetic to the War Vets?”

“What War Vets? All I see is a bunch of bluddy ZANU PF youths.”

They have a good laugh at that, and then Auntie Mary says, “No way, man. They know what side their bread’s buttered on. No farm means no wages. And they’re bluddy stupid if they think Bob’s going to give the land to the squatters. He just gives it to his cronies.”

“Do you need us to come down?” Mum asks.

“No, we’re fine, hey. I’ll give you a call if anything changes. Here’s hoping they stop banging those bluddy drums soon.”

“Here’s hoping.” Mum hangs up. “See? She’s fine. We’ve been through all this before, except worse. So stop worrying.”

I have my first panic attack shortly after, in a movie theatre. My chest starts to hurt and my breath won’t come. Pins prick my body and my left arm starts to tingle. I run outside and lean over the balcony, my heart galloping unevenly against my ribs. It feels like it has broken free of its veins and ventricles and is bouncing around inside the cavern of my chest like a rubber ball.

Some girls from school are sitting outside a café nearby.

“Are you okay?” one calls out with fake concern.

“I’m fine,” I say. I hope my voice is normal.

Mum takes me to the emergency room, where they examine me and give me a blue pill that makes everything seem far away. When the pill wears off, however, my heart starts jumping around again. For days.

“Stress,” the doctor says, and gives me pink pills and blue pills.

“Two of the pink ones twice a day. And a quarter of the blue one when you feel an attack coming on,” he says.

“What stress?” Steve snorts when we get home. “Everybody’s bluddy stressed. You don’t see me getting sick. You don’t see the bluddy farmers getting sick.”

Mum rolls her eyes.

“Don’t listen to him,” she tells me. “You take your pills.”

I do take them. They flatten things out like someone smoothing a crumpled piece of paper.

On the weekend, we hear that Auntie Mary and Pieter's farm has been invaded, properly. While they were out, the War Vets went into the farmstead and made themselves at home.

“Chinhoyi is the breadbasket of Zimbabwe,” says Mum. “Mugabe is a fool.”

Uncle Pieter and his workers threw the War Vets out, but they came back. Their chanting and drum-beating has doubled.

“We're getting no sleep,” says Auntie Mary. “They came up to the house today and demanded that we kill them a mombe. We said no, at first, but then Pieter said he'd rather kill one of the cows himself than see them try to do it with a bhadza, so he killed one and had it sent out. They're cooking it now. At least they've stopped singing.”

“Did they take anything from the house?” asks Mum.

“Ja, a few things. Beat up the gardener a bit too, poor bugger.”

“Is he all right?”

“Ja, he'll be fine.”

We see Mugabe on television. Whenever I see him on the news now, I want to reach in through the screen and shake him by the neck as if he was the scrawny rooster painted on the ZANU PF building.

He has a way of speaking and pausing that makes each word sound like a prophecy.

“There have been very few cases of violence,” he says about the farm invasions, “but if the farmers start to be angry and start to be violent, then, of course, they will get that medicine delivered to them. And it can be very, very, very severe.”

He pronounces each ‘very’ slowly and with weight. We have been given a warning. Behave and concede, or suffer the consequences.

In the middle of all this, we have another dry spell. The ground cracks like the dry skin on our heels, and our dry skin cracks like the crust of the ground. The grass is yellow, when there is grass at all. Mum puts a brick in the toilet cistern so that it will use less water. We go back to leaving wees in the toilet and only flushing for something larger, or when the urine has started to rot in the bowl and smell like old vegetables. We are not allowed to water our garden any more, or wash the car. We have shallow baths, and we share them, one after the other. I usually get the hottest, freshest water, because I have to go to bed earlier. Mum usually goes next, and Steve is left to sit in the cooling, grubby remains.

In the evening, I use the remains of our rain-water barrel to water the vegetables. Tatenda is uprooting the sad, limp carrots.

“It is because the land is being taken,” he says. “And because of what Mugabe is doing.”

If I was indoors, I might not have believed him. But as it is, we are outside, looking at a pale fingernail of moon in a blue sky, it seems perfectly reasonable.

Mum and Steve are inside, drinking gins and tonics on the verandah with Oliver.

“Tatenda says the rains won’t come because of what Mugabe is doing,” I say.

Oliver nods, but Mum raises her eyebrows and Steve splutters into his drink.

“Well, I suppose that’s one theory,” he says.

“Can I have a sip?”

Mum sighs and passes me her drink. “Ja, but just one, hey.”

I take a sip. It tastes like medicine. By the time it reaches my throat, all the liquid is gone and it is nothing but fumes.

“Medicinal,” says Steve. “Been used by the colonials for generations. The tonic water protects against malaria.”

“And what does the gin do?”

“Painkiller.” They laugh.

“I’m sick of this bluddy drought,” says Mum. She has her eyes closed and her head tipped back. The sky is starting to turn lavender, and I can hear the first whines of the mosquitoes and see the dusty shape of moths start to move towards the house.

“You could do a rain dance,” says Steve, and snorts.

“Shut up and make yourself useful,” says Mum.

Steve sighs and heaves himself out of his chair. He closes the door into the house and lights a mosquito lamp. They smell strongly and probably do repel some mosquitoes, but even with it lit I get tiny red bites on my ankles and shins.

I slide my legs off the chair onto the cool tiles.

“Where are you going?”

“Outside.”

“Take a jacket,” says Mum.

The evening air feels like a light blanket clinging to the hairs on my arms and legs.

“Okay Mum.”

I don’t take a jacket, but I do slide my feet into slops. In the dark it is hard to see the fallen acacia thorns lurking in the grass.

I go into the garden and walk down to the end, to the chicken run under the avocado tree. I can feel the squish of ripe fruit under my slops.

Would a rain dance work? Maybe if enough people in the country do it, it will have some effect. Even if the dance is danced by a white girl in Harare.

I start by moving some sticks into a circle. I am not sure why, except that circles seem to be important for magic. Archie has wandered down after me now, and sits a few feet away, watching. He is a darker patch cut out of the darkness. A fire would make the whole thing more effective, but Mum and Steve would get suspicious if I went back for matches.

The only rain dances I have seen are Native American ones on the movies. I start to hop on one foot around the circle, making vague chanting noises, but then I feel silly and stop. Instead I stand and listen. I can hear crickets like a shivering in the air more than a sound, and the rustle of creatures in the hedge and in the trees. I sit in the middle of my circle and let my breathing slow down until I can’t hear it any more. I know that n’angas will go into a trance and let a spirit possess them if they want rain. I wonder if I could do it. This is an idea that would seem ridiculous in the hot, hard sunlight, but seems perfectly reasonable in the rustling night.

I close my eyes. I can see myself from above, sitting on the ground with my legs crossed. At first I think it is just my imagination, but then I feel like I am floating further away from my body. I panic and open my eyes. My body is wide awake again, heart thumping, breath heaving in my chest, legs itching from the rough grass. I am scared, but too interested by what happened to go back inside. I decide to try it again.

I close my eyes and let myself float gently away from my body again. I wonder if I really have gone somewhere outside my body and, if so, what is left down there inside the mess of skin and muscles and blood. I wonder how n'angas welcome spirits in. A hot red light hangs in front of my eyes, as if I am tilting my closed eyes up at the sun, and I drift into a warm sleep.

When I wake up, I am thrashing on the ground and my mouth is full of saliva. I spit it out in a white glob on the grass, and cough. Tatenda is crouched a few feet away, watching me with wide, white eyes.

“Are you all right, Medem?” he asks me.

“Ja.” I take deep breaths. It feels like I am trying to catch the air in a net. I can't draw nearly enough into my lungs. “What happened?”

“I heard you shouting,” says Tatenda. I see sweat on his forehead and I realise that he is afraid.

“What was I saying?”

He shakes his head.

“Was I saying something?”

He stands up. “You should go back inside,” he says. “You are not well.”

I feel fine, but I stand up and start walking back towards the house. I realise that my legs feel shaky and my head is pounding. I had not noticed before.

When I get back to the house, Mum and Steve are drinking tea in the living room. Oliver has gone home. Mum says you would have to be crazy to bike home alone at night if you're a white man, but Oliver still rides his bike round to our place every evening.

Steve is looking at Grandpa's stone bust. "Hey, when's the last time Saru dusted?"

"Yesterday."

"Well there's bluddy dust all over Dad's hat."

"Your dad's ..." Mum follows his gaze. "I'll tell her to clean it."

I pour myself a cup of tea and do not say anything. I lift my hand up to my head.

"Are you okay?" says Mum.

"Headache." I never get headaches. Mum gets Migraines sometimes, and when she feels one coming on she draws the curtains and lies on the bed with a bean-bag over her eyes. When we lived in Chinhoyi, Lucy and I used to have to stay very quiet and not play loudly outside, because Mum says Migraines make every noise ten times louder, and every light ten times brighter. She knows when she is getting a Migraine because she can see tadpoles swimming in front of her eyes, she says. I can see little black dots in front of my eyes now, and I wonder if that is what she meant. I tell her.

"Migraine," she says. "Must be a storm coming."

I am put to bed, and I lie in the darkness feeling my head swell and fill up with blood until there is no room for thoughts. I can feel the heavy clouds outside pressing down on me as if they are an extra blanket on the bed. The air tastes like metal.

Whatever spirit I talked to must have listened to me. The rain comes and feels like a release, like when you really need to pee and have crossed your legs for hours and finally reach a toilet. The heavy, throbbing blood seems to rush out of my head, leaving it clean and sharp. I listen to the fingers of rain drumming on the roof, and realise that there is tension left behind after the storm has broken. The world is not washed as clean as usual. We are not just waiting for the rain, but for some other release.

Chapter Twenty-five

Steve has a story he tells about boiling a frog in a pan of water.

“The trick is to heat the water up gradually,” he says. “Then the frog doesn’t notice the water’s getting hotter, and he doesn’t jump out. The water will get to boiling point after a while, and the frog still won’t jump out because the change has been so slow, and he doesn’t realise that he’s going to be boiled up.”

“That’s ridiculous,” says Mum. “Of course he would realise.”

“You haven’t actually done it, have you?” I ask, feeling sorry for the frog.

“No, man, of course not. But it’s true. You can kill a frog by degrees without him knowing.”

This has always been the land of Make-a-Plan. People are proud of it.

“Zimbabweans are resourceful,” they say. “We can cope with anything.”

No power? Simple. Hook up a generator. No bread in the supermarket? No problem. Buy some on the black market. You can always make a plan, work something out. And we all stick together, calling our friends when we find a garage with petrol, sharing what we have.

Going to school has become optional now. Whether because of petrol or riots in town, I stay home almost all week, and when I do go to school it is half-empty. Skipping school was fun at first – I spent the days sitting on a rug on the lawn reading – but after a few months of this I start to worry about my future. This is not an education. And I don’t think things are going to go back to normal. I want to go back to school and scratch my

initials on the desk and sit through boring masses again. I start to worry about exams, and qualifications, and being able to get into university.

On Auntie Mary's farm, the War Vets and the farming families seem to have reached an uneasy truce. The War Vets are not venturing any further into the farm. Instead, they are camping outside. The revolutionary songs and drumming are not as unrelenting. Occasionally Uncle Pieter will send them a cow to eat, and occasionally they will take one without asking. They also chop down trees on the farm for firewood and pilfer vegetables and mealies when they can, but no one seems to be very concerned.

"Could be worse," says Uncle Pieter on the phone. "And if they start to shuper us again, we'll boot them off."

Over the past two years this has all become normal, this strange, limited life. Only sometimes do I feel like we are under siege, behind our high walls topped with glass and patrolled by a guard. The days when I can't go to school and when Mum and Steve work from home. I spend a lot of time on the phone with Farai. We can't always get to each other's houses, although we live just a few blocks away from each other. Some days it is safer just to stay indoors.

"I am so bored," says Farai every night. "I can't stand it."

"Me neither," I say, but I am lying.

If there is one thing I have learned, it is that boredom is a luxury. You cannot trust ordinary. Ordinary is not safe. You can wake up on an ordinary day, drink a cup of tea, eat a piece of toast, and be killed by a mob outside your door. You can drive to work on an ordinary day and end up in the middle of a riot.

I hold the times I have been bored in front of my brain like beloved photographs. The time I was waiting for a bus for an hour with nothing to do but chew my fingernails off. All those times spent in doctors' or dentists' waiting rooms. Sitting in the hot sun at school prizegivings. I look back at myself then, kicking the legs of a chair or pulling up tufts of grass, and I try to remember that feeling. Nothing to fear, nothing to think about.

Mum comes home triumphant from the farm one afternoon. She has bought a bar of chocolate for me, which is a great luxury now that everything has got so expensive.

“Good news,” she says.

“What?”

“I've solved our petrol problem.”

She tells me that the farm has started importing big barrels of petrol from Down South, and we will be able to get our petrol from that supply at a much cheaper price.

“So no more queuing,” says Mum.

I scrape off a sliver of chocolate with my teeth and let it melt in my mouth without chewing. Then, after a few minutes, I scrape off another. I don't know when I'll be having chocolate again, and I want to get as much pleasure from it as I can.

The petrol queues are getting worse. I leave the gate to see backed-up traffic, bumper to bumper, passing our gate and disappearing in both directions. Petrol queue. A record, this time. The Shell station is a good couple of kilometres away on Pendennis Road.

“Bluddy yell,” says Steve. We can’t get out of the gate. “I suppose we’re walking to school today.”

The atmosphere in the petrol queue is festive. Someone has set up a braai and people are leaving their cars to get some boerewors. Several people have brought cooler bags with Castle lager inside.

“What if the line moves forward?” I ask. There are a lot of empty cars.

“It won’t,” says Steve. “The petrol station doesn’t have any petrol yet. These people have probably been here all night, waiting for the delivery.”

A man in a suit gets out of his car and gives the keys to a woman – probably his wife.

“Her shift,” says Steve.

We walk along the line of cars. People smile ruefully at us. Some wave. Others sit with their arms crossed staring straight ahead. When we come to the end of the queue we see that the petrol station hasn’t received its delivery of fuel yet.

One of my schoolmate’s mothers picks me up at the head of the queue. We have started taking it in turns to drive kids to school.

The queue is still just as long when I get home. It has moved forward a little, but most people seem to be settling in for the night. Family members are arriving with food and blankets. There are even more packs of Castle lager.

A small space has opened up in front of our gate, and Steve manoeuvres the car into it.

“Last queue before we start getting petrol from the farm!” he says. He is unusually cheerful for a petrol queuing day. “At least I’m right by the house if I need the bathroom.”

Mum wakes me up early the next morning. “We’re going to have breakfast with Steve.”

Steve has been in the car all night. He is stubbly and bleary-eyed. Mum has brought him a bacon sandwich wrapped in cling-film.

There is a joke we tell at school about petrol queues. A man who has been sitting in a petrol queue for several hours has been getting gradually angrier and angrier. When he can stand it no longer, he jumps out of the car and tells his friend, “Look after the car for me. I’m off to kill that bastard Mugabe.”

His friend sits in the car and waits for the man’s return. After another few hours, the would-be assassin returns looking crestfallen.

“What happened?” asks his friend.

“The queue was longer there,” says the man.

We fall about laughing at this one.

“You know, I used to be able to see him in his office when I was having clarinet lessons,” says Farai one day.

“Who?”

“Mugabe.”

“Seriously?”

“Ja. The College of Music looked right over his wall and into his office.”

“You could actually see him?”

“Ja.”

“What was he doing?”

“Nothing. Boring as hell. Just sitting writing or reading papers. But I missed an opportunity.” Farai hefts an invisible gun onto her shoulders. “Great place for a sniper. Bang! Problem solved.”

If only. I pray for an assassination.

The News has become a fearful, hated ritual. When we hear the familiar drumbeat, we all drop what we are doing and go into the lounge. We do not sit to watch the news; we stand with our arms crossed and our feet planted firmly on the ground, facing it. What is he saying about us today? What does this mean? Sometimes it is not translated into English, and I can only pick up a word here and there.

Tonight, Mugabe calls us white Fascist imperialist colonialist pigs. He does a lot of shouting and gesticulating in front of cheering crowds. That is all we ever seem to see. He must spend his entire life finding crowds to stand in front of.

“That’s a lot to live up to,” I say. “White, Fascist, imperialist and colonialist.”

No one appreciates the joke.

I watch him yelling at the camera. The television’s sound is muted, but I still feel each word landing on me like a physical blow. There are little sequins of sweat on his upper lip. It has a very clearly defined line down the middle, filled with a tiny moustache. I feel my own lip. I have the same line.

Mugabe has very beautiful eyes. People always say that you can read someone's character in their eyes. "He has shifty eyes." "His eyes are too close together." "There was a mad light in his eyes." Not so with Mugabe, who has a neat fringe of almost feminine lashes along his top and bottom lids, and brown eyes that seem to glisten with feeling.

Sometimes I try to understand him. I stare at the screen and I try to read his expression, see what is going on in his head. Grandpa met him once.

"A soft-spoken chap," he said. "Terribly clever."

People say it was after his wife Sally died that Mugabe went mad.

I look at Mugabe's face, and I wonder why we are all in thrall to him, this little old man with the long eyelashes.

We find a place that exchanges goods for cash, no questions asked. It is outside of the city, in a new development that was abandoned when inflation rose and the money ran out. We pile furniture and electronics into the car and drive out there. When we have the cash in our hands we go straight to the shops and spend it. Mum and I are giddy and giggling.

"Hey, chocolate!" says Mum, spotting some of the imported stuff on a shelf.

"Get six bars."

We buy twelve tubes of toothpaste at a time, acres of toilet paper, enough canned food to build a pyramid. We can no longer afford to buy books, CDs or clothes. Prices are no strings of Os looped together on long chains, and they are always going up.

The summer is hotter than usual. I wish I could run around in nothing but my underwear, like I did when I was five, but the best I can do is drink continuous glasses of iced water.

Mum comes home from the farm with bright eyes and something exciting to tell us.

“Mr Cooper has offered to put a pool in for us,” she says.

Steve has no expression. “Put in a pool?”

“Ja. He’s going to pay for it.”

“Why?”

“Well, because he likes us. It’s a present.”

“A present.”

“Ja. He’s going to get some of the guys from the farm to come over and measure for it this afternoon.”

I am ecstatic. We have always been the only white family I know without a pool.

“We don’t need a pool,” says Steve. He flaps his newspaper out to straighten it.

Mum stands still. “Come on Steve.” She is smiling, but only with her mouth.

“It’s free.”

“We don’t need it. Tell him no thanks.”

“Agh, come on, Steve.”

“Come on, Steve!” I say as well. I am sitting right on the edge of my chair. It would be so wonderful to be able to dive into our own pool.

“I said no.” Steve gets up. “I’m going to talk to Tatenda about those beds by the rockery.”

“All right.”

We watch him go.

“Mum!” I begin, all ready to launch into a tantrum that will somehow persuade her to persuade Steve.

“Shush.” Mum is pale. She gives me a smile so quick that I am not sure it was there at all, and goes out after Steve. I watch her walk to him and slide a hand around his back.

I do not whinge about the pool. Instead I do what Lucy and I used to do in Chinhoyi – turn on the sprinkler on the lawn and run through the water in my swimming costume until I am almost too cold and can lie on the grass, letting the sun warm me through.

I read a letter in the paper that says, “If white farmers think they are so good at farming, why can’t they go back to Britain and farm there?”

“Are all the white farmers British?” I ask Steve.

“None of them are bluddy British,” says Steve. “They’re bluddy Zimbabwean, just like the blacks. Can you imagine Mr Cooper farming in England?”

I can’t imagine Mr Cooper anywhere but here. Like Steve, he is a part of the landscape.

Mugabe announces that he is putting forward a referendum that will give him almost unlimited powers. As a side note, it allows the government to take white farms without any compensation.

“What a bluddy surprise,” says Steve.

We can say Yes or No to the change. Mum and Steve vote and sit back, laughing and giddy with pessimism, joking that it's probably rigged anyway and there's no point.

We start to see people wearing 'Vote No' T-shirts in the streets. There are big adverts in the paper. This is when I notice the opposition leader for the first time. Steve has told me about the Movement for Democratic Change, but I have not paid much attention to them before. Now I start to see photographs of Morgan Tsvangirai in the paper. He has a big, wide face like a frog, and he lifts his open hand as a symbol of his party. Mugabe's symbol is a closed fist.

"Don't wave at anyone unless you mean it," warns Oliver. "Showing an open hand can be dangerous these days."

Oliver has thrown himself into the MDC's campaigning with enthusiasm. He shows us his party membership card, filled out by a painstaking hand that does not join any of the letters. He wears MDC T-shirts and hangs a photo of Tsvangirai from the back of his bike.

"It's a miracle he hasn't been beaten up yet," says Mum.

If Oliver was anyone else, he probably would have been beaten up, but he is so wholeheartedly passionate about the country that it shines on his skin like sweat.

Mum and Steve throw a party to hear the results of the referendum. All our friends come to the house for a braai and get warm and drunk in the February sun. It feels like the end of the world. Everyone has been throwing those kinds of parties lately – where people get so drunk that they can't move, voices are brittle and laughter has a hysterical edge. We

have a perfect life here, in this perfect weather, with our servants and sunshine and silver teapots, and we're determined to make the most of it while we can. If we're going down, we're going down with a gin and tonic in one hand and a cigarette in the other.

The time comes. The results are going to be announced. We troop into the living room and sit around the radio, waiting for one word.

It comes. "55 per cent of Zimbabweans have voted 'No' to the proposed amendment to the Constitution."

There is a silence, and then, "Bluddy yell," says Steve.

We can't believe it. Surely Bob would have rigged the vote? He always does. Was he really that confident that he could intimidate enough people to guarantee a 'yes'? After a short silence, everyone starts laughing. People jump up and clap their hands. We are euphoric. We can't believe something we did actually made a difference. Perhaps we can change things after all.

On the news that night, people are crying and laughing.

"We have the old rooster cornered," says a Shona woman. "He can't hang on much longer now."

Everyone thinks it is just a matter of time. This must mean the end of Mugabe's rule. The people have spoken against him.

I remember this, and try to freeze it in my mind like a photograph. The time when we did make a difference, despite everything. When we wrote something on a piece of paper and it magically changed history.

The Shona people are fatalistic. If you're run over by a bus, it was your time. They do not rail against God and fate, which could be why they are so good at religion –

any religion, be it Christianity or the older, less forgiving ones. It is so easy to adopt this attitude, living here, and to think that we are on an inevitable slide downwards, and none of us can do anything to change it. Tonight, I feel hopeful. I remember Grandpa telling me that our duty here is to leave it a little bit better than we found it. It is the idea that we can make changes, redirect fate, which made the colonists build roads and schools and hospitals. We are in charge of our own destiny; that is the philosophy of the West. We can make things better. I can almost believe it.

Mugabe makes a speech after the results are released. He is very calm, staring over the heads of the crowd, saying that the people have spoken.

“Shit, man,” says Mum, staring at his face.

I know what she is seeing, because I am seeing it too. There is a powerful anger in him that seems to come right out of the TV screen and jab us in the chest with a prodding finger. You, it is saying. You will pay for this. You will be next.

He has started wearing his old army fatigues. The trousers are too short on his spindly, old-man legs, showing a few inches of blue sock. His ankles are knobby and thin. For a moment I feel sorry for him, this old man who is petulant at not getting his own way. He reminds me of Grandpa after Granny died.

Articles start popping up in the government newspaper, blaming the whites for the results. The farmers forced their workers to vote No, the paper says.

“How the yell are we supposed to be blamed for this?” says Steve. “There’s only a bluddy handful of us.”

When we get home that night, the house is ankle-deep in water. The parquet floors are drowned and stained, and the paint on the walls is starting to bubble.

“What the bloody yell ...” says Steve as we splash our way into the kitchen. He presses the light switch, but nothing happens. Power cut. We don’t bother putting our candles and torches away now, because there is one almost every night, and the camping stove has a permanent place in the corner of the kitchen.

Steve switches the torch on, and we follow its optimistic light down the corridor. All the floors are underwater.

“What happened?” asks Mum.

“The water tank.” Steve gestures with the torch, making the light flicker and dance on the walls. “Looks like it sprung a leak. Must have emptied itself into the ceiling, and then came through and ran down the walls.”

Mum splashes back down the passage to put the kettle on the camping stove. We need tea before we can tackle the water.

“I don’t understand it,” says Steve, looking up at the ceiling. “My dad built this house. Nothing has ever gone wrong here before. All the time I was growing up. Not so much as a termite.”

We watch the water snake down the wall, coiling and hissing into the puddles when it reaches the floor.

“Not a bloody thing,” says Steve.

Chapter Twenty-six

We are Whites now, and nothing else. We do not have lives outside of our Whiteness. We huddle together with the rest of the community like pale maggots in a dusty corpse. All we can do is watch the news, and wait.

My grandparents post us what they call Aid Packages. They have to be careful not to put anything too valuable inside, because parcels are always opened at Customs. When we get them, they are battered and haphazardly taped together.

They send us videos taped from the BBC. They send me teenage magazines with pictures of smiling white girls on the covers and articles about boyfriends and clothes and pop stars. I am fourteen now, nearly fifteen, but I have nothing in common with these girls. I read the magazines anyway.

On weekend mornings we eat our breakfast while we watch the news. BBC World. Sky. CNN. ZBC. A succession of well-brushed, shiny newsreaders staring earnestly into the camera.

When we have finished this morning, I stand up. Mum doesn't like me riding my bike anymore, even if it's just down to the shops, but I want to go anyway. I need to remember that there is a real world out there, not just something seen through a camera lens.

"I'm just returning my library books," I yell to Mum, and run out of the house before she can say anything. The heat is a shock. The leather seat of my bicycle smells of long car journeys, and it stings my bare legs as I climb up.

Our neighbourhood looks just the same. The verges are still green and trimmed, the Cape Turtledoves are singing, the road is coated in jacaranda flowers that pop under the tyres of my bike. The air smells of cut grass and bruised petals. I can hear the sput-sput of sprinklers from every house. Only the potholes in the road show that anything has changed.

I return my books to the Mount Pleasant library, just five minutes from our house. A lot of the street signs have disappeared now, cut down for the metal, but I know my way so well that it doesn't matter. I can hear laughter and screams coming from the swimming pool across the road. It is a hot day, buzzing with insects, and there is no breeze. I do not take the direct route home, but cycle past the shopping centre.

I am biking past the shebeen when I see someone slumped on the steps outside, clutching a Chibuku Scud. He looks familiar. I stop and stand with one foot on the pedals, ready to take off if I am wrong.

“Cephas?”

The man looks up. His eyes are striped red with veins.

“Cephas!” It is good to see him after all these years, but I feel shy. “It's me.”

He stares at me, and I do not know if he has recognised me or not. His mouth opens, and his jaw moves slowly.

“Bluddy white kid,” he says.

I feel like someone has clasped my head in cold hands. “What?”

“Bluddy white kids think they can do whatever they want,” he says. He is speaking very slowly, and his eyes are not focused. “Bugger off.”

I do not think he has seen me. I do not think he knows who I am. “Cephas, it’s me, from the flats.”

“Bugger off, I said!” And he says something in Shona that I only partly understand.

And I do. My legs are shaking, and my bike swerves left and right before I can straighten it out.

We all go to church every week now, even Steve. Once a week we all gather together and sing songs and comfort each other.

“God is working in Zimbabwe,” says one of the banners above the altar.

We pray for peaceful change every week. Our priest is openly political, and in his sermons he talks about Mugabe and his plans to take the white-owned farms.

“He’s going to get himself into trouble,” says Steve.

“It’s his duty to speak out,” says Mum.

“Ja, well, sometimes it’s better to fly under the radar and not get yourself arrested,” says Steve. “When he’s chucked into Chikurubi Prison he won’t be of use to anybody, will he?”

When we sing ‘Jabulani Africa’ now, people stand with their hands up and tears leaking from their eyes. It almost feels like we are talking to God.

There is a march for peace planned for the first day of April. April Fool’s Day, a Saturday. They tell us about it at church. Lots of people are planning to go, even the children and the very old people. They carry banners. ‘No to violence’. ‘No to intimidation’. ‘No to military rule.’ We all help to make them.

“Can we go on the march, Mum?” I ask.

“Don’t be bloody stupid,” she says.

“Oliver’s going.”

“Oliver’s mad, you know that.”

“Why can’t we go? We have to do something.”

“No, we don’t.”

“It’s a peaceful protest.”

Mum turns to me. “How long have you lived here? Fifteen years? And you still think there’s such a thing as a peaceful protest? Don’t be bloody stupid.”

I lock myself in my room and sulk, but Mum pays no attention. And neither does Steve, who I thought might be more sympathetic.

“There will be trouble,” he says. “You just watch.”

On the day of the march we all stay home. The house is very quiet. Steve sits in the dining room pasting newspaper clippings into a scrapbook. Mum is gardening. I am reading in my room. Tatenda and Saru go about their work quietly.

At lunchtime Steve goes to turn his radio on, but Mum stops him. “We’ll know soon enough,” she says. We eat in silence. And then we hear the sound of a helicopter.

“Traffic helicopter,” says Mum. “Or maybe a rescue.”

We sit and chew and listen to the whop whop whop of the blades cutting the air. It fades. And then we hear a siren, very far away.

“It’s fine,” says Steve.

When the setting sun is cracked like an egg yolk on the horizon, someone rings the intercom.

“Hello?” says Steve, and “Oh, Oliver. Come in.”

Oliver wheels his bike down the drive. Saru puts the kettle on.

“Howzit,” says Steve, and then sees the cut on Oliver’s head. “Holy shit, man, are you okay?”

He comes through to the verandah. Mum and I follow, and all four of us stand behind the verandah chairs, gripping the cold metal with our fingers, without sitting down. When Saru brings the tea-tray through, Mum scrapes back her chair and perches on the very edge of the seat, and we follow suit.

“What happened, man?” asks Steve.

Mum pours us all a cup of tea. The steam smells like burning wood.

“Everything went wrong,” says Oliver.

“The march?”

“Ja.”

“What happened?”

“It started out fine. There were police there, watching us, but we had a prayer meeting before we began the march and they backed off. Think it spooked them. They had blockades around the city, though, to stop people getting in.”

“People?”

“People joining the march. Anyway, like I said, it all went fine to begin with. We walked down all the main streets, and passers-by were waving and smiling and

tourists were taking photos. It was fun. Felt like a big party. And everyone was peaceful. Then these thugs appeared.”

“War Vets?”

“Ja. They started laying in to everyone. There were people in bluddy wheelchairs, and kids! They beat up some old white people and a black guy with a camera, as well as anyone else that got in range. And the riot police started shooting tear gas into the crowd.”

“They got you?”

“No, man, I tripped and fell. Which was lucky, because a black guy shoved me into the Edgar's store. I tried to run back out, but he said ‘Get back inside, they’re after you whites’.”

I can tell that Oliver hates being lumped with ‘you whites.’

“We set up a kind of first-aid tent in there.”

“In the Edgar’s store?”

“Ja, all the shops closed their doors. There were bluddy helicopters flying over the city. It was like something out of a war film.”

“Shit.”

We all sit there, holding our cooling cups of tea. Archie coils around my legs, hopeful for some milky tea in a saucer. I put down the whole cup and he laps it delicately, his whiskers arched and quivering.

When we go into town the next day, the street is still littered with broken posters, blood and pieces of brick. It smells of tear gas, a smell that closes up your throat and makes your stomach lurch into your chest.

We have seen footage on all the news channels.

“Why, why? We came in peace,” says one black woman into the camera.

I see the woman with the ‘No Violence’ banner struck by a policeman. Her face looks surprised as her legs buckle and she falls to her knees. A middle-aged white man has a bloody split in his head. We watch as the marchers hoist him onto their shoulders. The white man looks embarrassed.

“A judicial order for the march to proceed without interference was presented to a senior policeman,” says the smooth newsreader voice, “who took it and threw it onto the pavement.”

The blind singer who performs at the corner of First Street and George Silundika Avenue had his guitar destroyed and his money and CDs stolen in the fight.

“I am appealing for help to raise money for a new guitar,” he says into the camera with dejected, puckered eyes that are even blanker than usual. There is a postal address at the bottom of the screen for anyone who wants to help him raise the money. I giggle, clap a hand over my mouth, and stop. It isn’t funny.

We are living a strange life at the moment. We get up, go to school and work and live our lives during the day, then come home to watch the news and see what is happening in the country. We obsessively check all the channels we can. ZBC. CNN. The BBC. Sky News. It is like living two lives. As if nothing has really happened until we see

it on the television that evening. Our own lives have all but disappeared – absorbed into the wider drama.

Oliver comes over for dinner that evening. The sky is streaked pink like blood in water.

“Red sky at night, shepherd’s delight,” says Mum

We sit and watch the sky change colour. Saru leaves for the day, jingling her keys in her pocket and calling, “Goodnight Baas, goodnight Medem,” as she crunches down the gravel. Tatenda lets her out of the gate, tipping an imaginary cap, then runs whistling down to the khaya, where he will get ready for a night on the town. Mum dishes up roast chicken, sadza and vegetables. Steve pours beers with creamy heads. The cat mews for scraps. The parrot makes sleepy mutterings from his cage. Black begins to leak into the sky, leaving a trail of stars.

The moon is big tonight, and orange, like a naartjie hanging on a giant celestial tree. You can see the pockmarks in its skin.

“It’s an optical illusion,” says Steve. “Look.” He stretches out his hand and measures the moon with his fingers.

I try it. The moon is swollen and juicy, but when I pinch it between my finger and thumb it shrinks to its normal size.

“It’s not real,” says Steve. “It just looks that way. It’s always the same size.”

I watch it rise above the broken glass on top of our wall.

“How’s your head?” Mum asks Oliver.

“It’s fine, hey.” Oliver looks different, and not just because he has a plaster on his head. I do not realise what it is about him that is different until I look at his feet.

“You’re wearing shoes,” I say.

“Ja.” Oliver grips his shoe in one brown hand. “My feet have gone soft for some reason. I feel all the thorns and stones at the mo.” He shrugs.

When Oliver leaves, he treads carefully on the gravel. He walks as if his feet are hurting him. He walks cautiously.

Farai calls me that evening. “Hi, howzit?”

“Good.”

There is silence on the other end. This is unusual with Farai.

“Look,” she says after a moment, “Can I come over tomorrow?”

“Of course.”

“Because I’m moving to the States.”

“You’re what?”

“I’ll tell you tomorrow.”

Farai and I sit on a rug in the back garden. We have Cokes and a bowl of crisps, but we haven’t touched them.

“It’s not like we’re not going to see each other again,” says Farai. “I’ll probably bump into you at some glamorous party in New York.”

She is moving to America to live with her older sister.

“What will you be doing in New York?”

“I’ll be some kind of executive. With a corner office. And my secretary has a secretary.”

“And what will I be doing there?”

“How the hell should I know?”

“Right.”

“Are your parents staying?”

Farai shrugs. “Ja, well, it’s not so bad for them.”

“Because they’re ...”

“No, because they’re rich.”

“Sure.”

“I’ll probably be back in the holidays.”

“Will you come back here to live? After uni, I mean?”

“Who knows?” she takes her first sip of Coke.

“That’s very sad for the country,” says Steve when I tell him.

“What?”

“Well, that people like Farai are leaving.”

“What do you mean, people like Farai?” I am in a combative mood.

“It’s not going to be people like us who change this place,” says Steve. “You know that. Farai is the future.”

He is right. Farai is the future. And I am not.

Our minister at church gives a special sermon that Sunday.

“We will not give up,” he says and “God is watching over us.”

Good will triumph, says one of the banners on the wall. We bow our heads and pray in special, robotic praying voices for God to bring us peace and justice and democracy.

When I am at church, I sometimes forget the horror, and the hopelessness. I look around as we sing and I see all the faces tilted upwards, looking at a God I can almost believe is there somewhere. For a moment I believe that it will all work out, that good will triumph over evil. That our prayers are heard.

But when I pray, the words are sucked into a vacuum. There is just darkness out there. Darkness and the old, vengeful gods of Zimbabwe, the ones who want blood-offerings and sacrifice. On a blazing blue-sky day, I can't imagine a God somewhere up there. Instead it feels like a bright, merciless eye pinning us to the world like bugs to a board, watching us squirm with a compassionless gaze. There are older things here than Christianity. They were here first. They are stronger.

Chapter Twenty-seven

I am sitting in the farm office with Mum, addressing envelopes for the monthly invoices. Mum has the radio playing in the background, and turns it up for the news. It is bad, as always. All we hope for is that there is less bad news than the day before.

Mum's parents called us last night from England. They sounded frail and old on the phone, and very far away. I know they are asking us to leave, because Mum pours herself a big gin and tonic before speaking to them and says "Ja. No. Ja. Yes, Mum. I know, Mum," for a long time.

When I speak to them, they make their voices bright and cheerful.

"How's school?"

"Not too bad. Things have calmed down a bit in town so I haven't missed many days."

"Good-oh."

They do not mention their worries to me.

"Morning," says Sean, raising his hand as he passes the offices. He is brown and lean in the sun. I lift my hand in response. He has started working with his dad on the farm, and he has his dad's easy smile and grasp of Shona slang. And swearwords. I have not spoken to him for a long time, apart from a quick greeting, but I see him walking through the tobacco silos and the ostrich paddocks, his hair lit up to the dusty yellow of the grasses.

I hear something on the radio.

“Mum, turn it up.”

Mum turns the dial. We hear the announcement that airlines have stopped flying out of Harare International Airport.

“Mum?”

Mum presses her lips together. “It’s not a big deal, man,” she says. “It’s only temporary.”

I feel my chest tighten and my heart start to leap painfully in my throat. We are trapped.

“Don’t look like that,” says Mum. “It’s not a big deal.”

“But we can’t fly out,” I say.

“We weren’t going to fly out anyway,” says Mum.

But that’s not the point.

“I’m just going outside for a sec,” I say, and make it to the door. The sky is a hot blue, and the farm buildings are so white that every time I blink I can see them imprinted in blue on my eyelids. I walk away from the offices to the dirt road that looks out onto the garages.

Every face on the farm is a threat. Every laugh is a menace, a joke with no punch line. I walk around the offices trying to shake off the feeling, but everyone I see looks like a killer. I don’t know whether their smiles and greetings are real, or whether underneath they are thinking of me as a White, a White that needs to be eliminated. It has a capital letter now. I can feel my chest getting tight. I sit in the shade and try to control it. We are trapped. Nothing is flying out. We have always had a back-up plan, somewhere to go ...

even though I never thought we would really leave, there was always a back-up plan. My breath is no longer just breathing – it sounds like a voice screaming. Nothing is flying out.

I didn't realise how much I relied on our ability to leave. Even though I've been telling everyone in my loudest voice that we will never leave, some secret part of me has been relying on my British passport and the fact that we have enough money to jump on a plane and be out of here if things get really bad.

Patterned curtains hang flashing before my eyes. I dip my head between my knees and try to hold my breath. I can hear my heart slowing down, then speeding up when I have to take a breath.

“Are you okay?”

I can't look up. Not now.

“Medem?”

The voice is young. I look up. It is Lettuce, one of the workers. He comes in and chats to Mum sometimes.

“I'm fine,” I say.

“Okay.” His teeth flash white in a smile as he walks away. I watch him go.

I thought I was one of them. Well, not one of them, exactly, but ... I was one of the cool ones. I listen to Oliver Mtukudzi. I have black friends. I wear the tie-dyed shirts and the rainbow caps. I'm not a White. Not really. Am I?

I think of Beauty, all those years ago. How can I possibly grow up with two mothers, one black and one white, and still be just a White?

My brain is not working properly. Maybe it is the heat. I start to walk back towards the offices. Things will be normal there. There are farm invasions, but everyone is still concentrating on end-of-month accounts.

As I am walking back, Mr Cooper pulls up on his motorcycle.

“Howzit?”

“Good.” I pull my lips back over my teeth in what I think a smile looks like.

“How’s school?”

“Good.”

“You all right?” He runs his hand through his hair. He never wears a bike helmet. He says it is because he wants to be able to hear what the workers are shouting at him as he goes past, in case they are being cheeky.

“I’m fine.”

“You’re not worried about all this government nonsense, are you?” he says. He is smiling. “Ach, sure, they talk big, but we’ve been here for years and we’ll be here for years still. These bluddy munts can’t force us off our land.”

I nod.

Mr Cooper is about to say something else, but stops to shout in Shona to a passing worker. Something about his girlfriend ... my Shona is fading, and his is very colloquial, so I can’t understand it all. The worker shouts something back, and laughs.

“The boys would never stand for it,” he says, turning his attention back to me.

“D’you think they’d let some rabble come in here and shuper us?”

“No.”

“No, they wouldn’t. Now, is your Mum inside?”

“Ja.”

“Good stuff.” He started up his bike, walking his feet along the ground a little way before it sprang into life. “See you in there, then.”

“Okay.”

I watch him pull up to the offices and walk in. I notice that his hair has gone greyer around the hairline.

A few minutes after Mr Cooper goes inside, Shumba trots up. He gives me a wide grin, his tongue lolling out the side of his mouth, then heads for his master’s motorcycle. He has obviously followed him from the house because a gate was left open. Sean will be furious. Shumba gives me a conspiratorial look over his furry shoulder. I remember the stories I have heard about farmers’ dogs ... but nothing will happen to Shumba. He may be a big softie, but he’s a strong animal and a good guard dog.

I follow Shumba back to the offices. The same words are running through my mind. No planes are leaving. We are trapped.

Before I go in I pause outside to pour Shumba a bowl of water from the tap. Through the blinds on the window I see Mr Cooper in Mum’s office. He is sitting on the edge of her desk, as usual, his legs brown and lean in khaki shorts. He lowers his head to look at some paperwork Mum is showing him, and for a second their heads are very close

together. As I watch, Mr Cooper puts out a hand and rests it on Mum's shoulder. It is a simple gesture, but the way she looks up and smiles reminds me of how Archie looks when you run your fingers along his back, lightly, and he arches up to meet them.

I realise that Shumba has wiped his dripping muzzle on my jeans, and I push him away, feeling the crunch of wet fur under my hand. Mr Cooper is moving towards the door, and I duck down to fill up the water bowl again.

"Cheers," says Mr Cooper to me, and whistles for Shumba. The dog gives me a bright glance, and then runs after his master.

"You okay now?" says Mum from inside.

"Ja," I say, "I'm okay," and sit back down to work on the envelopes.

The drive home from the farm takes almost an hour. Mum puts a CD on. When we pass the Independence Arch I see that someone has thrown red paint on it.

"Appropriate," is all Mum says. To me the white arch looks like a pulled tooth with a bloody stump.

When I finish writing my email to my grandparents in England that evening, Steve sits down to read over it. He checks my emails now, to make sure there's nothing bad that could be traced back to us.

I forget, sometimes, how careful we have to be. We are not allowed to say anything bad about the President in case someone hears and reports us. We know that the government opens any letters we send to England, and all the packages my grandparents send us have obviously been opened and clumsily resealed. We also know that our emails

are checked for keywords that might mean we are sending messages out of the country, telling people what is happening here. All the whites develop a code. In our emails and our conversation, we call Mugabe Tim. I ask Steve what it means.

“That Ignorant Munt,” he tells me. I am surprised that he answered me so quickly. I thought this would go under the heading of Things He Will Tell Me When I Am Older.

It occurs to me that perhaps I am Older now, that magical age when everything will be revealed. I certainly feel older, as I watch my mother’s skin go loose on her bones, and see the first grey hairs appear at her temples. When I touch her hair now it no longer feels glossy and oiled, but crumbling. New lines have appeared – one between her eyebrows, a sharp, deep cut, and two at the corners of her mouth.

In bed that night, I wonder what it would be like to live in England. I am so hot that sweat is trickling down the backs of my knees and pooling in the crooks of my elbows, as if my whole body is crying. I imagine lying in bed in a cold country where there is no need for a mosquito net and no mysterious sounds from outside. I wonder if I can prepare myself for it if I start imagining myself there now. If that will make it easier.

Mugabe tells us that we have to hand in our foreign passports or lose our Zimbabwean passports and be declared aliens. If we don’t renounce our British citizenship, we can’t vote.

“Mum, we have to be able to vote,” I say.

“Don’t be stupid,” says Mum. “Do you think our votes will make any difference? The whole thing is rigged.”

“But we have to make a stand!” I say. I am wearing a T-shirt with the Zimbabwe flag on it. I am on fire with the drama of the situation, the potential for some pointless heroic gesture.

“We’re giving up the Zimbabwe passports and that’s that,” says Mum.

“Bluddy stupid,” says Steve.

It’s not even a decision, really. Of course we will keep our British passports. We would be crazy not to. But handing the Zimbabwean passports over is hard. Steve leaves it until the very last minute.

“I’m keeping my Zimbabwean one,” he says on the morning of the last day.

Mum and I stare at him.

“Are you mad?” says Mum.

“I’m a Zimbabwean,” says Steve. “I’m not a bluddy Brit.”

“You can’t give up your British passport.” Mum crunches down on her breakfast toast as if that settles the argument.

“I’d rather give up my British passport than my Zimbabwean one.”

I feel hollow. Passports are the most important things we own. Mum keeps the three maroon pamphlets in a locked cupboard, and she has always told me that they are the first things we grab if we have to leave quickly. Our passports represent civilisation, freedom, the possibility of a future somewhere else. I have a superstitious attachment to mine, as if it is one of Beauty’s totems. As well as freedom, it represents my family – my other family, the one in England. The thought of Steve just handing his over makes me feel sick.

“That’s stupid,” says Mum. “Come on, Steve. It doesn’t mean you’re not a Zimbabwean any more. It’s just a piece of paper. Mugabe wants you to give up your British passport so you’re trapped here.”

Steve shakes his head and stares at his tea. Mum puts out a hand and touches his. I see the shiny patch on his knuckle where he had a piece of skin cancer cut out.

“It doesn’t mean anything,” says Mum.

But we know it does.

Steve gives up his Zimbabwean passport. The people at the office grumble because he has left it so late, and make him wait for an hour before they bring him the paperwork. For the rest of the day he is silent and brooding.

“It is too much,” says Tatenda, shaking his head. I am sitting with him and Saru while they have their tea. “Mugabe must go now.”

Saru and I exchange glances. It is not safe to say things like that.

“I worry about that one,” says Saru later. She is making the dinner, and I am sitting on the back doorstep half-watching her, half-playing with Archie. “My husband has heard him in the shebeens. He is always yelling about Mugabe and the MDC.”

I am silent. I know that is not a good idea, but I don’t want to voice any opinions. Even to Saru.

Oliver is the only person we know who hands in his British passport. He gleefully hands in his South African passport as well, and then throws a party.

“Celebrating the burning of bridges,” he says, “and the beginning of the end.” He has taken up wine-making, and his house is full of glass bottles full of greenish fluid. I know that his wines sometimes explode in the bottle, and I hope that they won’t do the same in our stomachs. The wine doesn’t taste of anything, but it smacks you upside the head like a flat hand and turns your vision blue.

The house is covered in Zimbabwe flags, and everyone gets splendidly drunk.

“You’re mad,” Steve tells Oliver every ten minutes.

“I know,” says Oliver. “Isn’t it great?”

It is only when the other guests are gone and we are helping him to clear up that he drops the act.

“What am I meant to do, hey?” he says. “There is nothing for me anywhere else. This is what I do.”

His whole life is cave paintings, Zimbabwean history, the Bush. I feel guilty for seeing a life outside of Zimbabwe – snapshots in my head, of me wearing a scarf and gloves on some faraway university campus. Of course, in that mental picture I was coming back to Zimbabwe in the summer holidays. There doesn’t seem much chance of that now.

We are illegal aliens. The name makes me smile. It makes us sound like we have two heads, rather than just being white Zimbabweans with British passports.

Mum starts to have low conversations with Mr Cooper in her office that I strain to hear from the other side of the door. I know, somehow, that Steve doesn’t know about these conversations, and I don’t tell him. I hear the odd word – passports, airport, money.

I know Mum has a bank account that Steve doesn't know about. She uses it sometimes for treats or emergencies, and she has always told me not to say anything to Steve.

"It's our secret," she says.

Mum's wages go straight into the family account along with Steve's. This money is coming from somewhere else. But I don't ask. We need everything we can get.

Mum and I drive to the supermarket to get meat for dinner. She is making Steve's favourite, to cheer him up. He has been in a foul mood since giving up his passport.

"What do we do now?" I ask.

"We go home."

"No, I mean, now that we're not citizens any more."

Mum keeps her eyes on the road. "Mr Cooper thinks we should leave," she says finally.

My stomach feels empty, as if I am hungry. Leaving is something we will do in the future. It is not something we will ever do now. It is always just around the corner, after some vague event that makes it necessary, far enough away that it might not come at all.

"Oh."

"And Steve doesn't."

"Oh." Steve is made of biltong, woodsmoke, khaki and cowhide. He couldn't survive anywhere else.

"But we're not going yet," I say.

‘I don’t know,’ says Mum. ‘If we get enough foreign currency, there’s no reason to stay.’

‘But we can’t leave. Not unless we have to.’

‘Things aren’t going to get better,’ says Mum. ‘It’s not a matter of ‘if’, it’s a matter of ‘when’.’

When we get home I sit on the back doorstep in the sun, watching Archie chase lizards. His fur gleams black-red in the sun like Coke. I can smell clean laundry and the dark, bitter smell of fresh tea. I can see Saru and Tatenda sitting on the grass drinking from enamel mugs and eating thick bricks of peanut butter and bread. I can’t imagine living anywhere else. I thought we would always have this house.

Inside, I touch the stone sculpture of Grandpa, leaving a greasy fingerprint on the black stone. I don’t know if I’m trying to anchor myself here, or trying to get some sort of magic guidance from Grandpa. Either way, it doesn’t work.

Mum brings up the subject of leaving at dinner, while I am there. I know she has done this so that they won’t have too big a row. Steve doesn’t like fighting with Mum in front of me or the servants.

‘We always said we’d leave when we got burgled, Steve,’ she says.

‘They only took the bloody laptop.’

‘I know. But it might be time to seriously consider it. We can stay with Mum and Dad ...’

‘I hate England.’

‘I know you hate England.’

“Too bluddy cold. Too many people.”

“I know, Steve, but we can’t carry on like this. It’s just a matter of time before everything falls apart.”

“It could get better. The election’s coming up ...”

“Ja, as if that will make any difference. You know how it works. Mugabe’s the big chief, he’s not going to give up power.”

“I don’t want to talk about it now.”

I am staring at my plate, pushing a piece of carrot around with my fork.

“I’ve spoken to Mr Cooper about it, and he thinks ...”

Steve is tight-lipped.

“So you’ve been discussing this with Mark Cooper.”

“Not discussing this, Steve. He’s just concerned.”

“Concerned for you.”

“For all of us. Bluddy yell, Steve, he just wants to look after us. You should be bluddy grateful.”

“Ja, like I should be grateful for the bluddy pool he wants to put in, and the guard.”

“You’re just pissed off because I make more money than you and you don’t like it.”

“No, I’m pissed off because my wife discusses our private business with another man.”

“He’s not another man, he’s my boss. For Christ’s sake, Steve.”

“Ja, well, you can go and tell him that we don’t need his money.”

“Don’t be bluddy stupid! We need as much money as we can get. How else are we going to get into a country? I haven’t got a degree. I have almost no points. We need money to get in, and you know it. Get off your bluddy high horse.”

“My bluddy high horse! When my wife ...” Steve realises I’m still sitting at the table. “Go to your room.”

I do not go to my room. I run down to the bottom of the garden, to the avocado tree next to the chicken run. I sit and listen to the chickens murmuring in low, feathery voices. I can hear Tatenda whistling from somewhere in the garden.

Living in Zimbabwe is like having a demanding younger brother or sister. It is loud, disruptive and badly behaved. It demands everyone’s attention, sucks up everyone’s energy, ruins family holidays and dinner conversation, keeps everyone up at night worrying about its future. All our problems centre around Zimbabwe’s problems.

It would be disorienting to be suddenly free of it – to make choices that aren’t dictated by its rowdy, unignorable presence. Here, Mugabe is to blame for everything. Away from Zimbabwe, some of our problems might actually be our own fault. I look at Mum and Steve, and I wonder what would happen if we lived somewhere where we didn’t have to worry constantly about money, and whether we will be able to buy petrol, and whether we will have to leave in the middle of the night. Or if we no longer had servants wandering about the house who force us to speak in lowered voices when we have an argument. Where you couldn’t exchange rueful glances with people in the supermarket when the bread has run out. Where you couldn’t speak in code and know that everyone would understand. We are all bound together by our problems.

The next day, Mum and Steve are still not speaking. Steve goes into the garden to order Tatenda around, which always makes him feel better. I go with Mum to the farm, as usual.

“Are the Coopers going to leave?” I ask. Mum’s radio crackles at her side. She never puts it down now, just in case the news everyone dreads is coming through.

“I don’t know.”

It is well-known that they have received threats. It is one of the biggest farms in Zimbabwe. What War Vet wouldn’t want a piece of it?

“Mark Cooper won’t leave,” says Mum. “He’s more Shona than the Shona. They love him.”

We sit in silence for a moment, thinking about all the farm workers that joke and laugh with Mr Cooper when he roars around the farm on his motorbike.

“I don’t think it matters,” I say.

Chapter Twenty-eight

The first white farmer dies. He is abducted from his farm and shot. The five farmers who followed to try and rescue him are attacked and beaten. They are not young men. They have beer bellies from years of standing over a braai with a Castle Lager in their hands. They have greying hair and floppy white hats. They have short shorts and veldtskoens, and a tan that stops at their sleeves and the folded tops of their socks. They look like people we know.

On Easter weekend we hear about the white farmer who was killed in Nyamadhlovu, down near Bulawayo – comfortably far away. For me. Not for Steve, who was born there.

The story is dramatic, a Dawn Raid, a Last Stand of the white farmer against the war vets. It sounds like a Western. A man locking himself in his house with ammunition and dogs. His wife and children fled. A crackle on the radio telling him that They were coming, the news we all dread. Seventy attackers. A two-hour siege. An injured man making his own splints for a shattered right leg. Roadblocks placed to stop an ambulance getting through. Molotov cocktails thrown through the windows.

And then: two shots in the face as the farmer stumbled out. Beatings with an iron bar. They like to do things thoroughly here.

We see a picture on BBC news.

“Don’t look,” says Mum, but I do, and I see a pulpy mess of white and pink that used to be a man. He has been mashed into the ground. He does not even look human. He looks like meat.

“What’s that on his leg?”

“Apparently he made himself a splint,” says Steve. “When his leg was shot.”

I imagine him carefully strapping his home-made splint to his leg. So much care for his body, the same body that was blown apart and chopped up as soon as he crawled outside.

The attack was organised by Comrade Jesus. The killing happened on Zimbabwe’s Independence Day. The place is called Compensation Farm. It is all straight out of a film script – ironies so great that no one even bothers to mention them.

One of the farm workers is interviewed. He is sobbing. He says his employer did not deserve to “die like a dog”. The news shows pictures of the body, covered with a sheet. The war veterans were shipped there in busloads from Harare, and given weapons. Local war veterans are horrified by the attacks, and make sure to say they were not involved. The dead farmer quickly becomes a mythical figure, a folk hero.

“He’s not bloody Ned Kelly,” mutters Steve, but we all see ourselves in him. And we are scared. It has started, and we all know where it will go. The war is back. No one says it, but everyone knows it. People dig out their old guns. Mum goes to bed with a migraine. I have so many panic attacks that I almost don’t notice them anymore – my heart is scudding on quick waves of blood, and I hear it like a drumbeat in my ears, always. I start to say “Pardon?” every time someone talks to me, because I can hardly hear them over the drums. The same drums that announce the start of ZBC news.

This was the second farmer to be killed. And as if something is hungry for more blood, the killings keep on coming.

Steve watches the news over dinner. Even after he swallows a mouthful, his teeth keep grinding. We are silent as we watch Mugabe gesticulating with chopping motions of his hands. There is spittle at the corner of his mouth.

“I’ll burn the house to the ground myself rather than let those filthy kaffirs get their hands on it,” says Steve suddenly. He takes his plate to the kitchen.

There are more and more White Farmers on the news these days. They all look the same: brown skin, white shirt, khaki shorts, long socks, vellies, paunches. So easy to caricature. The dreadful cartoons in the newspaper show them as comical figures, the Big Baases who own the land

I start having nightmares about War Vets invading our house. We have heard stories of what they do inside the farmers’ homesteads. I imagine them smashing our ornaments, burning the family pictures.

Auntie Mary and Uncle Pieter call every night now. Mum holds the receiver as if she is gripping Auntie Mary’s hand.

“They made us invite them in for a drink the other night,” says Uncle Pieter. “I had to go and buy six crates of beer. And they made Mary cook them dinner.”

“What do you make for thirty War Veterans?” says Mary when Pieter gives her the phone. “It’s not in any etiquette books, is it?”

She laughs. And she laughs again when Mum asks if she is okay.

“Ja, I’m okay. We’ve got the dogs if they get too cheeky.”

Mum does not remind her of what the War Vets do to dogs. We have seen the pictures of pets hung on chicken wire fences, dogs shot and crumpled in farmhouse driveways.

Oliver feels personally affronted by the attacks. He seems to fold in on himself, grow shorter. He thought the wars were behind us, that we were enlightened now. Sure, we had problems, but we were heading in the right direction and that old black-white palaver was gone forever. One evening he packs a rucksack and disappears into the Bush, just takes off.

“Bluddy stupid thing to do,” says Steve. But I can understand it. There are things that will hurt you in the Bush – insects and snakes and animals and tokoloshes and ghosts – but they will not try and justify the blood with laws and long speeches. Even if the people of Zimbabwe reject him, Oliver knows that the Bush will not.

The fabric between the old world and the new one has started to tear. Shapes are moving in the night, a whisper of a darker black behind the night. Older gods than ours have woken up, and they live by older rules. Mercy is not one of them. Nor is forgiveness, nor happy worship-group songs, nor The Lord is My Shepherd. As we crowd around the BBC World Service listening to the stories of violence and murder, I can feel the night pressing on the house like hands cupped over ears.

We are under attack from the world around us, too. Our garden gets an infestation of armyworm. Steve and Tatenda launch a counter-attack with foul-smelling chemicals that burn our grass to a peroxide blond. The armyworms, which are really

caterpillars, march on tiny legs, their blind, blunt faces pointed towards our house. I do not walk on the grass these days.

I catch bilharzia from swimming in Farai's pool. The pump has been broken for a while, and the water has become stagnant. We used to study the life-cycle of the parasite at school, but I can't remember anything apart from the fact that it is carried by snails and enters your body through the skin. Which is disgusting. The doctor gives me a fat pill almost too big to swallow, and tells me to stay in bed after I have taken it.

"Why?" I ask.

"Because it will upset your balance."

When I get home and swallow the pill, I lie back carefully on the pillow and wait for it to take effect. So far everything seems fine. Then I realise I need to go to the bathroom. I swing my feet onto the floor, and the ceiling seems to wheel round under me while the floor shoots up to where the ceiling used to be. Gravity isn't working – I feel like a fly clinging to a wall. Strangely, this is a relief. All the other laws have failed. Why should physics be any different? Finally, the world looks the way it feels – upside-down and spinning.

There are more crows than usual, too. They sit on the branches of the pecan and macadamia trees, laughing down at us and throwing empty shells. Grandpa used to get Jonah to shoot one crow with a pellet gun and hang it from the tree by one scaly foot to scare the others away.

Steve decides to try it. He does not trust Tatenda with the pellet gun.

"Sure you can manage it?" says Mum.

“Of course I can bluddy manage it,” says Steve. “I was in the army, wasn’t I?”

I go outside with him. Tatenda is there too, grinning. This is the most exciting thing to happen to him all day.

The crows snicker down at us. They cock their heads on one side and eyeball Steve.

“Right,” says Steve, and raises the gun to his shoulder. There is a commotion among the crows. They know about guns. They scramble to take off, tripping over each other. Steve fires once, twice into the crowd, and a bird falls.

“Got the bastard,” says Steve, but when the bird hits the ground it gets to its feet and starts staggering towards us.

“Shit.” Steve lowers the gun.

“It’s not dead,” I say.

Steve gives me a look. “I can see that. We’ll have to shoot it again.”

The bird is turning in a circle around its injured wing and flapping with the other, trying to get off the ground.

“I can’t hit it while it’s moving,” says Steve. “Hold it still.”

I hesitate.

“We have to put the bluddy thing out if its misery.”

I don’t want to touch it. Its black eye is revolving in its head as it looks for a way out. Its feathers shine purple and green beneath the black. Its beak is clicking.

“Hold the bluddy thing still!”

I grab the crow’s wings and hold them closed. It snaps its beak at me and rolls its eyes.

“Right,” says Steve, and rests the gun right against its head and pulls the trigger. Its brains fall out of the back of its head like chewed gum.

“Good stuff.” Steve picks it up by one foot. “Tatenda, grab the ladder. We’ll string the thing up.”

Tatenda doesn’t bother with the ladder, just shimmies up the tree with the agility of a vervet monkey. He ties the crow’s feet to one of the higher branches.

“Is that good, Baas?”

“Ja, good.”

The crow revolves slowly. The sun reflects off its dead eye.

“Kill one and the rest will go away,” says Steve.

The crow casts a pall over the garden. All I can see from the back doorstep is its dead, slowly spinning body. It rotates one way, then, when the string has wound itself too tightly, it starts to spin the other way. It is hypnotic.

Now when I look out into the night, I don’t see the bright fingernail of moon or the pale shapes of moths. Instead, I look for shadows where something might be hiding, the glint of eyes that don’t belong to any animal. We are besieged. We have always locked every door and had burglar bars on every window, but now there is no sense of safety even when we are barricaded indoors. I lie awake for an hour every night listening for sounds outside. Sometimes I am listening so intently that I forget to breathe, and my chest will surge up with a laboured puff of air, startling me out of my trance. I know Mum and Steve are awake too, in their bedroom. I can’t hear anything, but the silence from their room is a listening silence, a watchful silence.

It seems inevitable, this slide into violence. There are some people who can read scary novels, watch horror movies, play violent computer games, and then go to bed and never think about them again. I cannot read even the simplest ghost story. I turn my head away from the television when someone is shot or stabbed. Every violent act is another crack in the normality that we have built up so carefully over the years. Smack! A headless chicken squirting blood from a scrawny neck. Smash! A dead kitten eaten to sandy crumbs by maggots. Crack! A skull crunched open like an egg by a black man wielding a bhadza. Someone could kill you for no reason – no reason at all. Just because it is night-time, and he has an axe, and he is high on mbanje. Just because you are white. Or perhaps there is not even that much of a reason. Just the instinct to – Smack! Smash! – hit something because it is there, in front of you, and because you can. Like holding the slender, furry neck of a kitten in your hands and closing your eyes, knowing that if you wanted to you could snap it. That brief urge, followed by remorse – cuddling the kitten closer, whispering into its ear. I would not hurt you, I would not, of course not. I will not hurt you.

We are woken up near midnight by the phone. It rings and rings in the darkness while we swim up from our dreams and back into the quiet house. I hear Mum answer, then a light is switched on somewhere. I can see the band of yellow under my door. When people start moving about and I hear the hiss of the kettle, I climb out of bed and walk down to the kitchen.

“What are you doing up?” says Steve.

“I heard the phone.”

“Oh.”

Mum is pale and her eyes are red. “That was Auntie Mary,” she says. “They’re about half an hour away.”

“From here?”

“Ja.”

“But it’s the middle of the night.”

“They had to leave the farm,” says Steve.

“Why?”

Mum and Steve look at each other through the steam from the teapot. “Just had to,” says Steve.

“Do you want some tea?” says Mum.

She pours me a cup. I sit down. Steve pulls his little world radio over to him and starts fiddling with the dials to tune it. Whistle, crackle, hiss, a voice, then a snatch of sunshiny trumpet music that could be from South America. Steve loves to tune the radio, and he is fussy about getting the perfect sound. I find that the static scrapes over my nerves and the voices, when they come, sound startling and stark.

The light from the kitchen window shines into the garden, and I can see the dead crow revolving slowly in its dull gleam.

Chapter Twenty-nine

They pile into the house. My aunt and uncle look thin and red-eyed. My cousin is fuzzy around the edges and half-asleep. They are carrying two bags each, and all of the bags are bulging.

Mum has thrown blankets and pillows on the sofas in the lounge. Soon it is awash with people and luggage.

“I’ll make some tea,” says Mum, and vanishes. She pops her head around the door to add, “Better call Mum and Dad.”

“Ja.” My aunt takes the phone out of the lounge, smiling apologetically at us all. My uncle leans his elbows on his knees.

“So,” says Steve. “What time is your flight tomorrow?” He glances at the clock. “Today.”

“Five,” says my uncle.

“Early,” says Steve.

“You still okay to give us a lift?”

“Ja. Is there going to be any trouble with ...?”

“No, I don’t think so. We’re saying we’re going on holiday. They wouldn’t have had time to ...”

“Ja.”

“What happened?” I ask.

My uncle looks at my cousin, then me. “We thought it would be a good time to go visit Granny and Grandpa for a while,” he says.

“We’re going on a plane,” says my cousin. He is nine years old, another golden-haired mini-farmer with brown skin and dusty feet.

“Cool.”

“I’ve never been on a plane.”

“You’ll get the kids’ pack,” I say to him. He brightens a little. “Sometimes they have really good models you can make. And colouring books.”

Steve and my uncle start talking in murmurs about the trip. I know I am meant to entertain my cousin, but I don’t know what to say.

“We had to leave the dogs behind,” he whispers. “And all the horses.”

“I know.”

“We gave them to a friend,” he adds. “We didn’t just leave them.” His face is fierce.

“I know.”

We have all heard the stories of dogs and cats left to forage on farms, or dumped out of car doors on the Airport Road.

My cousin has fallen asleep. His breath whiffles in and out of his nose. The shadows in the room seem longer. Mum comes through with a tray of tea and toast spread with butter and anchovy paste. It is what she makes for me when I am sick. When she has poured the tea and sat down, and we are all clutching hot cups, the real business begins.

My aunt comes back with the phone and sits down. “They’re going to pick us up from the airport,” she says to Uncle Pieter.

“Lekker.”

There is a silence, and then “Those bloody kaffirs,” she says.

“Ja.” My uncle nods slowly. They don’t say anything more. We all know this is how things work in Zimbabwe. You have to be strong, you have to shrug these things off and Make a Plan.

Steve and my uncle sit together, unconsciously mirroring each other’s bowed heads, clenched knuckles, chins resting on fists.

I think of the farm – the stretches of white road lined with dead flowers, the blue gum trees, the horses with their dust-powdered coats, the endless ear-splitting racket of the chickens. I don’t know what the War Vets will do to it, but I imagine them rummaging through the closets and drawers, using every pan in the kitchen, running themselves baths and using all of Auntie Mary’s expensive bath salts. I know this is ridiculous.

“What about the workers?” says Steve.

“Ja, well, they tried,” says my uncle. “That poor bugger Phineas got himself beaten up for his trouble.”

“What will they do?”

“Hell, I don’t know, hey,” says my uncle. “Some of them might stay on, but, shit, if they break it up and use it all for growing six mealies each, there’ll be no work.”

“Hapana basa,” says Steve. The men laugh a little.

My uncle is rooted in the soil like a baobab tree. There is dirt under his fingernails that no scrubbing will get rid of, and every crease in his palms is a thin brown line. His skin has been burnt by forty African summers to the consistency of horse-hide.

He speaks Shona more readily than he speaks English, which is why his words come out in short, sharp bursts, as if he has to think before each one.

“Ja, well,” says my uncle again. I can see him looking ahead already to the next step. There is always a next step here in the land of Make A Plan.

“Auntie Mary,” I say, “What really happened to the dogs?”

She looks at me. Her face is grey. “They shot them,” she says. “Shot them and hung them on the fence as a warning”

Those beautiful dogs. The little black spaniel, the big golden retriever. Friendly animals with names and personalities and warm breath. Dogs and cats, horses, pets of all kinds are being killed.

“Don’t tell your cousin, okay?” she says, and I nod.

They leave in the grey, concrete light of morning, just as the sun is hardening in the sky. Steve drives them to the airport. There is not enough room in the car for Mum and me to come too, so we wave them off at the gate. The car is weighed down at the back with their luggage, and barely scrapes over the speed bumps.

I am allowed coffee this morning. It is bitter and gritty, and the milk swims in pale, scaly puddles on its surface.

“Are they going to come back?” I ask.

Mum smiles. “Maybe.” She reaches out and smooths the hair off my forehead with a dry hand, as if I am five years old again. For a second I imagine I can smell the stale, furry air of an airport, hear the roar of planes. I wish I was going with them.

We get a call from my grandparents two days later – quavering, elderly voices that sound far away. My cousin comes on the line too, to tell me about playing football with the local boys on muddy fields, and to tell me about snow.

“It didn’t settle,” he says, “but we saw it falling.”

“Cool,” I say.

We start keeping a suitcase packed and ready to go in the corner of Mum and Steve’s bedroom. It is called a Grab Bag, and every white has one now – just in case we have to fly out in the middle of the night, like Auntie Mary and Uncle Pieter, or drive to Beitbridge or the Mozambique border. We are meant to fill it up with all the essentials and leave it alone, but we can’t seem to stop packing it. Passports and important paperwork are in a box under lock and key in Mum’s cupboard, also ready to grab in the middle of the night – this suitcase is for things we can’t bear to leave behind.

It starts sensibly – photo albums, some precious jewellery – and then gets steadily less so. Mum’s ancient teddy bear, who is missing an eye and most of his nose, goes in. My stuffed cat, which I have had ever since I was born, goes in and out on a daily basis. I put him in the suitcase in the morning, since I can’t bear the thought of accidentally leaving him behind, and then take him out at night because I feel sorry for him alone in the dark. And in the morning, he goes back in.

Mum is relentlessly cheerful, even more than usual. She jollies Steve and me along. She makes the hour-long drive to the farm every morning, and drives back every evening. She

creates meals out of whatever we are able to buy that week. She buys us chocolate from the petrol station whenever there is any.

I have managed to go to school almost every day this week. A friend's mother drops me home in the evening.

“Mum? Mum!”

I slam the door and hear it echo through the house. I know Steve is out tonight, but Mum should be here.

“Mum!”

The lights are all off. I switch them on as I go – the snick of the switch and then the fizz and crackle of the fluorescent bulbs that cast wild shadows on the wall before settling down into a steady hum. Archie appears at my feet. His eyes are deep wells of black, and his tail is up and fluffed.

I hear something from the lounge. “Mum?”

I can suddenly see in sharp focus, and the hairs on my arms rise up. I pull a walking stick out of the tub by the front door, and walk quietly through to the lounge. There is a shape in one of the chairs. I flick the light on.

“Mum?”

Mum is sitting in her bathrobe, surrounded by crumpled tissues, a glass, and a bottle of Scotch. She is pale and waxy, her nose a bright spot in the middle of her face. She turns her head to look at me. She is not wearing her glasses, and her eyes have a naked, unseeing look.

“Oh, hello, darling.” Her voice sounds thick.

“What’s the matter, Mum?”

Mum waves her hand. “Oh, I’m fine.”

I touch her hand. It feels like paper. “Have you had anything to eat?”

“No. But I’m not hungry.”

I don’t know how to cook – I have never had to learn – but it can’t be too difficult to heat up a can of beans and frankfurters. I open the tin and pour the orange gloop into a pan.

“Do you want some tea, Mum?” I call. There is an indistinct noise from the lounge which I choose to interpret as yes. I switch the kettle on. The beans have started to bubble, and I pour them into a bowl. They have crystallized at the bottom, but I stir them around and they look pretty appetizing. In her current state, Mum probably won’t notice the difference.

I take her through a tray and a cup of tea. She has tried to tidy herself up while I was in the kitchen – her hair is smoothed down and she is wearing her glasses. There is a white speck of tissue on the side of her nose.

“Thanks, treasure.” She sips the tea. I perch on the arm of her chair and watch.

After a while, “What’s the matter, Mum?”

“Oh ...” She pinches the bridge of her nose. “It’s nothing, really, I’m just a little tired.”

I have never seen Mum cry properly before, not even when Granny and Grandpa died. For the first time, I look at Mum and I see her as a person. I see her pale, freckled face and red-painted lips – she never tans, just grows more freckles – and see her as Someone Else, removed from me. She is like any mother in Zimbabwe, in so many

ways. She is pretty, tough, cynical, fair-haired and tanned. She can always Make A Plan. She knows all the black market places to buy forex and food – she can deal with snakes and spiders, even though they make her squeal. She does her best with the servants, she keeps her sense of humour even in the worst situations, and she manages to get to her hair appointments even when there is rioting in the streets.

“Come on, Mum.” I want her to tell me.

Mum smiles and downs the rest of her tea. “I called your grandparents today, that’s all.”

They are worried about us, I know. They want us to move to England. I have gathered this by lying awake in bed and straining to hear Mum and Steve talk in their bedroom.

“What did they say?”

“Oh, you know, the usual.” Mum takes a spoonful of my concoction, but the spoon hovers in the air and doesn’t start towards her mouth. “They’re getting old, so they worry. And it’s so long since they lived here, they’ve forgotten what it’s like. I’ve told them not to worry about us.”

“Okay.”

Sometimes I want to be in England so badly that I can almost feel the cold. I want to be safe. I feel guilty for wanting to be somewhere else. There are lots of people who have left already – moved to South Africa, England or even places as far away as Australia or New Zealand.

“They’ve gapped it,” or “Rats deserting a sinking ship,” Oliver and Steve say whenever we hear about someone else leaving.

I do not want to be a rat, but if the ship is sinking I don't see any other option.

"Thanks for the tea," says Mum. She looks like herself again, and I can almost forget the dark, silent shape in the chair.

"That's okay. Do you want me to run a bath? You can have it first."

"No thanks. I think I'll just go to bed."

"Okay."

I have a bath that night. I leave the lights off, and sit in the hot water staring out the window at the scudding clouds and the wild thrashing of the trees in the wind. I can hear the television from the bedroom – first the drums of ZBC, then the dramatic, film-score music of CNN and SKY, then the BBC. I can see myself for a second, sitting in the cooling water, as if I am remembering myself from somewhere far in the future, safe on another shore.

I know that Mum wants to leave. I hear her on the phone to my grandparents, when Steve is out. She half-covers the phone with one hand, as if her voice could escape. I hope the phone lines are not being tapped.

"I can't," she says, and "Not just yet." I pretend I haven't heard, but I bring her cups of tea in the evenings.

"Thank you, treasure," she says, and smooths my hair from my forehead. I think of Lucy and Dad, far away in Canada. What is Canada like? I picture snow, and Mounties, and moose. I cannot picture brown and barefoot Lucy there.

"I've booked a ticket to England," she says at dinner one evening.

Steve looks up from his shepherd's pie and chews while he looks at her. Then he swallows. "What?"

"I've bought a ticket," she says. "Just to see Mum and Dad, and Pieter and Mary."

Steve picks up another forkful. "And when were you planning to tell me?"

"I'm telling you now."

"Ja, well."

"I leave next Monday."

"What about work?"

"I've already got time off."

Steve stares at Mum, then pushes his chair back. "So Mr Cooper doesn't mind."

"No."

Steve takes his plate into the kitchen. I look at Mum.

"When did you ask for time off?" I ask. I feel strange. Mum has made plans that don't include me or Steve, and she has talked to someone else about them, not us.

"It doesn't matter, hey." Mum is fizzing with excitement. "Is there anything you want me to bring back?"

I know that she will be staying with my grandparents, and I think that she will probably be investigating places for us to live. That is what we do. There is always a back-up plan, always an escape clause.

At the airport she looks young and excited. "I'll phone you when I get there." She even smiles at the men with the rifles who guard the gate. One twitches his lips a little, but the other keeps staring straight ahead.

As we hug I smell her perfume. She has worn the same perfume ever since I was born.

"Bye, treasure."

"Bye, Mum."

She walks through the gate. She is wearing jeans and a long-sleeved sweater, even though it is thirty degrees, so that she will be warm on the other side where it is winter.

Steve and I go up to the observation deck to watch. The plastic chairs are scaly, and on the table in front of me is a white plastic cup ringed with old lipstick. Everything smells of cigarettes.

"Look." Steve points. "There she goes."

The Air Zimbabwe plane points its nose up and takes off. Out of the country.

"Come on."

We go back downstairs. The airport looks even dirtier and more shabby. And outside, the sun makes everything look flat and hard. We drive back to the house in silence.

The airport is an hour out of the city, and on the way back home we pass groups of black people walking or resting by the side of the road. War vets? Or workers leaving the farms? They look too tired and defeated to be war veterans, but it is difficult to tell.

Steve grunts as if he is about to say something, but when I look at him he is staring straight ahead. Steve and I have never been alone before. Mum is gone for two weeks.

That night I dream of stones. Big grey monoliths, outlined against a blazing blue sky. I look down and realise I am standing in a ruin of stone – walls of stone, and a tower, old and cracked, with strange designs carved on them. It looks familiar, but I cannot remember where I have seen this place before. Snakes wind around the fallen blocks. Moss grows up to cover them. There is a feeling of old gods around me, watching from the walls. The place is old, and strangely patterned.

I wake up to a warm rush of liquid which quickly turns clammy, and a rich, yeasty smell. I reach my hand down between my legs and feel the dampness. I can't believe it. I have wet the bed. I haven't done this since I was four years old, and I am fifteen.

I turn on my bedside light and strip back the blankets. They are damp and embarrassing. I can't let Steve see this.

I change my pyjamas and take off the bedclothes in one damp, ungainly bundle. I take them down to the washing machine and throw them in. Will Steve wake up if I turn it on? I have to risk it.

Back in the bedroom, I re-make the bed. The red light of my clock blinks at me – half past four in the morning. Just two more hours of sleep before school.

Archie has wandered in from some mysterious errand, and sits watching me. He smells of woodsmoke and compost – he must have been hunting at the bottom of the garden. When the task is completed to his satisfaction, he jumps up on the bed and kneads it with viciously affectionate claws. I can't sleep. I sit up and stroke him until the light goes grey and the first birds start to shout down from the trees.

Steve and I have long-distance, crackly conversations with Mum. She calls us, not the other way around, because phone calls are so expensive. We hear about how pretty it is, how clean, how easy.

“The supermarket shelves are full,” says Mum. “And there's petrol at every station. And no queues.”

“Ja, well,” says Steve.

“Mum and Dad don't even lock the doors when they go out,” Mum says.

“That's a stupid idea,” says Steve.

“The point is, Steve, that it's a safe place.”

“Too many bluddy people,” says Steve, which is strange, because there are millions and millions of people here. You see them swarming like worker ants in the cities. I think Steve means there are too many bluddy white people. I wonder what it would be like to be just another white person, rather than a White with a capital W. I think I would quite like it.

Mum comes home from England. We pick her up from the airport. She hugs us and says she is happy to see us, but I can tell that she is sad to be back. She smells different, of English washing powder and new perfume.

She has brought a picture of the house she is planning to buy for us in England. It is a grey box against a grey sky.

“It’s lovely inside,” she says.

We watch BBC World and see the War Vets taking over another farm, this one owned by an old white man. The chief War Vet pounds his fist against his palm, shouting so loudly at the old man that little globs of spittle fly onto the camera. But the old man says nothing. He does not look like anything special – he could be anyone, someone we know. He looks like a farmer; long socks pulled up to just below the knee, veldtskoens on his feet, shorts, an open-necked shirt, a floppy hat. His face is blank as he listens to the shouting, his head tilted to one side.

Some of the farm workers defend their Baas and Madam against the War Vets, and get beaten for their pains. Mum and Steve won’t let me see the pictures on the international news channels, but I get hold of some of them – heads with blood and flesh blossoming like roses from their temples, faces that are all bruise. The foreign journalists come in for a kicking as well.

Mum has two bright spots of excitement in her cheeks. She tells me that we are going to start moving out some of our possessions, and that our tickets to England are valid for a year. We are lucky, I know, but I can’t imagine living in that cardboard-cut-out country.

I think of the dark glow of the floor that Saru polishes every day, rain
thundering on the roof, the sharp smell of morning and the blue bowl of the sky overhead.

Would living somewhere else be worth the loss? Is living here worth the danger?

“We’re not going,” Steve keeps saying. “Not yet.”

Chapter Thirty

We follow the plan. The plan has been stuck up on the wall of the offices for months, complete with numbers to call, places to hide and supplies to bring. There are even little diagrams of how the farm managers are meant to deploy themselves. It is like a miniature campaign map.

Although no one really thought we would have to use it.

I come with Mum to work most days now, when there is no school. I am addressing envelopes in the office when we hear a crackle on the radio.

“Come on,” says Mum, picking up her handbag and a file bulging with papers.

“What’s happening?”

“War Vets on the farm.”

My hands and feet are suddenly cold. The tip of Mum’s nose has gone white.

We pack up our things, and Mum drives the car up the dirt road to Ian’s house. Ian is one of the farm managers, and his house was chosen as the Safe House because it is so far away from everything, up on the Dyke. It is surrounded by granite rocks that look like the great bald heads of gods, with long grass making comical tufts over their stone ears.

There is a party atmosphere when we arrive. There might as well be balloons hung on the gate.

“Hello, hello, howzit,” says Ian, ushering us in. He has his rifle slung over his shoulder, and a Castle Lager baseball cap on his head. His wife is inside laying out trays of sandwiches. The atmosphere is festive but brittle, fear shimmering in the air like a heat haze.

“Have you heard anything?” says Mum.

“Just that they’re heading up to the farmhouse,” says Ian. He has a grin on his face that doesn’t seem to belong there. It hovers like a pale moth in front of his sun-reddened skin. Like the smile on a skull.

Inside the house are the wives and children of the farm managers, as well as the other female office workers. The children are playing in the corner, while the adults stand around the food table with drinks in their hands. They talk in low voices. Whenever there is the crackle of a radio, everyone falls silent, even the babies.

“Where’s Mark?” someone asks. Mr Cooper.

“At the homestead, I think,” says Ian. “He knows they’re coming.”

We have all heard the stories of what the War Vets do when they come to ‘talk’. Mr Cooper’s perfect Shona and easy smile won’t help him today.

I look out the window. The trees up here are blackened and scarred. Lightning is attracted to granite, and this is the highest point on the farm. It looks like lightning has struck more than twice here.

After about an hour, we hear the sound of an engine coming up the hill. Ian goes to the door with his gun.

“It’s just Lettuce,” he says. The room relaxes. Ian goes to meet Lettuce, who is riding his motorbike barefoot. He is bringing us news from the other farm managers.

“They are going up to the Coopers’ place,” says Ian when he comes back in.

“But Mark has hidden. He’s not going to meet with them today.”

“Good,” say several people.

“Where is he hiding?” asks Mum.

“In the generator shed,” says Ian.

We all imagine Mr Cooper crouched down in that hot metal shed, his ears filled with the thrumming of the generator. How ridiculous if they found him. He would have to crawl out of there into the crowd of War Vets, blinking in the sunlight, shading his eyes with his hand. And no one knows what they would do to him if they found him. Sometimes they talk. Sometimes they beat the farmers up. You can never be sure.

After a while the novelty wears off. I want to go home. It is late afternoon, and I am tired. I am almost willing to risk the War Vets just to end the tedium. I can see Mum is thinking the same thing.

When Lettuce toils up the hill again he tells us that the War Vets are angry that there is no one here to talk to them. The workers are refusing to tell them where the farm managers are. We all wonder whether the War Vets are going to wander off again, or squat on the farm.

I am starting to worry. “Mum, what if we can’t get home tonight?”

“We will.”

“But what if we can’t?”

“It’ll be fine.”

“But what if it isn’t?”

“For Christ’s sake.” Mum is exasperated. “It’ll be fine, all right?”

I sit still. The radios crackle every few minutes. A farm manager, checking in. Nothing from Mr Cooper.

“I can’t believe he’s still hiding in the generator,” says Mum.

The sun is setting over the granite hills, and the sky is turning pink. A hyena whoops in the distance. Ian’s dog barks back, standing on trembling legs, ready to run away if his bravado produces any results. Mosquitoes start to bite our ankles. Ian’s wife closes the fly-screens on the windows and doors, but it doesn’t help much. It is too hot to close the doors and windows properly, and the air smells of night time, faint wafts of it blowing away the hot, dusty smell of day.

When the first stars spill like grains of sugar, Lettuce appears again.

“They have gone, sah,” he says to Ian.

“You sure?” says Ian.

“Yes, sah.”

Mr Cooper’s voice crackles over the radio. He is out of hiding. He laughs a static laugh. Everyone in the lounge straightens up and stretches. My foot is asleep. I did not realise it, but I have been sitting in the same position for hours. My toes tingle into life. Everyone else seems to have the same problem, because there are groans when they stand up. I look at my nails and see that one of them is bitten right down to the half-moon. I didn’t realise I was doing it.

Mum drives us back to Harare in the dark. I watch the pools of light from the streetlamps flare and fade.

“Are you going to work tomorrow, Mum?”

“Ja. Why not?”

“They won’t come back?”

“We’ll see what happens tomorrow, hey.”

We drive under the Independence Arch. In the dark it is a white fish leaping over the road.

The men at the farm are tall, blonde and strong. They come into Mum’s office and stand with their legs far apart, pulling their broad-brimmed hats off and wiping their foreheads with them. Whenever there are parties at the farm, everyone gets splendidly, spectacularly drunk. It is a point of pride to wake up somewhere incongruous, like face-down in a paddock, or leaning up against a banana tree, or at the wheel of your car. They keep in constant touch by radio. They carry guns in their car. I cannot imagine them being beaten by the war vets. I remember my uncle as he looked to me when I was young – a man as tall and solid as a baobab, unbreakable. A man who could kill a kudu and a snake, who commanded hundreds of men and could shoot a can clean off the wall with one shot from a BB gun. These men are indestructible. I can’t imagine them being cowed or beaten.

“Bluddy kaffirs,” says Ian the following night. He has invited the farm managers and their families to drinks at his house. We sit on his verandah looking out over the granite

kopje, sipping drinks with ice. The maid is clearing plates as he says this and we all flick our eyes from him to her and back again, but say nothing. Ian looks drunk. He is swaying in his seat and his eyes are bloodshot.

“Tell you what I’m going to do,” he says suddenly, sitting up. “I’m going to pack up everything and leave, and before I go I’m going to stuff this house full of explosives. Then I’m going to hang the Rhodesian flag on the roof and set up a radio to play the Rhodesian national anthem over and over. Then when the bluddy war vets come to possess the land they’ll fire at the house and blow themselves up.” He cackles. “Bang! Bits of black everywhere.”

“Ian,” murmurs his wife.

“I’m not bluddy going to, don’t worry.” He sinks back into his chair and sighs noisily.

The War Vets have not returned. A week later, it feels like nothing has happened at all. I am on the farm with Mum again – somehow it feels safer to stay together. It is still day, but the light has that flattened, pastel look it gets when the sun is dipping towards evening.

“You ready to go?” Mum asks.

“Ja.” I start packing up.

There is a crackle on the radio, and a voice. Mum picks it up.

“Ja?”

She listens. “Okay. Yes, we’ll go now.”

She turns to me. “Leave that stuff. We’ve got to head off now.”

“Why?”

“War vets,” she says briefly.

“Are they coming here?”

“I shouldn’t think so.” Mum swings her handbag onto her shoulder, picks up her keys. “Come on.”

“Why shouldn’t you think so?” I haven’t moved.

“We would have heard something.”

“But they just told you.”

Mum sighs. “Look, they’re just on the road. Don’t make a big fuss, okay? We’ll be fine. We just need to get going.”

She seems calm. Exasperated, but calm. I follow her out the door and into the car.

“Here, hold this.” She gives me the radio. It is a black brick with a long aerial that telescopes in and out. It looks like something from an old science-fiction movie.

“What do I do with it?”

“Nothing, just hold it.”

I rest it on my legs as Mum grinds the car into gear. We set off down the dirt road.

“Anything from the radio?” Mum asks.

“No.” Just the odd bit of static, like someone tearing open a bag of crisps in the cinema.

The shadows from the blue gum trees are lengthening. We are almost at the main road. My head has been hurting since we left the office, and intensifies until there

are little dancing tadpoles in front of my eyes. The sky seems to go purple and warped. Everything around us blurs, but I can see the pebbles on the road in sharp focus.

“Mum!”

“For Christ’s sake, what is it now?”

“Mum, stop. Pull over.”

“No. I told you, we need to get moving.”

“Mum!”

I try the door handle. My fingers feel fatter than normal. I can’t get it open.

“What the bloody yell are you doing?” Mum pulls over. “What’s the matter?”

I am sobbing now. The pain in my head has become a throb. When it pulses, the sky changes colour. “Please Mum, just stop for a bit.”

“Fine.” Mum’s voice is quieter now, concerned. She switches off the engine and we sit in silence until my head has calmed down.

“Sorry, Mum.”

“You okay now?”

“Yes.”

“All right.” She switches the engine on and pulls out into the road in a cloud of dust. We reach the intersection with the main road, and we are about to turn right when Mum stops.

“God. What’s that?”

A crowd of fifty or sixty people, men and women, carrying placards and singing. Heading towards the next farm over.

There is a crackle from the radio. “War vets on the airport road.”

“Ja, thanks,” says Mum. “Good timing.”

We watch the crowd move further away. If we had driven out five minutes earlier, we would have been right in the middle of them. My stomach seems to drop out of my body when I realise this.

“Well,” says Mum, “that was lucky.”

We turn into the road, and play the radio loudly all the way back to town.

Mum gets a phone call the next morning. Her hand on the receiver is white and it takes her two attempts to replace it.

“I’m not going in to work today,” is all she says.

“Why?”

Mum walks through into the kitchen.

“Why, Mum?”

Mum is leaning on the kitchen counter. I can tell she is wondering whether or not to tell me.

“What happened, Mum?”

She turns round and speaks normally, as if there is nothing unusual in what she is telling me. “You know the Bakers? The family on the neighbouring farm?”

“Yes.” I have not met them, but I know they were good friends of the Coopers’.

“Well, their farm was invaded yesterday.”

We wait for a minute. We both know there’s more. Mum teeters on the edge of it for a minute, then smiles quickly and leaves the room. I am left with her half-said sentence hanging in the air like a breath.

Mum and Steve are talking later, in their room, after I have gone to bed. I sneak down the corridor a little way, just enough to hear.

“Raped ... kids watched, apparently.”

“And the dogs?”

“They think it was done with a bhadza.”

I go back to bed and wriggle my cold feet into a still-warm part of the bedclothes. Pictures hang in my mind like washing on a line. As I start to fall asleep, the washing line becomes real, and I can hear Sally humming as she lifts each image from the basket and pins it onto the wire. The farmer’s wife with her skirt up around her hips and her thighs laid bare like pale, peeled bananas. The dogs with their throats cut, oozing sluggish blood onto the brown grass. The sky is blazing blue behind her.

It is a slow, sick disintegration of a way of life. No one knows what to do. Not my teachers, not my parents. My grandparents call from England every night. Are you okay? Are you hanging in there? I know they are asking us to come over, and I want to, but I do not want to leave everything here. It must get better. Surely.

I watch Archie washing on the end of my bed. One of his legs is sticking straight up behind him, and he is totally absorbed in his work. I imagine someone coming into our house and cutting his head off with a bhadza. Then I stop imagining it.

Oliver comes over for drinks that evening, as he usually does. He looks pale, as if he has been spending more time indoors.

“You all right man?” asks Steve.

“Ja.” Oliver sips his drink. “I’ve been trying to finish up my article. You know, for the university Down South.”

“I thought you said you weren’t going to take their offer?”

“Ja, well.” Oliver seems jumpy. The ice in his drink is trembling against the glass. “You never know, hey. Might be a good idea to keep my options open.”

They finish the whole bottle of gin that evening. They are finishing a whole bottle of gin almost every evening now.

Chapter Thirty-one

When the War Veterans come back, they come officially and without any weapons that we can see. They come without warning, after another week of nothing at all. They are smiling, and wave at the workers they see. Some of the workers wave back. Some of them don't.

Mum and I are on the farm when they arrive. I am coming to work with Mum instead of going to school. It may be safer to stay home, but somehow that doesn't seem as important as staying together. Mum has given me my own cell phone now, too, and reminds me to keep it charged and carry it everywhere I go. Just in case.

"Mum." I have seen the War Vets out of the window. One of the farm managers called to let us know they were coming. We considered leaving, but Mum thought it would be safer to stay off the roads.

"It's an official visit," says Mum. "There won't be any trouble."

She carries on with her work. My hands feel cold and numb. We have seen these men so often on the news. My stomach and bowels seem to melt into an oily mess. I run to the toilet and shut myself in. I can hear the crackle of the radio next door.

"Are you all right?" Mum calls.

"Ja."

I do not have any control over my body. Everything that is inside rushes out, and leaves my legs trembling and my teeth chattering. I curl my legs up so I am sitting on the toilet with my arms around my knees, and try to stop my body spasms. Outside the little window I can hear voices, the rumble of tractors and the clank of machinery.

“Are you okay?” Mum calls again.

“Ja, I said I’m fine.”

I flush the toilet and watch the water whirlpool down. I know exactly where it all goes, to the septic tank just outside the offices which gets clogged up every other week. I wish it was that easy to get rid of my fear.

“Come on, man,” says Mum from outside the door. “They’re here.”

I come back into the office and sit next to Mum. She clasps my hand and I can feel her bones underneath papery skin, and the cold of her wedding ring.

One of the War Vets sees us through the window, and waves. His teeth flash white in his face. I feel my stomach lurch again, shamefully, and something hot rushes out of me.

“Shit.”

Mum lets go of my hand. “What?”

I am too embarrassed to tell her.

A bird flew into our house once. A thrush. It panicked and started banging against the walls and windows, trying to get out, and left a trail of white-and-green sticky mess behind it. I feel like that bird. But I do not want to admit that I am scared. We are all pretending that we can cope, that we will be fine. If anyone does say they are scared, they are called a bluddy sissy.

“Nothing,” I say, and go back into the toilet. I take my pants off, rinse them clean and throw them into the bin. I will just have to deal with it from now on. Besides, there can’t be anything left to come out.

Mr Cooper is meeting the War Vets in one of the offices. He looks relaxed in a white shirt and shorts, the kind of thing he would normally wear for a day on the farm, but he cannot really be relaxed.

We watch the group of men walk in. They are not threatening us – not at the moment – but we know that they are the most powerful people in the country.

One of them nudges another and points to a piece of farm equipment, saying something in Shona. The other laughs. They seem calm, and they are not hopped up on mbanje or dagga, drugs that fuel bloodlust. Not yet.

Ian describes it to us afterwards. The War Veterans spread out on their chairs, taking up as much space as they can. They spread their legs, rest their arms along the backs of the chairs, put their feet up on the tables, and yawn widely and without covering their mouths as if they are going to swallow up the whole room.

Mr Cooper has a translator who sits beside him and turns the rapid Shona into English, leaving out most of the insults and asides. Mr Cooper keeps his face impassive as the War Vet leader talks, spurring him on to even greater obscenities. Then, after a Shona question is left hanging in the air, he opens his mouth and responds in fluent, perfect, colloquial Shona.

After a moment of wide eyes and raised eyebrows, the leading War Vet starts to laugh. So do the others. They laugh and smile and clap each other on the shoulder as if Mr Cooper is a great friend of theirs who has done some wonderful trick. For a moment the atmosphere in the room is almost warm. You can imagine them buying him a drink. But it drops away, and the chief leans across the table with a yellow grin.

“You have ten days,” he says, “And then we will be coming.”

They leave, but they don’t go far. They are camping in fields on the outskirts of the farm.

“Is he going to leave?” I ask Mum.

Mum shrugs. “I don’t know.”

“What about us?”

“We follow the plan,” says Mum.

There are two photocopied sheets of A4 paper on the wall of Mum’s office. Someone has typed out ‘CRISIS SITUATION’ in big capital letters, and drawn a picture of a little man with his hands up in surrender.

The first sheet is titled ‘Under Siege’. There are steps listed underneath. Phone task force member immediately. Inform the task force member who is in your house. Are they armed? How many are there? What is their attitude? Your task force will call the police. Inform the rest of the farm and call a code. Deploy task force and have other volunteers on stand-by.

The second sheet of paper lists the different codes that could be called out over the radio.

Code green means “Everything is fine, stay put. Go back to normal. The situation has calmed down.” It is a mint-green digestive tablet, soothing everything. Code yellow means “Everyone on alert. Stay near the radio. Not sure of the situation and waiting for confirmation.”

Code red is printed in red. It means we must evacuate immediately and meet at the airport, because people are injured, or worse, a house is under siege, and the situation is life-threatening. There is a list of things to do: find out where the trouble is and take the safest route out; get your family to the airport; wait to find out what has happened and whether we can get back. There is also a note reminding us to take cash for the airport car park. I can imagine Mum calmly counting out notes from her purse before driving us both to the airport.

When Mum and I get home, Steve is furious.

“This is what she’s missing school for?” he says. “So she can go get killed by War Vets?”

“We didn’t know they were coming today,” says Mum.

“Neither of you should be there.”

Mum is nodding, but her eyes are remote. In her head, she is somewhere else.

“You need to leave. Tell Mark Cooper he can find someone else to do his bloody books. It’s too dangerous.”

“It’s fine,” says Mum. “Everything is under control.”

“These kaffirs aren’t reasonable people,” says Steve, “These bloody War Vets don’t care about anything but getting the whites off the land. They’re high on dagga. They won’t care if you own the farm or not.” He takes a pinch of Mum’s skin, near the top of her arm. It goes pink under his fingers. “You’re the wrong bloody colour. That’s all that matters.”

“The situation’s not bad enough to stop going there.”

“So what do you want to happen? You’re waiting for someone to get killed?”

“Of course not, Steve.” Mum goes into the kitchen to pour herself a Diet Coke.

She finds Saru standing over the sink.

“Masikati, Medem.”

When Mum comes back through to the dining room, her voice is lower. “We have to keep things running, Steve. Otherwise they’ve won, and we might as well give them the farm now.”

“We?”

“What about the workers, hey? They live on the farm. They have families to feed.”

“You’re not going back there.”

Mum leaves the room with her drink. And we all know she is going back.

What’s more, we all know I will go with her.

Steve opens one of his old books. “Nothing changes, man,” he says. “It’s time you learned that. You and your Mum. Mark Cooper isn’t indestructible, you know.”

Another man is killed on a farm near the Coopers’. Several more are beaten. I am not meant to know these things, but I cannot help it. The knowledge of what is happening seems to pass from white to white at impossible speed, as if we are all connected by lines that quiver with each new attack. Every white we talk to seems to be suffering from headaches these days.

When I get home from school, dropped off by a friend's mother, Mum and Steve are waiting for me. I take my backpack off slowly, unwilling to hear what it is they have to tell me.

"Do you want a drink?" says Mum.

"Okay."

She pours me a Diet Coke with ice. I sit down.

"It's about Sean," Mum says.

"What happened?"

"He's fine."

"But what happened?"

Sean was picked up from school by what he thought was one of his father's drivers. It would be easy to do. Slipping into that back seat, head full of rugby scores, homework and what-I'm-doing-on-the-weekend, you would see the black face in the rear view mirror. Don't recognise him? Well, there are always new workers. And he's here, after all, and he knows your name.

The car seemed to be heading back to the farm, but pulled down a side road unexpectedly. Sean was probably suspicious. He is a farmer's son, a BB gun killer-of-pigeons, a Shona-speaking, barefoot, Bush-savvy, tough kid. Alarm bells would have gone off.

More men were waiting down the side street. They beat him almost unconscious. Sean is tall and broad for seventeen, and has the beginnings of a beard, but he couldn't hold his own against four or five guys.

“He put up a bluddy good fight,” I hear. I have heard that one eye is completely closed and that he needed stitches on the side of his head. Apparently he also had a broken rib.

“Are the Coopers staying?” I ask Mum.

“He has sent Chelsea overseas,” says Mum. “But Mark and Mr Cooper are staying here for now.”

“Why is Sean staying after what happened?”

“He wants to.”

“And Mr Cooper is letting him?”

Mum shrugs. “Sean will own the farm one day. I suppose Mr Cooper thinks he needs to be here.”

I remember Mr Cooper coming to pick us up the day we saw the elephant. I remember him clapping Sean over the ear, and telling him to be more careful, that being the Baas’s son wouldn’t save him.

I think of Sean as he was when I first met him. He seemed so much older than me, so grown-up and sophisticated with his easy smile. I remember riding on the back of his motorbike, breathing in the smell of fresh sweat and cotton washed by black hands in Sunlight Soap. I am amazed at my own ability to take anything that happens and turn it into normality, like skin growing over a scab and making it smooth. I can already feel this new and horrible event being absorbed into all the others.

I would like to tell Farai about this, but she has gone. She left me a knotted bracelet of her old braids, as a joke.

“I’ll get a weave in the States,” she said. “They can do it properly there.”

I wear them on my wrist. They are black and red, with little blobs of glue on the ends to keep them from unravelling. They smell of Vaseline, and leave a scraped, red lesion on my wrist. I do not loosen them, though. I think I need this reminder.

Ian, the man who said he would drape Rhodesian flags all over his house and blow it up before the War Vets could take it, is leaving. On his way back from a neighbouring farm he was taken by the War Vets and beaten with a fan belt. After six hours, he was released. He came back to the farm with welts on his back, a grim mouth and shaking hands, packed a couple of suitcases, booked tickets to Australia and told his wife to get the children ready to leave the next day.

“Don’t be a bluddy sissy, man,” says another of the farm managers. He is a big, burly man with blond hair, a former rugby player. “Don’t be a chicken.”

“Don’t you bluddy tell me I’m a chicken,” says Ian. He has welts all over his face and neck. “Don’t you bluddy tell me. It’s not worth it, man. I have two kids under five. It’s not worth it for a piece of bluddy dirt.”

“Ja, well, send the kids to Harare. Stay here and fight the bastards.”

Ian looks old. The stubble on his jaw has started to come through grey. “This isn’t a war we can win, man. I’m not watching my kids die at the hands of these kaffirs. You stay if you want. I’m bugging off. Let them have the land, for all the good it will do them.”

Mum, Steve and I drive them to the airport in Mum’s big company car. The kids are playing a clapping game in the back. Ian and his wife are silent.

We drive through farmland and bush on the way to the airport – golden grasses on both sides. Ian has a basket of avocados on his lap.

“You know you won’t be able to take that into Australia,” says Mum. “They’ll make you throw it away.”

“Ja, I know.”

The car smells of warm avocado, a sweet, buttery smell like sunlight.

“Now can we go?” I ask Steve.

“Don’t be stupid,” he says.

I wonder what it will take to persuade us.

Chapter Thirty-two

Again, we hear nothing for almost a week. Then we hear that the War Vets have invaded the Coopers' farm. They are killing the game for food.

“Mr Cooper got some death threats,” says Mum. She says it as if she is saying he got some bread at the supermarket. “So he asked some of the other guys on the farm to stay at the homestead.”

“Does he have guns?” I ask.

“Don't be stupid,” says Mum. “That would be asking for trouble. He probably has them, but he's not going to shoot at these guys and get them angry.”

“Is he going to be okay?”

“He's fine so far. They're just camped outside, toyi-toyi-ing. Like on Mary and Pieter's farm.”

I can imagine Mr Cooper winning the War Vets over, as he wins everyone else over. He'll go out to them with his smile and outstretched hands, palms up, and talk to them in perfect Shona complete with swear words and dirty jokes, and they'll love him like everyone else seems to.

Mum does not go to work that week, but she keeps in touch by phone. She works on her computer at home, muttering under her breath. If she is scared, she hides it well; she just seems annoyed by the invasion.

“I have to go back,” she says after a few days. It is the school holidays now, and I am home all the time. It does not feel like a holiday, though, because we have been given a huge pile of homework to make up for all the school we missed during term-time.

“Why?” I stare at her.

“Just to get some papers and things,” she says.

“Mum!”

“It’s fine.” She seems calm.

“You can’t go.”

“It’s no big deal,” says Mum. “And I have to get that stuff out. I won’t stay.”

“You can’t go. Something might happen.”

“Nothing will happen.”

“Does Steve know you’re going?”

“He doesn’t need to know. It’s not a big deal.”

Steve wouldn’t let Mum go alone.

“I’m coming with you.”

“Like yell you are.”

“I’m not letting you go by yourself.”

“I’m a big girl,” says Mum. “I survived the last bush war, didn’t I?”

“Mum!” I can smell her perfume. She looks fragile, bird-boned. She could break with one snap. “I’m not letting you go by yourself.”

Mum stares at me, and I stare back.

“Do you really need to get that stuff?” I ask.

“Ja.”

“Then I’m coming.” I am hoping that this strange, superstitious bond our family has created over the last few months will hold true. We do things together.

Mum presses her lips together. Then, “All right,” she says. And she goes to make us sandwiches to take for lunch. As if we will have time to eat them.

It is strange, how invincible we can still feel. It will never happen to us. It could never happen to me.

Mum takes one of the rifles from the bedroom.

“I told Steve we should have bought a bluddy pistol,” she says, “Something that could have fitted in the glove box.”

She lies the rifle along the back seat. It takes up the whole seat.

“Do you know how to use it?” she says.

“Ja, I think so.”

Mum gives me a quick tutorial. “Then you just point and shoot. Okay?”

“Okay.”

“Not that we’ll need it.”

We pull out of the driveway.

“Have you heard anything from Mr Cooper?” I ask.

“Ja. Apparently things are okay. He took the War Vets out a crate of Castle Lagers, which kept them pretty happy.”

“Okay.”

“He says it should be safe enough. We’ll go, pick up the stuff and come straight back. And if anything happens we’ll just drive right through. We’ll be fine.”

“Okay.”

The drive to the farm is just like any other. The heat haze shimmers trees and fences into streaks of colour. I see a mirage on the road that moves with us, always staying one step ahead. We pass a jeep loaded with young men carrying rifles who laugh and wave at us. I don't know whether to wave back or avoid meeting their eyes, so I lift my hand slightly and stare above their heads. I remember the 'Sweet and Sour' game Lucy and I used to play back in Chinhoyi.

There is a plastic bag of sandwiches and water bottles at my feet. Mum is playing the easy listening station on the radio. We argue over the channels like we always do. The air conditioning is on, but I wind down the window and gulp in the sweet-grass smell of the air. The sky is a blue bowl above us, high and arched like a cathedral ceiling. It is pure and holy and untouched, and it fills me with a strange kind of serenity.

“Here we are,” says Mum when we turn into the farm driveway. There are no picanins playing on the side of the road. There is not even any breeze in the blue gums. We can hear every stone thrown up by the tyres.

“Shit,” says Mum as one hits the windscreen, leaving a tiny cracked star.

When we get to the offices, we see that there are no other cars in the car park. The roads are deserted, and the farm equipment is still and silent.

Mr Cooper is at the office when we get there. His arms are crossed and he is smiling, squinting into the sun.

“Hi girls,” he says as we get out of the car.

Mum radioed him to tell him we were coming.

“Everything all right, Mark?” she asks him.

“Ja. They’re still saying I need to be out of there by tomorrow, but we haven’t had too much trouble.”

Mr Cooper has a black eye and a cut on his head. We do not ask about it. I help Mum flick through the files looking for the ones she needs, and I see that my fingers are shaking. I feel cold, even though it is almost thirty-five degrees outside. I feel like I will never be warm again.

“Right, I’m going to head back up to the house,” says Mr Cooper. He puts his hat back on. It is a broad-brimmed farmer hat, and with his shorts, long socks and vellies it makes him look like a caricature. His eyes crinkle in a smile. “Cheers.”

Mum is still looking for a file. I go outside and sit on the step, looking out at the white sandy earth and scrubby grass that passes for a lawn. I see something moving in the grass and I squint to make it out.

The snake lifts its broad, blunt head and stares at me. It has a long, tarmac-grey body and a flat, puppet-like line of mouth. We look at each other. I can feel the sun burning my back through my T-shirt.

I open my mouth to say something to Mum, but no noise comes out.

The snake sways its head to the side, slowly, as if its skull is heavy. It gives me one last glance from stone eyes, and I feel its cold-blooded spirit reach into my head. We were here before you. We will be here long after you have gone. And we don’t much care what happens to you.

It strokes the grass back with its long body, and is gone. The sun is already reddening the back of my neck and arms. I am pale and unsuitable for this place. My feet

are soft and easily pierced by thorns. The ideas in my head do not work here, in this place which obeys older, sterner rules.

“Got it,” says Mum, coming out of the office. “Let’s make a move.”

I do not tell her about the snake. We are about to get into the car – in fact, one of my legs is already half-up – when we hear a voice.

“Medem! Medem!”

Lettuce runs up to us. He is panting and worried.

“Hello, Lettuce,” says Mum. She is swinging the keys from her finger in an impatient circle.

“Medem, where is the Big Baas?”

“He has gone back to the Big House,” says Mum. She is half-turned, as if she is going to jump in the car. She seems irritated. “What’s the matter?”

“Agh, I need to speak to the Big Baas, Medem.”

“I have told you, he is at the house.” Mum wants him to spit it out. “What’s wrong?”

“They are coming, Medem. The War Vets, they are coming. There is big big trouble coming.”

Mum stops jingling the car keys. “Lettuce, go and find the farm managers and tell them, okay?”

Lettuce shakes his head and turns away. He has tried to tell the Big Baas. It is not his fault that the Big Baas is not here.

“Come on.” Mum starts the car up.

“Get Mark on the radio,” she says.

“Mark?”

“Mr Cooper. Come on, use your brain.”

I fumble for the buttons. “I can’t do it.”

“Here.” Mum takes it, but before she can do anything there is a crackle on the radio.

“Mum, it’s Mr Cooper.”

He is sending out a general SOS to all units. Mum turns the car around with a grinding noise and a cloud of sandy soil, and we start driving back.

“Mum!”

“It’ll be fine,” she says. She is holding the wheel of the car in one hand and the radio in the other. She is talking to the farm managers. The car hiccups over stones in the road.

“Mum, what can we do?” We are two women in a car with an old rifle. “Mum, we have to go home.”

“They say they’re taking the house now,” says the farm manager on the radio.

“But he had until tomorrow!”

“Ja, well, these guys aren’t fussed about that. They’re hopped up on mbanje.”

“We’re coming.”

“Hell, no, you guys should get out of here.”

But Mum is accelerating up the slope to the farmstead.

“Mum, slow down! We’re going to be the first ones there!”

We are almost at the homestead. Mum is still driving fast. We can hear drumbeats. The electric gate is hanging off its hinges, and we barrel through it, stopping just inside. I am jerked forward and crack my head on the windscreen.

“Mum!”

Mum is staring at something outside the window. There is Shumba, slumped on the ground like a stained rug. His spine is flayed open. There is a stain like oil on the sand of the driveway, but it is not oil.

The war veterans are standing outside the house, talking to Mr Cooper. The leader has red-stained eyes and spit at the corner of his mouth. He is shaking his fist in Mr Cooper’s face. Mr Cooper has his hands spread, palms up, open. I can see his mouth shaping itself into Shona vowels. He is calming them. He strokes the air with his hands as if he is soothing it, patting down the air.

The war veteran shoots once, twice, with jerky movements like a broken puppet. It looks almost comical, and not as if it could really hurt someone. Mr Cooper looks like he is smiling for a moment, until I realise that his mouth has fallen open in a strange shape.

His head splits open like the mangoes I used to eat naked in the bath, in case I got their sticky juice on my clothes. Mum would cut them in half for me so they were open like wet mouths, and I would suck them and pick their fibres out of my teeth. His head looks just like that, as if a second slobbering mouth is smiling out of his forehead. The blood runs down between his eyes, and mingles with the fine red dust that has flown up from the dirt road.

It all happened in less than a minute. I can see the red lights flashing at me from the clock on the car dashboard. As I watch it clicks over from seven minutes after one to eight minutes.

Mum starts to struggle with the keys in the ignition, but her fingers are not working. They look almost blue with cold. I could help her, but I can't move.

Mr Cooper still looks like he has a faint smile. It is the expression he used to have when he was joking with the workers. I expect him to say something in Shona that will make the war veterans burst out laughing, but he makes no sound. The smile fades, and I think he is dead, but then I see his mouth move slackly. His jaw does not fit together anymore, and it flops to one side. Another war veteran steps forward, swinging his gun casually to his shoulder, and shoots him in the head again.

Mr Cooper's body falls sideways, clumsily. Blood on the dust looks like spilled petrol. The War Vets have spotted us, and they are laughing and shouting. They start to move towards the car. I can smell urine, and I know it is coming from me. The War Vets are high on mbanje – you can tell from their red-stained eyes.

Mum has got the car started now. Her hands are shaking so much that the keys rattle together.

“Thank Christ.”

She accelerates so hard that I can feel my brain pressing back against my skull, and we judder over the gravel. We are reversing, and narrowly miss hitting the iron gate, which hangs off its hinges. Mum can't keep the car steady, and we weave across the road, skittering across the stones. We come to rest facing the right way, and Mum accelerates

again with a lurch. I can hardly see out of the windscreen. Mum is humming under her breath, a mad, high-pitched tune that I do not recognise.

It does not feel like the car is moving. It feels like one of those dreams where you are running away from a bad guy and your legs won't work. I can see the speedometer, though, and I can see that we are driving dangerously fast.

When we have left the farm gates Mum swerves off the road onto the long grass of the verge. We cling to each other. Her cheek feels cold against my face. I do not know how long we stay there, but we are both shivering and our teeth are chattering as if we are freezing, although the sun beats down and turns the car into an oven.

“Why were you saying the Lord's prayer?” Mum asks me afterwards. I didn't even realise I was saying it. I ask her why she was humming.

“I was humming?”

My legs are red and chapped from urine. The car stinks.

And finally, we have found a reason to leave that not even Steve can argue with.

Chapter Thirty-three

It ends quickly. Steve buys our plane tickets. We start to pack up the house. Steve calls Oliver to tell him what has happened. To tell him we are going.

“Oh.” Oliver is silent for a minute. “When?”

“As soon as possible.”

“Fair enough.” We don’t see Oliver as often these days, and when we do I can see that he has changed.

He comes round for one final drink on the verandah. He is pale, in a long-sleeved shirt, trousers and lace-up shoes. He is taking a job at a South African university. He does not seem to hear us clearly when we talk. He shakes his head as if to clear it before responding.

It seems strange to carry on living after what has happened. Everything is new and alien and somehow sinister. The ice in the gin and tonics is colder, and the clink it makes in the glass is piercing and unpleasant. All noises seem too loud.

“I saw one of my old students the other day,” says Oliver suddenly. We are in the middle of a completely different conversation and everyone stops, startled.

“A black boy,” he says. “Tendai. Bright boy.”

We look at him.

“He spat at my feet. Said, bluddy White.”

“That’s just one boy,” says Steve. “I’m sure most of your black students don’t feel that way. You’re a good teacher.”

“Ja. I know, it’s just one boy.”

We do not talk about Mr Cooper. We have not talked about it, except to list the barest facts, since it happened. There is nothing to say.

Shumba is dead, that big floppy Labrador that I took for walks around the farm. Mum does not let me see the pictures in the paper, but I know that his throat is matted with dark liquid and gaping with a pink, vulnerable hole. I remember the snake Dad killed all those years ago in Chinhoyi.

And Mr Cooper is dead.

He taps on the window at night. The wound in his head is black with blood, but his skin is white-green pale and translucent. There is a faint smile on his face. He smells of wet earth after the rains. Ngozi. Ghosts of the wrongfully killed, looking for revenge.

“You have the wrong person,” I say to Mr Cooper’s ghost. “We didn’t do it. Go and haunt the War Vets.”

He smiles and says something in Shona that I do not understand.

“Go and haunt Sean,” I say. “He’s your son. If you want someone to avenge your death, he’s the one to do it.”

The wound in his forehead gapes wider.

“Why us?” I ask, but I know I am not going to get an answer.

The murder is on the news that night. Seeing it on television makes me watch through a different lens. Everything is distorted. Mr Cooper’s body is under a tarpaulin, and we cannot see it. The thirsty earth has drunk the blood from where he fell, and there is only the faintest brown stain on the sand.

I have started to shake whenever I hear the BBC news theme. Now an English accent tells the story of the latest white farmer to be killed.

I think of all the people around the world who will hear this on the news. I imagine them waking up, yawning, padding through to the kitchen in slippers and pouring a cup of coffee, then switching on the television to see this news item. Another white farmer dead in Zimbabwe. Oh dear. They will watch it the way we watch news from some far-off place. With vague interest, maybe. With indifference. It makes me angry, angry, angry to think that someone could watch the news footage, hear a voice saying, "Mark Cooper was killed on his Mashonaland farm this afternoon," and just switch it off as if that could make it go away. Or perhaps it won't be on the Overseas news at all. Perhaps it will just be another death added to the growing number.

I find out that Sean had been staying at one of the farm manager's houses. Mr Cooper had been staying there too. He had only gone back to the homestead to pick up some more of his things. I don't know what was so important that he had to go back. Passports? Photo albums?

We see Sean one last time before we leave. Not in person, but on the television. A woman in a blue suit is holding a microphone up to his face and nodding as he talks. Her hair doesn't move, even when she shakes her head. Each strand is firmly slicked in place. Her makeup is perfect, even in the hot sun.

Sean looks thin, all elbows and knees. His hair sticks straight up, like a little boy's. I turn the volume down as he talks, until he is mouthing silently. He looks like a fish swimming in the heat haze, gulping for air. Behind him I can see a gaggle of farm

workers. Three of them are staring at the cameras, hands hanging uselessly at their sides. One of them is smiling and pointing. Look Mum, I'm on television. He makes me smile, too, through my tears.

I pack up my room into metal trunks. I have left little legacies to my friends as though I am dying. I lean my forehead against the bed and try to cry, but nothing comes out except a high-pitched keening, like an animal noise. The cat's whiskers emerge around the door frame one by one, as he cautiously looks inside. He brushes me with a casual tail, and jumps up on the bed to sit beside my head as I make these sounds. I can hear him there, purring. After a while he grows tired of the noise and gives me a sharp bat on the head before jumping down and stalking away.

We try to find a home for Archie. We can't take him with us. Since he's coming from Africa, Overseas governments assume he will be riddled with diseases. They also assume that we are going to be riddled with diseases, but we can have dozens of injections and give neat little jars of stool samples to accredited doctors.

I wish I could tell him what is happening. He knows something is wrong. He has started sleeping in my suitcase. At least we are searching for a home for him and not just throwing him out the car on the way to the airport, as some fleeing whites are doing.

After a few days, some friends of Steve's agree to take Archie. They have two other cats. I wonder what he will think of that.

We put him in his cat box for the journey. I am not going with him. I put a finger through the bars of the cage and try to stroke him, but he jerks his head away. He is puffed up and indignant. He doesn't understand.

I cry that afternoon as if Archie has died. As if everyone is dying. The tears are wasted, because he comes back that night.

I hear the sound of Archie's paws thudding on the carpet when he jumps down from the windowsill. My feet are on the floor before I even realise that I am awake, and I run through to Mum and Steve's room and scoop him up.

"For Christ's sake," I hear Steve say in a mumble.

I hug Archie so tightly that he protests and digs his claws into my arm a little way, but he is purring loudly and won't stop. His paws are raw. He has been walking here all night.

The next day we take him to a new house. More friends of ours. They live too far away for Archie to make the trek across town.

"Keep him in for a while," says Mum. "He ran away from the last place."

Archie stares at me from inside his cat cage. His whiskers are standing out in indignation. He walked all night to come back home, and this is the thanks he gets?

I lie awake that night, but hear nothing. Archie is safe in his new home. I am lying on a bed in an empty room where every sound echoes off the bare walls.

The week before we leave, Mum and I both get dysentery. We throw up every few minutes, so often that sometimes we have only just finished flushing the toilet when the next spew of vomit rumbles up and out. We can hardly walk. We cling with both arms to the porcelain as if we are drowning in the bathroom tiles. As soon as we have finished vomiting we drink as much water as we can so that there is something in our stomachs to

throw up and it is not just foul-tasting nothing, shuddering out of us in humourless Ha-Ha-Has.

It gets so bad that Steve has to drive us both into town to go to the hospital. We take a bucket each in the car, the green ones that Saru used to soak the dirty cloths in. I think we will have to throw them away.

It is embarrassing, lugging our puke-filled buckets into the waiting room. I am still throwing up, even though there are all these people staring at me. I can't help it. The room fills with the humid smell of vomit, and the other people in the waiting room go green. The doctor hurries us through to his room before we make everyone sick.

"Pull down your broekies," he tells me. I am too weak and sick to care if he sees my bum or my privates, so I do as he tells me. He jabs a needle into my bum.

"Move your legs like you're riding a bicycle," he tells me. I do as he says, although I can imagine how stupid it looks.

That injection stops the vomiting for a while, and when it comes back, it is far less often and not as violent.

We spend that week lying in bed drinking water and eating boiled rice. I stare at the ceiling while Mr Cooper's ghost tries to attract my attention from the bedside. He mouths things at me that I cannot hear, but I understand what he is trying to say. You do not build houses to be stolen and defiled. You do not raise children to die in the dust with an axe in their skull, unwanted in a country that hates them.

When I am feeling well enough, I carry on with the packing. Mum asks me what jacket I'm going to wear on the plane.

“I don’t know yet.”

“Well, decide.”

“Why do I have to decide now?”

“You just do.”

“Fine.” I choose one, and Mum takes it away. She returns with it the next day.

“Here, put it on.”

The jacket crackles as I put my arms into it.

“Mum!”

“What?”

“My jacket’s making a weird noise.”

“Put it back on.”

“But I’m hot.”

“Put the bloody thing back on.”

“Why?” I am suspicious. I crunch a corner of the fabric in my hand, and I hear that rustling again.

Mum sighs. “I sewed foreign currency into our clothes last night.”

“What?”

“You heard me.”

“But we’re not allowed to take it out!”

“Why else do you think I’d sew it into the lining?” says Mum. “Look, we’ll be fine. Just act normally.”

Normally. I don’t think I remember how.

My grandparents are excited. They call us every night to ask if we are still coming, if everything is ready, if we are sending boxes over yet. They do not talk about what happened on the farm, or what is happening on the other farms.

We have not seen Oliver for days. Not since we told him that we were leaving. Steve grabs his walking stick one evening, just two days before we are due to leave, and says, "Come on. We're going to walk round."

We walk down our road, looking at all the familiar high walls and electric gates. We are shaded by the jacaranda trees that spit flowers and pods onto the road.

Oliver's gate is shut, but not locked. He always refused to build a proper wall around his property, and it is surrounded by rickety chicken wire and hedge. His gate has a latch that anyone could lift up.

"I'm not shutting myself in," he always said when Steve tried to persuade him to get an electric gate.

"It's not shutting yourself in, man, it's keeping the other bastards out."

"Same thing," said Oliver.

We walk up the driveway. The chickens are pecking half-heartedly in the yellow grass. Oliver's goat has got into the vegetable patch and is tearing up lettuces. The house seems silent, unoccupied.

"I don't think he's home," I say.

“Ja, well, we’ll just check,” says Steve. He knocks on the door, then tries the handle. It opens.

“Bluddy yell,” says Steve. “What’s the stupid bastard doing, leaving the door open?”

“Maybe’s he’s sleeping,” I say. After all, it’s a hot day, the kind that settles on you like a warm duvet saying ‘sleep’.

“Ja, maybe.”

Steve goes in. “Oliver? Oliver? You home, man?”

The radio is on. I can hear the beeping of the BBC World Service, a sound that always makes me feel sick.

“The radio’s on,” I say.

“Ja, I can hear it.”

There is a funny smell in the house. Oliver’s house always smells a bit funny because of his homemade wine and his aversion to bathing, but this is different. It smells sweet and metallic. I see a fly buzzing against the living room window. It is fat and lazy in the heat, banging its head against the glass with a pointless, pessimistic smack. I watch it for a few minutes until I realise that Steve has not come back from the bedroom.

“Steve?”

He comes back through to the living room. His face is white. The fly is still drunkenly beating its head against the window.

When the police arrive, I am sitting on the front lawn.

“Manheru,” I say, and am rewarded with the wide smile that usually greets a white person’s attempt to speak Shona.

“Manheru, manheru,” they chorus. Two policemen go inside, while one stays out on the lawn and lights a cigarette. He watches the chickens pecking at the grass.

“Do these chickens belong to the house?” he asks me.

“Ja.”

“Oh-oh. They are fat, these ones.”

“Ja, they’re well looked after.”

I feel a tear leaking out of my eye, and force it back. I stare straight ahead, not blinking, until my eyeballs are sticky and full of grit.

“I remember this one,” says the policeman. “This white man. He was in the Neighbourhood Watch, yes?”

I nod.

“He was a good man, but kapenga.” The policeman laughs in gusty ha-has. “Eh-eh, always riding his bike around town.”

“Ja.”

“Shot himself right in the head,” says the policeman. He makes a popping noise with his lips, forms his fingers into a gun and points them at his own temple.

“Ja.” I look away.

To my surprise, the policeman rests a hand on my shoulder. I look up, and he blows a lungful of smoke into my face.

“It is all right,” he says, shaking my shoulder in a bracing way and grinning, “she is all right.”

We are leaving the next day, and there is no time to feel sad. We are saving everything for the other side, when we will be miles away from here. We need to get away from this place where there has been so much death.

On our last night in Zimbabwe, Steve drops Grandpa's weapons down the well. His old bayonets, his rifles. They judder along the sides and fall into the water with a muffled splash and clang.

"Worth a fortune, some of them," says Steve, but we both know that isn't the point. I wonder what the metal will do to the water, but I do not ask. We cannot take the guns with us, and we certainly can't leave them here.

The well will be concreted over in the morning, just in case.

We say goodbye to Saru and Tatenda for the last time. Saru is crying. Mum promises to send some money. We give them our address Overseas. We are lucky, to be able to leave. They are stuck here. I am relieved to be going, and guilty to be relieved.

We sit on the verandah for our last dinner, cobbled together from the odds and ends that were left in the fridge. I hear ice clinking in the glasses, and the whine of the evening's first mosquito.

"Won't miss these buggers," says Steve, slapping his arm. He has not spoken much to Mum and me since he got back from the police station.

Mum reaches out and strokes Steve's arm. Her eyes are red and puffy.

A bird cries from one of the trees.

'Listen,' says Mum, "The loerie."

We hear the loerie every day. It is a nondescript grey thing, with a haunting, high-pitched shout. “Go ‘way, go ‘way!”

I have known ever since I can remember that the Loerie is the Go Away Bird. It only now occurs to me that its song could be any number of things – it depends on how you listen.

“Why is it called the Go Away Bird?” I ask Mum.

“Because it says Go Away.”

“But ...” I think about it for a second, then remain silent. I think it is significant that we have always heard it as Go Away, every day, all these years.

Chapter Thirty-four

Before we leave, I decide I am going to hunt a tokoloshe one more time.

I wait until Mum and Steve have gone to sleep. I climb out of bed and walk barefoot through the empty house.

The only thing we have not wrapped in bubble wrap and packed away yet is the soapstone bust of Grandpa. It stares at me with fixed, unseeing eyes from under its policeman's cap. I lay a hand on it as I pass, hoping for some sort of ghostly presence, or a warmth under my fingers, but it is just stone.

The house is empty, but that is because the ghosts are all outside, under the pockmarked moon. I can see Lucy sitting on the back doorstep, small and hunched. I can see my Dad wandering at the end of the garden, eternally lost, tapping his compass, Poppy sniffing at his heels. I can hear Mr Cooper's voice saying something in Shona that I cannot understand. I can see Oliver walking barefoot on the wet grass. I see Jonah stooping to tend the flowerbeds, Susan and Jane playing Catch around the vegetable patch, Mercy hanging out the clothes on a washing line which glints silver in the dark. I see Archie and Betty chasing phantom flying ants and the ghosts of moths. I smell pipe smoke.

We are leaving so much behind. But the ghosts are coming with us.

I can hear crickets. An owl. A faint crackle of wind in the top branches of the flamboyant tree. Sleepy clucking from the henhouse, where something has obviously disturbed them. Something running in the thick hedges. The rubbery flap of a bat above my head. The ground is dew-wet already, and I know that thousands of insects are beneath my toes in the grass and in the earth. The air smells of night. It smells like the shrilling of crickets, the sharp metal taste of blood, the sense that something is watching you.

I walk right down to the bottom of the garden, by the compost heap where the shrews and mongooses live, under the tallest avocado tree. I stand on the overripe fruit that has fallen to the ground and I feel it squish between my toes. As I walk I know the avocado meat is picking up bark, leaves, dirt and grass, coating my feet, and I am glad.

I stop right at the end of the garden. This is where a tokoloshe would live. Quiet. Away from people. Near water. I want to see one before we leave. I want to tell it why I am going. Why I don't have a choice. I know it will not care or understand, that it lives in a different, older time with different, older rules that are as inescapable as gravity. It will not care what this white, maggoty creature thinks. This interloper. This outsider. But I want to tell it anyway.

I want to tell it all the things I know.

How I am exchanging the harsh, blood-red real world for something safer.

How although I am white and bred for cold, I am as African as the chittering mongoose that lives in a world of snakes.

How I don't think I can live anywhere else.

I sit under the avocado tree and stare into its branches. I feel the world slow down and the air thicken. I hear the mosquitoes stop their shrill whine. I can hear the tokoloshe breathing, and I know it is coming.