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RACKDRAFT . db~cJlJv^^ ^A/vXj^vv-^ ^ vj* "W "

._irvÂ£Z, v^J^zA-O^- d-& -

"tSo V-^iOÂ£ czJLs^-t^fiSX-^ ..

Sergeant Maswetsa Sefako's burial followed his murder by j H

exactly twenty four hours and he was laid to rest in the same'IW!-IM<'i^JL

mists of dawn in which his body had been discovered.

Inevitably, therefore, most residents of Moroka TownshiÂ£fc^v^wu^

believed that the timing of the two events was providential ^ ^

and meant that the dead policeman's memory would evaporate as rapidly as the mists of daybreak. However, three months after his lonely funeral, the dead man's shadow still roam,ed the, .

township streets - like a ghost trying to reverse his maadog- . lfo-db- \s-

ccThe township's reservoirs of love*. had not even been vd isturbed m

my the policeman's passing.^a>r:^eea!'^fsfei-l-^n

the matter, for once there might have been consensus between

cop and township. y^Unable to rever'se_TTTs FaTfe-hiT"wbu Id, mos'I

(irttcSTyT trave reconciled himself to rest - eternal undisturbed^TThe peo^l"e~"pTeferred to~ pretend ~tIat the he nSver exisTed. However, that consensus remained vexingly of reach because no one had come forward to claim credit his death and the hunger for a hero was growing.

^caught in the crossf iteV)

As the hunt for a hero got going in earnest, hopes came to focus on Masoja. He had^ een arrested on grounds of suspicion on the afternoon of the day of the murder. In three months, his popular standing had soared skyward on wings of rumours of the failure of torture in detention to stain his hands with the dead man's blood. News of the imminence of his release plunged the township into jubilation. The law had been upended. However, caution was all the more essential.

Anyone^ on.^!^! a in ted with detention was a marked enemy,of the state . to display joy at v^e^*r^=lease o-Â§-sHi-e4i-a-p^e-&eÂ« was to risk the state's wrath. There was another problem: what if Masoja came back and disclaimed responsibility for Sefako's oneway exit? More devastating still: what if he really was

innocent? ~

H_si- ^T7CXui-v\ _<2^-. \Gre>-^A- "

The afternoon was whistling cold, dusty and blasted with wind,

trees swayed naked and rusty, grass lay shrivelled, brittle and yellowish brown and the pale blue sky, stretched as flat as a wafer, was tufted^ at the distance edge^p with thin, dry clouds, the light weak, impure, pointless and hostile. He got out of the train at Nancefield and started to go up the steps out of the platform, on the way to the overwgJ_k~that led_ down to the bus when Ma Shezi hailed him^frtfr her shar~p~~nilgr' arruTenj^

/roioGp She came up to him and he helped- her hoist a bundle of washing on her head. They walked to the bus. She let him sit down first and sat facing him sideways.

"Nice to see you back. Doesn't look like they took anything

except your weight. It's going to take some real eating to get it back. You do look like a ghost. Did they break anything that can't be repaired - like bones and things?"

He shook his head.

She inspected him intently. "You don't look broken."

She had stood up well to the erosive retreat of years. In his childhood she had been a vivacious beauty, statuesque and buxom. Now she was simply beautiful, spirited and diminutive, a shade darker than he remembered, her wrinkles faint and nearly invisible and with long distance eyes that refused to believe that they had seen it all. They wavered between restlessness and calm, constantly turning things over, probing and teasing and, at short range, they could still focus like lasers. He warmly remembered that distant past when he had been in the delightfully habit of cutting her pictures out of Zonk Magazine and taping them in his religious knowledge notebooks. She had been the first serious subject of his carnal fantasies. However, long before he had had time to become a man, she had given up nursing her looks and he marvelled at how she was still the envy of many women half her age.

"Now tell me," she whispered. "Tell me the truth. Did you really do it?"

"My neighbour?"

She nodded.

He laughed. "Now, would I really do something like that? For years we had not even been speaking. 'Vo-Uoit & o

"Everybody knows that, but it does nothing stop I anything.

The man was a monster. He got what was coming his way." She paused, her eyes steadily fixed on his. "I would have loved to do it myself." She winked. "I'm not going to ask you again." "You don't have to, because you know I didn't."

The rest of the way they were silent. He went off first. When he was gone, she said "Let's see if he can find him maybe he

did or he didn't. I'll go with him any day."

A dark cloud lay over his bright. He had thinned

down until he dangled in his pants and he walked with a aching laboured shuffle. He was glad to be out of prison, to be back home and, inside, he felt as clean as a fresh bud. He came down from the bus and started walking to wife and home. The streets still ran in the same directions but as he went through the familiar, tight box neighbourhood, doors slid silently shut as he advanced and curtains parted and drew together sharply at the hinge. He felt the weight of probing eyes upon his back. The old houses, the same look-alike facebricked facades and different names of people and places had not changed but he felt like an intruder. It was as if he had been away in prison, "spirit had

.tasoul and spirit of the township.

He crossed the threshold into his house and his wife rushed to embrace him, wetting his shirt with wuutx tears of joy. They stood for a long time in the middle of the little living rnm^ the world reduced to just the two of them^bTissfully Dllnd to

C the t r af f ic ~oT""~g3Tes sTaring tlf rough-the gaping front door,

their bodies ~T?rSssed 'together, sucked_up and-drafting as one in a sudden surge of passion, their hearts racing wildly and their tongues paralysed with happiness.^ Inevitably they hasi-to come up for air, which was as well, berraiT^e-tTiat s WtrSrT'the tart aroma offrpumpkinX^uriLilig^ assailed her nostrils. She pulled back with sighing reluctance. Her eyes were steeped in

sleep and dreams - a warm, dark and misty promises of

the cold night that was falling. "Someone has to attend to the pots on the fire," she whispered hoarsely, her voice

sandpapered, with longing. A smile warmed its way _____ into his

moist eyes, fending the tottered velvet down had been slow and \ /Tov~Lng, The landing - soft "sgÂ»<f cozy and when his feet touched j (^jearth it was not a. &&4^.^c^naK,ed concrete floor./"' '

The little necessities of life were still there and as imperious as ever. He had to go to the Ky-^cj^and^^J^ the shops and once in a while, to stretch his ^r eeL^o^in general, to make up for the three months lost. Above all, he had to go and thank the friends who, had come to Lindi's rescue with a variety of kindnesses during his absence. So, in almost no time flat, he had to leave the house and, outside, the world was waiting to assail him with changes. -He noticed

jrfe^ST) the change of expression that came over the faces ~of old friends when they saw him. Their smiles were still there but they were pinched with a wariness and soured with a vague epixlente curiosity - their eyes looking without seeing him, as if begging him to drop a veil of almost sinister invisibility. Strangers were more direct but no less disturbing. They stared at him with inquisitive yet safely distant eyes and did so without apology - as at a creature at once alluring and deadly. He did not know it, but what he saw mirrored in those eyes was the township's exasperated and edgy perplexity at what it saw as the stranger

who had _____ returned in the body of the Masoja they had once

known. <*Ei.s-Tn^~^nge^d4?d--B^4-the township felt betrayed and was piqued to vengeance. ^

In loyalty to friendship, Masoja had gone to prison with a

secret Fmri returned with---it---into-ct. Not really given to

dissimulation, he had unwittingly come to wear the weight of #his guarded knowledge on his face/Jilfci goault,-he had begun

to look like a tortured spirit chained to the nethers of

sleepless nights .^---Ihir~"TiTd-rrefc-terra w Tt worserrgd The)

^sTSu a t ioTH/H i s appear an c e and mahrfeT was intriguing but the township's curiosity was impatient. Intrigue gave way to speculation. In time, it was concluded that he was hiding the very truth they wanted him to confirm. They could not understand why he was reluctant to be a hero.

^Toward mid-morning on Saturday, Ndonda burst out of his house, n ^

across the tiny lawn patch in the front yard, c 1 e^

JuW^^the sagging fence and landed, head first and - but for his

potholed underpants, stark naked on the startled street. As a tiny crowd rushed to form around him, his wife, Lesedi,

appeared at the door brandishing a gigantic pot of boiling

water. Her face was aflame with enough fury to keep the water boiling. The crowd froze. "I'm tired of this nonsense?" she shouted. "I'm tired of going sleepless just because a dog died. Ha! Am I a policeman to know who killed the dog? I'm sick and tired ^r~TITrs~~rTT7rrgens"a 1

Ma Mbatha, their neighbour, had materialised and was shuffling hurriedly along the fence toward the gate, a blanket in her hands. "Here, cover yourself," she said holding it out to

Ndonda. "Musani ukus ihlasa. Whatever happened is no excuse to shame the street?"VvcSUM/vcW

"It's her," Jja&ojra protested between gasps as he took the blanket. /V

"What has she done?"

"She almost boiled me." He had the wild look of someone narrowly missed by a horrific natural disaster.

"Now my children, house problems dont look nice in public."
"It's noÂ£^Zg^ house problem," Lesedi interjected. It's this dirt he brings home from the streets."

"She doesn't know how right she is! Yes, when other men went out and got themselves wives, I went and raked the filth of the streets into my house and this is the thanks I get for my efforts - a woman who would like me boiled."

"This is no way to talk. There are children listening..."

"You think she cares? Not that one."

"Tempers will only make things worse," Ma Mbatha counselled.

"It's him, Ma Mbatha, it's him. He's been after me for the last, I don't know how many months, to tell him who killed

Sefako. How should I know? I mean, he's the one that goes out to work and I hardly ever leave the house.

"She's the one that's friends with Lindi..."

"...Masoja's wife?" Ma Mbatha asked.

"When was the last time I saw her?" Lesedi shouted.

"How am I to know? How am I to know what you are up to behind my back?"

"Didn't you tell me not to go anywhere near Masoja and his wife? Ha! listen to him."

"Now my children," Ma Mbatha cooed as she herded Masoja into her yard, took him by the hand and led him into the house. The crowd stopped swelling and dispersed.

"The police failed to make it stick on him," Mbube reminded the tiny group standing in the shelter at the bus stop on monday morning. _____

"Maybe he was (qiTs^ too tough (For them)," Nuna replied.

"But he acts so strange," Mbube observed.

"You never know with these things," Bab'u Mpanza tried to throw some sanity into the matter. "Torture has been known to compel (peFfect!^ innocent people to confess to murder. On the hand it has been known to fail to__break the guiltv. Anything in between is possible. Most^QT the timeP) the grjLnci leaves geTTgJe) unbalanced. Maybe he needs' Ggtflnjij time. I (g3Til~I) think I know that boy well enough and would be amazed if he did it."
"Well, anyone tough enough to kill is tough enough to resist torture."

Mpanza shook his head. "Have you ever been tortured?"

"I know lots of people who have," Nuna responded. "Some came back and others didn't. Many just disappeared."

"I've been through that meat grinder." A distant and painful look had come into Mpanza's eyes. He slowly shook his head. "Well h atg^__am. " He spread his hands. "Sometimes I wonder if

it has Qmy thing to do with toughness or weakness or if it's just a mSftTter of plain luck. They were trying pin the rape and murder of a white woman on me."

"A white woman! My God? and you got away?"

"They got nothing out of me but in the end I still had to serve fifteen years straight."

"Ijiiil/had you really done it?" Ma Shezi's eyes were focused on the old man's eyes.

"I was innocent," Mpanza said with resignation. He sighed and shook his head trying to exorcise the memory.

Ma Shezi took his hand, held it warmly and squeezed it before letting it go. what he said^." Her vigour was

surprising. R ~

"Who?" Mbube asked 4-^.___

"Masoja." Ma Shezi (gT voice) was emphatic(but_eve^ .

"Problem is (that) he wont even talk about it," Nuna observed quietly.

"What about you, his friends, talking to him? Something is hurting him and hurting all of us," There was pain and weariness in the old woman's voice. "He's your friend, isn't he?" Ma Shezi asked, looking first at Nuna and then at Mbube. They looked at each other and then away.

"It can hurt so deep it ties your tongue," Mpanza observed philosophically. /But who 's innocent in these Yimes?^

Lindi was the last to hear how her husband's name was the rave

of gossip. Succumbing to the urge to act, she took just enough time to work up the courage to ask him: "Masoja, my

dear, is there something you want to say?"

"Say what, my dear?"

"Something you may not want to tell others?"

"Wouldn't you be the first to know?"

She knew her husband well. The innocence of his eyes and

voice was real. She clung to it and believed him. Even if

she had not believed him, she probably would not have had the extra courage to pursue the matter because she dreaded what she suspected.

The policeman's mutilated corpse had been discovered hanging over his front gate on a Wednesday morning. That afternoon, as Masojari^tepped down from the bus, the police had picked him

up. Later that same evening, when the news had come out of prison the week before, Lindiwe had heard the news of her husband's arrest, she had already been numbed by rumour. She had stared at him with absent minded eyes, nodding to every word he uttered. But the words had sunk. Later her mind replayed them in her solitude and her sleep had evaporated.

Detentions were common, she kept saying to herself but could not stop worrying. Some detainees were known never to return. There was also the possibility that they might come for her before dawn broke. The surge of sympathy that had filled her house with on the heels of the rumour and its

confirmation, was great, but in the night, in the ringing emptiness of the house, it was a small consolation. She could run into exile but what if that was used to incriminate her

husband? Also, she could not bear the thought of being

separated from her Masoja by another country. Frightened, she had gone down the street to seek refuge in the comradeship of Dexter and Langi Radebe, only to find house, furniture and household effects abandoned, doors and windows banging and

* â€¢ % A

curtains flying in the night wind. There was no &i ng - qÂ£ them and every abandoned item spoke of hurried exit. Alone, with nowhere to go, she had resigned herself to her fate and waited

the ni g h t o u t% our sing herself "repeatedly for having even)

thought ~of~ fleeing./ Horning f ouhH her firmly resolved to stayT ~

Lindi's usually clean, fresh and cheerful^^looks &iÂ «?4^Â©-3rie4., a stoop crept over her tall and erect lope slowed

down and a deepening fear and sadness looked out of her eyes and spread over her face until it was a mask of terror. The closer Masoja tried to draw her in, the more he felt the pain of her probing eyes, a shell of agony he could not

pierce. When they were alone in bed, v streets abandoned to marauding winds which slipped through cnoies in the ceiling, shook rafters and chilled the air; when leaves fell in dry showers, branches twisted, creaked and groaned, gusts of sand grated against the windows; when they alone could hear the mela^holic wail of a distant train; when they had only each othd^ to hold onto and she hovered at the verge of opening up, she would break into sobs that corroded his insides. She would never say why she cried. It was little use that each time she shed tears she declared her undying love. Again and again he would invite her to ask whatever she wanted to ask. She, however, dared not ask because the last thing she wanted was to have her worst suspicions confirmed. She would beg him to stop asking her to ask, afraid that he might drive her to the truth or cgÂ£d hysteria. Apart from the rare and brief explosions of screaming, their house became a hive of silence, a dark stage on which the happy life they had once know, continued.#- enacted in sorroj^~ij^^pantomime, in mute gestures at the bottom of an aquarium, a They agreed that he should move out of the bedroom on to the sofa in the dining room.

Pheko, a member of their cell, was the friend^ who still

came visiting. He was young, bright, handsome, enthusiastic and free of those doubts which are the curse of age. He would burst into the house at any hour, cheer them with hugs and kisses and deposit himself on the nearest seat. Smiling, he would bubble with news and views and speculations, merrily offering his opinion of what it all meant for the struggle. The more they listened the more he seemed to be talking about a faraway country they aught to visit. His visits would rekindle the spark in Lindi's eyes and that would do wonders for Masoja's peace but the vibrant mood he brought into the house trailed right after him at his departure. He became their narcotic.

"I got a hot letter from Dex and Langi" He told them.

"Got one too," Lindi volunteered.

"De^trcij^gd^it after reading?"

They^at each other. The letter was still in the flowerless vase, on the table in front of Pheko, staring at him. They were not about to destroy it. It was the only constant companion they shared. "Ofcourse we destroyed it," Lindi said without looking at her husband.

He nodded.

"It's nice to know they are fine out there," Pheko continued.

"As well as anybody/' Masoja added.

"Maybe better than us here at home," she speculated.

"Ha! /Pheko exclaimed. "No place is better than home!"

A silence fell over the room and not even Pheko could not summon the resourcefulness to lift it. The evening iretei? downhill, mute and deaf. In time, excusing himself, he left with an embarrassed good bye.

As he walked home in the dark of night, Pheko was worried. It wasn't just the strained expressions on his friends' faces. Their unspoken suffering was obvious enough and only time would heal that. It was Lindi's remark. What did she mean? Was there something even worse he was missing? Had he picked up a note of extreme desperation, an S.O.S, in the her tone and voice and words? Go back to them and ask for

clarification? That would be clumsy. What if they didn't want to talk about it or couldn't? He would raise the issue with Dexter.

Masoj a fETegan To) missty* Dexter and Langi, his wife. Maybe they would have been able to breach the wall, to help heal the wound that festered in their souls. The only time he caught a glimpse of her old self was when she read their last letter. They had written that they had arrived safely in Botswana and were still to decide where to go*, from there. "...If we had known how much we were going to miss you we probably would not have skipped... We pray though that nothing befalls you that might force you to follow the road on which we are stuck. Exile is hell thrice over... Knowing that that Bastard has passed on to eternal rest does, now and again, give us some peace. For now, for all of us, there's nothing to beat the fact that Masoja came out, intact. It must have come as a great relief to Lindi... Don't ever lose each other ...Maatla^" But they were gone, he reminded himself.

In prison he had come close to death and seen the deaths of many others. He was quite sober about what it must have meant to Sefako to be murdered. That did not, however, make him feel anymore sympathetic to the dead policeman. Theirs had been more than a difference of occupations or political conviction. He could never understand how a man could be the willing enforcer of laws and a politics imposed by a government which oppressed, exploited and humiliated his people, but he had tried to live even with that, tried to console himself with the knowledge that no person can roast in

the furnaces of another's conscience. Things would have remained that way if June 16th had not happened.

He remembered that fateful afternoon. His brother's children, Nompoti and Mandla had burst through the door, all shook up and out of breath, <^heT?} black and white uniforms dusty and

dishevelled, their faces streaked with tears and masked with fear. When they had recovered from shock, they had told him the story. Sergeant Sefako had just unleashed an army of police against students marching in peaceful protest[^]

Hundreds of students had been killed and Sefako had personally shot his own two sons, Themba and Veli, at point blank, by way of setting an example. The story percolated swiftly through the grapevine and the media, wallowing in sensational gore, had rehearsed it ad nauseam. In a televised interview after he received his medal of distinguished service, Sefako had recounted the story in lurid and remorseless detail. Masoja still could not live with the fact that a man could knowingly kill his children for blood money. Likely, if everybody had believed in the same things, in the same way and with the same force life would have been death. He was prepared even to believe that people had different ways of making their peace with their consciences. Otherwise he would never understand how Sefako had continued to live with himself and why his wife had not left him. [^]He could do was to make a clean and total break with their neighbours. So, though their houses shared a fence, the lives of the two families were a cosmos apart. Not even in the trying times did he even think of the widow next door.

On Sundays, after mass, they still sat at table for lunch. Lindi still put her heart into preparing the food and it was still Masoja's pride to set the table. The ghosts of the

friends who had drifted away were always there in the air heavy with tension. They were both oppressed by that presence. It made the food taste like stones and the water like vitriol. One Sunday afternoon, trying to lighten the air, Masoja suggested that places should be set for the ghosts complete with food. She [^] saw her shrinking, glistening tears gurgling in the throat of her guts and his heart broke when she burst into tears. Crying, she looked smaller than he had ever seen her. She had lost a lot of weight, her skin had wrinkled, her hair was falling and she looked like a leathery effigy of the woman he had married.

But for the cloud over his eyes, out in the street he was still the happily married man, as well fed and immaculately clean as CEEHXB resources allowed. But the changes outside were not going along with his charade. He was increasingly the centre of hushed-up but palpable attention. When he spoke, everyone within hearing distance hung to every word he said but no one spoke back. The world was going deaf and mute on him.

He gave up, first - the habit of the one beer he took at

Sheba's Tavern, on his way home at day's end, next - the early

evening game of drafts at Nuna's across the street. In time

he abandoned his foraging trips to town. He still went

walking but wandered as far from Moroka as he could and CKi?
went to church with with even greater religious regularity.

(D

At home, in between meals, he would sit on the tigo 1 e ~anco

battered armchair in the tiny dining room, listening to the creaking of the tired springs as he shifted about trying to find the least uncomfortable reading position. His eyes would begin to smart and water in the pale sunlight or the dim and unsteady candle light and he would have to stop reading. Outside, the unattended garden went to seed. He watched his wife flit around the house, trying to lose herself in constant work and when she was not humming some funereal hymn under her breath, there was always the noise of traffic and pedestrians coming through the window (To disturb The- chilly silence). The house had never been cleaner nor the meals tastier but they

ate in silence and then waited for nothing to happen.

They ran out of things they (might waivb to share. Their life was reduced to one unspoken question: Why us? They sought (TiS^ refuge in their faith but the regular church services at St Francis of Assisi up the street were not enough. To make up for the shortfall, they resorted to frequent confession. Since repeated diggings into their souls brought up less and less, their visits bewildered Father Mbebe. Like the rest of the township, he had been waiting for the real stuff but instead, their confessions had sounded more and more like the confessions of saints, of beings not of this world but <duFeTvJ of the spirit. He began to fear that he might be missing the point of their apparently diffuse and airy confessions. That fuelled his curiosity and inside he burned in earnest. But his vocation, he constantly reminded himself, was to minister to the wounds of the spirit and to shine light for lost souls on the pathway to salvation. In the House of God who knew everything there was no room for detectives in clerical collars and so there was no way he was going to ask them questions.

Word had, ofcourse, gone out that Masoja and Lindi were going to confession at every chance. It was concluded that they had made the awaited confession, in which case Father Mbebe was withholding the truth from the people. Or the couple was still taking spiritual practice runs in preparation for dropping the big one. In that case, the priest was suspected of not doing enough to urge the couple on. "He is just not doing his job," Ma Moloi summed up the matter on behalf of the people. Ma Shezi, also on behalf of the people retorted: "What can poor Father Mbebe do where the police failed?"

Masoja and Lindi made an intriguing request; they wanted to

confess t^get-hex^_____ Uie man of God was ^o> elated, (le a 1 mosT^

<went public with ths-Cfn TacTt/ The more thought of

it; The more he came to see it as a sort of confession, one paving the way for the real thing - if only he could find the right way to interpret it.,--*He quivered wTETT excitement!T>>

"What's with you? You couldn't sit still in one place long enough all day and you barely nibbled at your food at supper." Father Mbebe and his wife were in bed and dawn would be breaking in a few hours. He had hardly touched her all night

and she had just shaken him awake from a sleep which had been so fitful and noisy that it had kept her awake with fear that he might be hallucinating with fever.

"I don't know," he said sheepishly.

"You really are strange," she remarked testily. "Something's eating you?"

"Insomnia, maybe."

"Insomnia? HalHa!"

"Would it help if I told you I have a serious problem of the spirit?"

"Masoja and his wife?" she asked cautiously.

"Mhhh," he said, nodding in the darkness.

"The whole township is, likely, awake right now, troubled by the same problem...Do you believe in ghosts?"

"There are tortured spirits who cannot enter heaven because they have not done enough penance."

"Yah! that sounds like Sefako...Can anyone ever do enough penance for murdering his <55wri> children?"

He was silent.

"Can he, now?" she persisted.

"The mercy of God is boundless and is not our's to ration."
"That's Sefako's problem."

"It's ours."

"Jow so?" It was one of those questions which are at one a d* sclaimer and an exclamation.

"Look at what Morolia is doing to Lindi and Masoja."

"It's heartless.. xAiy don't they just tell what they know?" _____

"Maybe they dTTready? have . "

"Don't make me laugh!"

"Laugh?"

"I mean, if they already have, why don't we know?"

"Maybe God knows."

Ma Mbebe knew her husband enough to know that the grave tone in heÂ® fmsband s) voice reflected the gravity with which he

believed what ____h_e had just__sai^â,~nd had no taste for strolling^

^through ~ r.eXig-4-etfrs--mi-fiel: i-eids', Btrt-stle could not resist a

final probe. "Have they confessed?" She whispered the question as if afraid that God might hear it.

"God would not tell you."

"Too bad!"

As the chorus of township cocks announced the first grey light that peeped through windows, snug in his wife's arms^Tdid not notice his weary inward eye blissfully closing. Later he woke up thinking that the conversation with his wife had been a dream until she reassured him that it had happened. His happiness was shattered.

They walked to church together but Lindi waited outside as Masoja went in to confess. At the last minute, she had changed her mind. "I have nothing to confess. If you have something to tell me why have a priest as witness. You don't

trust me?"

"I cannot tell a lie in front of my God."

"But you can in front of me?"

"Not that...I just thought it might help if God was my witness."

"You don't need me to help you stand in front of God."

He knelt alone in front of the priest at a side altar. They prayed and the priest heard his confession. As he rose and was about to turn and walk away, the priest stopped him. "Masoja, does your heart feel lighter?"

He nodded abstractly.

"Remember that there's no heart so heavy that it cannot be emptied into the vastness of the mercy of God."

He nodded again.

Father Mbebe sighed, shook his head and threw up his hands. "And how's your wife?"

"Maybe I'll know better after she's seen you," he said hopefully. "I wish I knew what has come over us."

"Over the whole township. It's like a curse in everybody's eyes, a terrible disease that nobody wants to name or talk about."

The sun was bending over the chimneys in Sotho Section, its pale rays embroidered with dust and smoke, the wind whipping up a frenzy of cold and an uncertain silence falling over the belching, screeching, hooting, roaring and howling of late peak hour traffic. Ma Shezi felt the heaviness in the darkening air as she walked like mother and child, hand in hand with Father Mbebe toward the churchyard gate. "Do you have a feeling that we are running out of things to confess?" "Impossible! You can only run out of things you are not afraid to confess."

"I do not mean it that way. Everybody feels the urge to say something but we don't really know what that something is."

"You don't know that, now, do you?"

"All this sudden rush of people coming to the church, what am I to think they are coming to do?"

"The church is the sanctuary of all God's children and has no

visiting hours."

"I suppose it's something they just discovered?"

"Does it matter? Who knows what makes jrou come to church? It's like asking why people /IncT"~glT~wanting to) go home. The answers are as many as we are^ different. I also know of a case

where a man came to church to/viet God to bless a murder he was planning. Who knows?" _____

"Well, shouldn't you? Who_^s the Priest? Not me/I^They went \ von. in silence but Ma. Shezi could not contain- Tier.....curiosity.y

"You mean to tell me "you don't even know what people are saying?"

"No more than you do."

"Well, people don't come confessing to me."

"Confession is an appointment with God."

" I s^hex^ something you k^ow? You do looked troubled."

least)\$s much as you'.. . I wish we could get the whole thing done with and forgotten... It's chewing at our innards."

"My old man will hardly let me sleep. He's fixed it in his

(V

mind that I m not telling as much as the â– y-cmn~B~::~!^arrâ– .to 1 d me

And I say to him: why don't you go up to him and ask him yourself... and he has no answer."

"But he did tell you."

"What I told you, which is better than the blank the police drew. "

"You would think Masoja would be happy to be out of jail."

"Suffering is written all over his eyes...mus^e driving his poor wife crazy. <f~I won3eP) why does' t'.just empty his chest." *

"More than he told you?"

"Enough to make himself happy, I should say."

"If he didn't do it, why so much suffering?"

"I don't know what to believe."

"Heard about Ndonda and Lesedi?"

He nodded. "It's hell (everywhere^ - behind -the-'Jclosed doors of this township." ~

"It doesn't come out in the confessions?"

"God alone, knows."

They walked to the^gate and he watched her disappear into

dusk .__heaTwa y s left him feeling lighter but now he

j'felt lonely. He raised his eyes to the furthest stars

Vbecause the evening was new. the-g-we-r-e--nat_far ennngh_

shadow surfaced out of the darkness. As the form strutted out of the-greyness he realised it was Pheko.

"Father, good evening."

"My son, good evening too."

"I had to see you."

"It's been a while since we saw you."

"One is just so busy these days."

"Still looking for a job?"

"I gave up on that one, if you mean a paying job. I do

volunteer work for the unions, like organising and other things..."

"That could put you in trouble with the law?"

"Nothing criminal..."

"Depending on who's looking at the law?"

That was what he liked about the priest; he understood things.

"It's their law, isn't it?"

"True enough. It's criminal, but we should be careful not to

take license." They were walking into the parish house behind

the churchr_____ "Never fight a dog on it's own terms. /That'~way7}

/you become a parody___of the dog and only the dog can win. . fCih!

"did you wanted to see me in the church.

"Like to say my confession?"

"For example."

"Not really."

They sat down. "Maybe some tea or coffee?"

"I'll have tea."

"Ma Pule 1 "

"Yes, Daddy," his wife answered from somewhere in the the

spacious rooms of the house. It was neatly painted and the

oily surfaces of the religious pictures on the walls glowed ^
in the electric light and the furniture - taken right out of

the Old Testament, was in good condition. ~----- -

"Were you_eal1ing?" Ma Mbebe stood framed at the door (into the .
riving~~room^ "Oh! Pheko!"

^Jvening, Ma'am." He had sprung to attention.

"(fihat^hal 1 we serve you \ tea or coffee?"

" (L ' IT~ take) tea .

"ArTcf"a coffee i:or Daddy?"

He shook his head. "I intend to try and sleep tonight."
she excused herself.

Father Mbebe knew that Pheko was very active in what was

simply referred to as the "Movement." If anyone had any

knowledge concerning what had happened to Sefako, he would be the one. Ofcourse there was always the possibility that the "Movement was not involved. Whatever there was to be known, he would know it. He sunk back into his armchair, folded his

arms and prayed that the answers he yearned for would

volunteer themselves without the need for the questions Jje wanted to ask but dared not. 3^<XV'-

The first letter from Dexter and Langi was dog-eared by the time the second one arived. She brought it to where he sat on the settee and (H^her sat next to him as she tore the unstamped envelope and pulled out t^he^ sheets* Their bodies were pressed so close that?he^ rem.dm1bej^ed- "tTfie itfternoon (pnâ,,cwhTc\$' he had arrived .from prison and falT)tl^e other days beforeT"thexl hact part&eil-treds. The frost of iawkward self consciousness fell on their rising body heat and he felt it falling. He jerked ever so slightly . _____

"What's wrong?" she asked (^tar~t 1 ed~T^> - _

"Thinking of the old times," he said weakly. " g cfu-wou ldh' O

fcf/ind reading aloud mcm-ld-

"Why not?" <ghe--asked po 1 ntiess~TyT> The ice of nervousness kept tripping her reading voice but by the time she reached the letter's end the old warmth was back in her tone. She gave him the letter and disappeared, ^\$nto the kitchen;3Â° makeT^ \~bTea kTas~Â£> His eyes /the letter, returning to the

^passages which had caught his fancy. "...I may be raising an issue which is perhaps best forgotten: the dog's execution.

As you know, I don't suffer from an excess of sympathy for footsoldiers of the law back there, but he was human.(smile?)

So I go on thinking of him sometimes. More than that, I'm just

anxious. Langi and I pray all the time that they should never

catch the executioner - he did us a favour and why should he suffer after you also did us the favour of suffering you for him and, I guess, for all of us?...Any news on that front? What about Pheko, how is he doing? We worry about that chap quite a lot. His innocence - and I don't mean as in naive, is very charming but it could get him into trouble if we don't look after him. He sent us a short, hurried and cryptic note

about how he is depressed because he upset the two of you

without aiming to. I believe it about the not aiming to but I

am even more worried about his depression. You know how that

thing can lead people to do strange things that can be

dangerous to themselves and to others? Please finri___him and:

""Te 11 him things are okay. (TT kno_w; you know how to do i t/.Tu s~t> fright.: ' (FT.ease do it if ydu ffaVBn t done so a 1read y>. ."

(S>

plates (jan3) cups and spoons
reading as Lindi reentered

on <fcÂ±LÂ© t in
She placed

tray

the

The scuttle of
interrupted his

tray on the table and set (The? two (usual^ places.

"Can we eat?"

Ted her at the rickety table. His mind was so much on
he letter that he was slow to no t_ notice that, for the first

since ...the parting of beds,/they /were~)si11imft on the same

ipedt side of the tab 1 ' s^v'

angi and ~Dexte^ 4eem sure you didcL t do it."_____She sai
d_____it

softly/... nervously even, ^Eut it shattered the silence Tike a)

./S'Ted ge lfamme r b 1_qh -----

He/shook his head .

"It's there in the letter." Her face was strained, trying to
hold on to a smile.

The smile warmed him and^ltT)warmed him up some more because he
trusted it. His hand crawled tentatively across the table

until it touched her's. She did not pull back._____

"Did you?" she asked, fTre^r^erTâ,~le~jvoice staking her entire hope/
<on~an answer that wnu ld/as tab TT^h his innocence ./â- n l f you/Jid

it, we 11 / everybody would understand because, sooner or later,
somebody had to do it...but I have to know if you did it or
not. "

"I didn ' t /"cfoT/Lt), " he said softly looking into her eyes, his
vision b1urred by a^slow onset of tears.

^I'm talking aTTaut . 'the policeman \s,^lea^th _____

"fTustV wTiat \Langi and Dexter "tkrer, taTk'ing" about fin the lette^.

I d idn ' t t J " " ^ _____

They finished their breakf ast (TrT silence rose as one and went into the bedroom. "We are tired," she whispered.

"Times have not been easy."

The darkness that had left with dawn was back with dusk and, as it thickened, it seemed to lighten the heaviness it had left behind and returned to in the room. Waking, they

tightened the embrace with which they had roped themselves to

asleep and giggled. They resisted the urge to rake over the desolation that had sent them parting bed and/l/ac/p lunged them into the limbo of their -gisperate> silences. The wounds were still too fresh for a postmortem. They remembered the world out there and went to the back window. TheGtxack}windows of the houses behind were tightly shut. Seen in a row in the

darkness dappled with the new moon's light, they seemed like the windows of an enchanted ship .<r^T ahTp^whose motion was

silence and stillness, a ship headed _____ f or _ _ a luminousl
y

mysterious destination. The dogs intheir makeshift-/Jkenne 1 s/
Vere respectfully quiet. / .Further ahead.* in front of the
hrmseff^Zt hri/Mi'ghF nt. I v from^argon bulbs fixed to

the./
stalks of
wands in

se_s_^iJia\ light Streamin#~Faintly
tops ox taTi cast iron pole

the tops' of tall cast iron po 1 e~sX&t' n feFvals along
"street;, looked like like miniature suns. The stubby
last summer's crop of backyard maize, swaying like
the softly blowing wind, shimmered silver.^ The faraway
of the township came and went 4 <Tn> facing/waves like

(L ea vjing-tiÂ»e-. tfh

form the ocean

r-^fith^ttre~~ma^ic of
in spring

night(They
s maiden shower of rain1,

ley went

back

' wo Re up tZTp

noises
whispers
tcu^leep

sunrise awash

n

"No word since our friends left?"

go

"Friends?"

"Langi and Dexter." _____

Pheko smiled. "They are in Botswana planning to

return to the area" _____

"So they are in ...? Father Mbebe sighed deeply with relief. "They are safe?"

He nodded. "Something terrible is happening Friends falling out, couples quarreling and shrinking into themselves. Heard about Mbube and

"Almost killed each other, poor chaps. It's over."

"All because of the dead policeman?"

"If I didn't know better, I would say us."

to Moroka.
everyone is
Nuna?"
happening all

he's come back to haunt

"But you don't believe that, do
Father Mbebe shook his head. "I
I can't put my finger on it."

"It, what?"

"You've heard about the wounded
? Those things
like wounded lions?"

you:

fear it's worse than that, but

Theko

"You are talking

about the

shark?"

shuddered^

If the

mj

is

fth

Pheko was leaning

nobility.

true, they

"Are they anything

Sharks are woefully
are selfhatred made

different
flesh."

"How (fso
chair.

The minute one of them bleeds, the others
their teeth. The sight of their own
cannibal in them. I'm actually not sure
hatred of their own blood that does it
seems to supersede their survival instinct..."

CFfTgTrtgrrrrrg" ffg "hissed-the-wof31\ "Could it be that the

wounded shark is being punished by the tribe for betraying a
weakness of the species - if the shedding of blood can be seen
as a weakness?" His quick eyes were glued to the priest's

foward from the edge of the

turn against it with
blood brings out the
whether it is love or
Whatever it is, it

mouth.

"For___heaven

s sake,

we

are human beings!"^ It was Father

this

the

thing about bleeding," Pheko
earthly fate of the Lamb of
and renewal, of sacrifice and

smile radiated out

OfiDebe s turn to shudderT^

"I mean among animals,
explained swiftly.

"Just so long as you remember
God . "

"Blood as a symbol of absolution
love and redemption?"

"You've got the idea." (A beatific
Ceyes\) "That's why human blood is so sacred and should
be iightly shed- real or symbolic... The policeman's
seems to have struck a vein of self-hatered in all of us
dont want to accept that the bleeding shark is dead
buried. We continue to look for him among the living
anyone is fair game."

"What about the one who killed him."

"He must make his peace with himself before God."

"If he came out do^TItj you think the people

of his

j

never
death
We
and
and

would tear him

apart?"

"The mood is ugly right now and there are the police to
with. One thing I can be sure of is that he or she
confess and do penance for profaning the sacred."

deal

must

/confess and do penance for profaning the sacred./)

"Penance?" - /---/ ~~

"Sacrifice (of something valued) Maybe we hate ourselves because we can't find a hero."

"A criminal?"

"It's their law against ours, as you said."

"These days it's so quiet after dark, it scares me. The ghost of Sefako seems to walk the streets alone."

"Our fear of ourselves. Only a hero could free us."

"Die for us?" -----.-----

^Whoever it is, dead or alive, the hero has already died for us. He or she is beyond the power of the state to assign guilt. Anyone beyond the reach of guilt has died a symbolic death. If he or she believes that they did is right, >they are the freer.!!/

church yard his fear fell
of. warmth and the distant

door

CA/c-'i 4^;

Pheko walked out of the
silent streets were full

___fri . KHe fknknkeri at Masoja and Lindi

swung open as if they had been expecting him.

"So glad you came," Masoja beamed at him. ^ ^

"We thought you had forgotten us."

"As if I could." The change of mood in the unmistakable. He felt himself in the warmth of his hosts. They were glad to be with each other,

the old times. "Heard from our friends?" -

"Just this morning," said Lindi. "As^josua^J they sound okay
"Unbeatable chaps, those two

away. j
starss

It

r

house was
the smiles of
It was like

ad^)

"Yah," said Masoja V'wTth satisTaction/'f^fou' 11 break the bre
[with us If"

/He has no choice," said Lindi pleasantly.^ _____
_____ "

Tf they hacTITot told him, Pheko would have known that the
letter had come. _____ It jaas,.all there in the mood _____ that washed t
he^y

house. J "Well,
Masoja passed

what do

Jbim the

our friends
letter and

Hiereand TheTe^smi 1 i ng to- himseTU
"Dog's

gTTost travels far, doesn't it?'

Lindi and Masoja werefmomentarily puzzled.
"You would think Langi and Dexter would
about Sefako...But then again, maybe it's

have to say?"
they watched him read

it,

R.

be beyond worrying
everybody's worry.

is that we haven't found a

Seen the way it's tearing the township apart?"

"Almost tore us apart, didn't it, Masoja?"

He swept her in and kissed her softly on the lips. "And didn't it?"

"What's so vexing is that there's no one convenient to blame," Lindi observed.

"Father Mbebe thinks the problem hero. "

"How so?" Masoja asked.

"You think I can understand him religious talk?"

"If we had a known hero - one of our know that we did it."

"I would have thought that knowing was enough," said Masoja.

"Wouldn't the joke be on us, if it turned out that to it, that he took his own life? In that case he

once

own

he gets into his
maybe then we would

that he was gone forever

he beat us
would have

"Hell, I'm just glad he's no more." Masoja was vehement.

Really? Lindi asked archly. "Didn't we just say the whole thing almost tore us apart? And I don't think we've heard the last of it."

"What a terrible thing that the township had to come after you. "

"And I doubt that they are about to let off. They've flung us into isolation. They all seem to think Masoja did it."

"Why Masoja?" Pheko almost screamed the question.

"What made them angry is that he would not admit he did it."
"Because it isn't true," Masoja added quickly.

"Dexter and Langi know at least as much," she added.

"They said as much?"

"Isn't it there in their letter?"

"Ofcourse," said Pheko suddenly remembering. "I wish everybody could read that letter."

"Impossible 1" There was trembling in the voice. "It's private," she said reverently.

"I could tell the people you didn't do it?"

"And get yourself into a mess?"

"If you know who didn't do it, that could be taken to mean you know who did it," Masoja observed.

They all nodded.

"And so you must go on suffering?" Pheko asked impatiently.

"I just don't want you to exchange places with me."

"So how do we take you down from the cross before it's too late?"

Lindi's done that already. She knows I'm innocent. I know I can't just kick public opinion in the teeth..." (8395)

"But, darling that's just what public opinion is doing to you and we have every right to fight back..."

"...And hope for the best."

"We've got each other. We've got Pheko and, they may be far

away, but we've also got Langi and Dexter."

"And don't forget the good father...And, yes, you've got me."
Pheko had never sounded more emphatic.

"Remember that there is nothing you can tell God that He does not already know," was Father Mbebe's parting word as he, Lindi and Masoja stopped at the main door of the church. "I am glad that, at last, you came together to speak with one voice to the Lord. That's a lot of light at the end of the tunnel.

The trees were pregnant with buds, the clouds were fuller and cleaner, there was almost no dust left in the air, a warmth was creeping into the air and the sky was bluer. Lindi took Masoja by the hand and they walked out of the church yard, for the time in a long while, really looking forward to going home.

Going up their street, they ran into Pheko. "I just came from your place."

"We were at the church," Masoja explained.

"That's where I'm going."

"Something happened?"

"Not really."

"Who doesn't go to the church these days?" Lindi asked helpfully.

"Don't let it be too long before we see you again...And thanks for the visit last night," said Masoja as they continued homeward.

The Wednesday evening service was in progress and the church was bursting at the seams, the air oppressively expectant. Word had spread that Lindi and Masoja had made a joint confession. The relaxation of the wrinkles of stress on Masoja's face had not gone unnoticed nor the return of the good-natured twinkle to his eyes. "He's a man who has unburdened his conscience," Ma Mbatha had observed. "The weight of an unbearable secret has fallen from his shoulders. Can't you see, even his walk is suddenly taller and there's an almost graceful flow to the way he swings his walking arms." "It's almost like the Masoja we used to know." Nuna remarked. "If he's not happy, maybe I have to go back to school to learn what happiness is," Ma Shezi summarised the situation.

"There's something they must have told Father Mbube," Nuna speculated. "And we're not likely to get it from that tight-lipped priest." He shook his head sadly.

"I'll go to church, any way," said Ma Mbatha.

"Who will cast the first stone?" With that question Father Mbebe opened and closed a passionate sermon on the mercy of God, the fraternity of humanity and the importance of each individual's constant self examination. The hypnotic cadences of his wavelike delivery, the dramatic pauses, the silences which sounded like exclamations and which he let linger almost unbearably long like questions insisting on answers, the vivid images - even of blood which burned into the congregation's imagination like love sonnets - they had the breath of the audience hanging on every syllable he uttered. His steady gaze - by turns charming, loving, cajoling, irate, fighting, conciliatory, serene and peaceful, scoured the congregation like a searchlight, sweeping slowly row by row, resting on each individual in turn, suddenly leaping across the length

and breadth of the church in unpredictable fashion and just as suddenly zeroing in on any face, was like a mirror in which no one had looked in a long time. There was a general gasp of surprise and disappointment when the congregation realised with a shock that the sermon was over and that the priest had not even vaguely hinted at an answer to the unasked question. They filed out of church murmuring.

"Yah! that boy can preach. I think the spirit was in him," Ma

Shezi remarked.

"I fully expected him to start talking in tongues," Ma Mbebe said wistfully.

"Wish he had. Then maybe he would have told us the truth," Nuna said snugly.

"It's been a long time since I felt so much fire in that church. Lesedi was talking to her husband.

"Fire? It was more like dry ice. You know how when you touch it, it sticks to your fingers, freezing and burning them all at once - that's how it had me glued to my seat. I kept itching to get up but I couldn't."

A sudden epidermic of wailing sirenes shattered the calm of

the night air and a convoy of police cars in a carnival lights blinking blue and red rolled into the square outside the churchyard. With wheels still screeching insanely between

brake pads and earth still hard with winter, an army of lawmen

poured out of the cars and invaded the church and parish house. They quickly reemerged with Father Mbebe, bundled him into the pilot car and the convey sped away in a welter of slamming doors and wildly changing gears and wheels churning up dust. The congregants who had witnessed all this from the safe refuge of the shadows were only slightly slower in dispersing. They rapidly thinned out in the direction of the safety of their homes. Except for Mpanza, Ma Shezi, Masoja

and Lindi who collided at the gate, as they all rushed to be

at be Ma Mbebe's side. Ofcourse, this was not before Nuna had his usual last word. "I did think his sermon was a sort of confession. Otherwise, why did they arrest him and so quickly. They didn't even waste time asking question. They behaved like people with sure evidence." It was of little consequence to him that no one heard him because, as usual, Nuna was far ahead of the fleeing congregants.

Though spring was in the air, on limbs of trees, on flower stalks and on the tongues of blades of grass, next morning the township woke up with a heavy and wintry heart, weighed down by the knowledge of Father Mbebe's arrest and it's collective tongue too paralysed by what it imagined to be the damning implication of the arrest to comment or ask questions.

A hearse commanded by Moroka police station drove quietly under the cover of predawn into the church yard. It sidled to a brief halt next to the kitchen door of the parish house and then was gone. That was where, less than an hour later, Ma

Mbebe and her friends, who had stayed up all night with her,

found Father Mbebe sitting on the doorstep in the sun. The

sight of her husband sent tears surging to her bloodshot eyes

and if Mpanza had not quickly held, she would have collapsed over her husband. As it was she merely passed out in the old

man's hands. They took both of them in and laid them side by

side on the huge bed in their bedroom. Mpanza took Masoja by the hand and led him out of the bedroom. "You go and get a

doctor," he said to Masoja. I'll go and take care of the

children and get them ready for school. Nothing's to be said

about this, not to them and not to anybody else until we can't help it."

The old man had just wiped the blood from the doorstep and had gone into the living room where Lindi had joined him when

there was a sharp knock at the front door. "I'll get it,"

Lindi offered. She almost collided with Ma Shezi at the door. The old woman walked wearily to a chair facing Mpanza.

"He is too weak and broken to have walked back home," Ma Shezi said .

"And they would not have dared to bring him back in this condition in daylight. Even the fool cops know better than to invite, at least, a riot. How are they in there?" He nodded toward the bedroom.

toward the bedroom.

"She should come to any time now. Smelling salts should do it. He is breathing strongly and the bleeding on the wounds

has gone down. I couldn't feel any broken bones and if he's not bleeding inside he should be okay in a few days. But in these things you can't take chances. We'll have to hear what the doctor says."

Lindi came in, a telegram in her hands. "Should we open it? Maybe it's urgent."

Ma Shezi and Mpanza shook their heads and he said: "All telegrams are urgent..."

"...and the last thing we want to do is to throw another problem at them, right now," Ma Shezi. "Who's it addressed to?"

"To Father." She placed it on the coffee table and they sat around it in a triangle of silent misery which was hardly

disturbed by the soft entry of Ma Mbebe.

"Ah! you are up," they chorused with delight. They rushed to sit her down.

As she took her place between the old man and woman, her eyes fell on the telegram. "Whose is that?" Her finger was pointing at it.

"It's addressed to Father," Lindi replied. There were light stirrings beyond the door. "Sounds like the children are up. I'll go and attend to them."

It was indeed time for the children to be up, but what they had heard was Masoja coming in with Doctor Khumalo. Ma Mbebe rose to meet the doctor and was leading him into the bedroom, she shouted over her shoulder to Masoja, asking him to read the telegram. He opened it with trembling hands and Lindi,

the old man and woman watched him read the short paragraph over and over, clearing his head with a shake at each reading. He passed it on and it went from hand to hand in silence. "Where's it from?" Ma Mbebe was back at the door peeping in. "Botswana."

"Good or bad news."

"Hard to say." He was shaking his head again, except even more vigorously this time. "I swear to God!...to think that all

along I thought it was Dexter who did it..."

"Did what?"

"Here, you take it and read for yourself.

Ma Mbebe read: DEAR FATHER STOP SAFE FRANCIS STOP TOWN
THANKS

FOR STOP HEARING MY STOP CONFESSION STOP FEEL LIGHT ST
OP NESS

YOU STOP MENTIONED STOP DEXLANG STOP FINE TELL STOP AL
L

FRIENDS STOP TRUTH IN STOP FORMED POL STOPE ICE PHEKO
STOP.(9972)