

The Hare

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Later that evening, after Sara had left for Johannesburg with her friends of the combis, Nhongo had driven angrily back home to Chitungwiza, and packed a few of his clothes into a bag. He told the housemaid, Ella, to put the children into clean clothes and get them into the car. They were going home to the country, he said. They were going to see *Ambuya* Mangai and *Sekuru* Jumo. Ella said she would run the bath and spruce the children up a bit but Nhongo said they didn't have time. So the two girls, Sekai, six, and Netsai, four, were bundled into the car in their street-dirty clothes, their dusty faces creased into moon-grins.

Within ten minutes they were driving out of Zengeza, across the Manyame River over the new bridge towards the Mbudzi turn-off, where they would take the Simon Mazorodze Road south towards Chivhu.

Nhongo hadn't planned to go home but, watching his wife, Sara, as she waved to him through the window of the combi outside the Monomotapa Hotel earlier that afternoon, blowing kisses and laughing, she seemed suddenly to belong more to those friends of hers than to him, and he had had a sudden desire to taste *dovi* once more, sitting in his mother's pole-and-*daga* hut. A strange, irresistible nostalgia to revisit the scenes of his childhood had assailed him, to walk once more through the tall dewy grass, hunting for wild fruits such as *matufu*, *hute*, *nzviro* and *maroro*. It was mid-January, the season for wild fruits. But he had a premonition—the air was too dry and dusty and there had been very little rain since November—indeed, virtually the whole of the rainy season—that there wouldn't be much fruit in the bush.

He pulled the car off the main road at the Eight-Mile Service Station and asked the petrol attendant to fill up the tank. He got out of the car and walked across to the kiosk to buy potato chips and soft drinks for the children. He wanted to have a beer but he was a very careful driver. His wife had often told him, with the merest hint of play in her voice, that if she were looking for faults, it was his sense of responsibility that she found oppressive; she said it could have provided her with an excuse to leave him.

His new shoes pinched and he felt hot behind the ears hearing them squeaking as he walked over the hard asphalt of the service station. He felt people were looking at him and he was forced to produce a vacuous apologetic smile that made him feel even more stupid as it wasn't directed at anyone in particular. For a strange—exasperating—reason, he felt as if they all knew that she had bought him those uncomfortable, flashy shoes. She had insisted that he put them on for the trip into town where she was going to board the bus to Jo'burg. And, in his anger, he had forgotten to take them off when he returned to their home in Chitungwiza. Now he would have to wear them all the way to his parents' homestead. A bizarre childhood fear nagged him: his parents would ask him where he'd got *those* shoes from. Try as he might, he was finding it very hard to outgrow the thought that everything he did must first be approved by his parents. Uneasily, he sensed that Sara somehow despised him for this.

He handed the packets of chips to Ella to share among the children and herself, and the two little girls jumped up and down with glee. As always, seeing them happy because of something he had done, gave him a lump in his throat. And the way Ella spoke to the children, the way she asked them to behave towards... to treat him!

Ella said to the girls, "Say, Thank you, *Baba*."

And the girls together, as if in a classroom, "Thank you, *Baba*!"

He paid the petrol man and they drove off. Driving towards Manyame, Netsai said, "Are we going home, *Baba*?"

"Yes."

"Are we going to see Granny Zvauya?"

"Granny Zvauya doesn't live at Chivhu," Ella said.

"Doesn't Granny Zvauya live at Chivhu, *Baba*?" Netsai asked her father. Her father knew better than Ella and who was Ella anyway? This was a family affair.

"Granny Zvauya is Mummy's mother," Sekai said.

"No, she isn't!"

"Oh, yes. She is."

"Is Granny Zvauya Mummy's mother, Dad?"

"Yes," Nhongo said .

"What did I tell you?" Sekai bragged.

"You told me nothing," Netsai said pouting, to hurt Sekai.

"And your mother is Granny Mangai?" Sekai asked her father, at the same time showing off to Ella and Netsai.

"Yes," Nhongo said.

"I don't want to visit Granny Zvauya," Netsai said.

"Do you hear, *Baba*? Netsai doesn't want to visit our Mummy's mother."

“Girls, I don’t want to hear this kind of talk. They are both your grandmothers. You must love them both equally,” Nhongo said. He felt uneasy as he said this. He was asking his children to do something that he himself found very difficult to do. Sara’s mother was “that woman,” and his mother was “my mother,” and he couldn’t change that. His body tensed each time he tried to see his mother-in-law as someone as worthy of his love and attention as his own mother.

“Our home is in Chivhu, isn’t it, *Baba*?” Sekai asked.

“Yes.”

“I don’t want to go to Gutu!” Netsai yelled.

“Netsai!” Nhongo bellowed.

And immediately regretted it. In the confines of the car he felt that his voice had been unnecessarily loud.

But it worked. The children fell silent, eating their chips. Sekai made faces at Netsai. Netsai hit her but Sekai didn’t stop until Ella told both of them they were such good, grown-up girls and being such they would find it very silly and very stupid to laugh at other people.

Then the children began to sing, each her own song, each looking out of her own window.

“We are going home,

“Going home,

“We are going to see Granny,

“Granny,

“We are going to see Granny.”

Listening to the children singing to the smooth purr of the speeding car, Nhongo felt a little sad. When was the last time they had all driven home, as a family? When was the last time he had taken the children home to their grandparents? He seemed to remember that their last trip had been to Gutu, to see Sara’s widowed mother. He wanted to be fair but he was sure the last trip had been to Gutu.

The sun went down before they reached Mupfure River, at Beatrice. There was a police roadblock just outside the little town. One of the officers signalled to them to pull over to the side of the road and stop. He came over and looked into the car through Nhongo’s window. He smiled.

“A family?” the officer said.

“Yes.”

“Going home to see Grandmother?” the officer said to the girls.

“Yes!” the girls chirped brightly, together.

“What are you going to bring me?” the officer asked.

“*Dovi!*” Sekai said.

“We are going to Granny Mangai,” Netsai said.

“You seem to be driving into a storm,” the officer turned his attention

to Nhongo, straightening up and pointing at the sky over Chivhu.

Nhongo was surprised. They were driving south but he hadn't noticed the heavy dark clouds ahead of them. The sky was grey and menacing.

"Drive carefully and bring the children back safely," the officer said, signalling them to continue.

From the policeman's look, he must have thought Ella was his wife, Nhongo thought and glanced at Ella out of the corner of his eye. Then he quickly looked away, and put his foot hard on the accelerator.

At Rosarum, Nhongo switched on the headlights. The clouds seemed to be falling, swallowing the space between earth and sky. Memories of his ox-herding days suddenly overwhelmed Nhongo. Without realizing it, he found himself reciting the childhood ditties that they used to chant as they walked through the bush, covered in hooded jute sacks, after the cattle in the rain.

"Mubacha ndipe hacha

"Mukute ndipe hute

"Muonde ndipe maonde."

The songs came from an almost forgotten childhood and he was surprised that he could have forgotten that there had once been a time when he had been happy and carefree. The low sky, so full of the promise of imminent rain, formed a kind of protective canopy over him and allowed past and present to merge in the strong smell of cowdung, damp soil, wet leaves, smoke.

"Jaja Mandure

"Mandure mandure

"Jaja mandure."

Enclosed in the car, they were a family separated from the rest of the world, windows tightly shut, the sound of the engine lost in the rush of wind and swishing of tyres on the tarmac, the children clapping their hands and singing together with Ella—why was it that song, under certain circumstances and conditions, could transform even the most commonplace events—and the plainest of features—into something never-to-be-forgotten and never-to-be-repeated? Nhongo wondered, stealing glances at Ella who was now as absorbed in the story-telling and singing as the children. Ella contributed most of the stories and songs. Nhongo told one of his father's dark, dark stories of the crocodile and the girl, and surprised himself by singing the haunting crocodile's song—well, not quite note for note but well enough for Ella to compliment him and then to beautifully finish the crocodile's haunting song for him. Nhongo blinked back tears and hoped that Ella didn't see them. They were on the monotonous stretch of highway between Featherstone and Munyati River. The lights of the car formed a long shaft boring into the dark tunnel ahead of them, sometimes

catching the trees along the road in grotesque shapes that rushed into and past them in a mesmerizing kaleidoscope of eerie patterns.

It wasn't much of a thing. Just something, a shadow caught again—in that sharp, magnifying corner-of-the-eye vision, like the furry-edged blur of a dream just as one falls asleep. He might have been falling asleep, it was that insubstantial, but he clearly heard Ella shout, "*Tsuro!*" Then a flash-and-bob of something fluffy-white, a slight fleshy thump, a squeal of tyres and a deep, deathly silence, the dusty shoulder of the road, the smell of burning rubber and petrol and, maddeningly, the roar of the engine and the lights ghostly bright, surreally lighting the trees ahead of them and etching unearthly silhouettes into the nightcape.

Nhongo experienced an instant of knife-like clarity. He had wished both to hit and to avoid the hare. He could feel his heart pounding in his ears. He switched off the engine and the lights. His hands were shaking. A car roared past them without stopping, horn full blast, echoing in chilling diminuendo up the dark night road towards Harare.

"Did you kill it, *Baba?*" Netsai asked sweetly.

For some strange reason, Nhongo thought that was the funniest thing he had ever heard in all his life. He began to laugh. Then the laughter began to feed on itself and he couldn't stop and they were all laughing safe inside the car—and yet they all seemed to be aware of something that was sitting out there, outside their laughter, something crouching in the darkness, ready to pounce the moment the laughter ceased.

Wiping tears from his eyes, relieved but still shaking, Nhongo opened the glove-locker, took out his torch, switched it on, opened the door and got out of the car. The hare was crouched on the edge of the road a couple of metres behind the car. It didn't move when he picked it up. It just made a kind of hiccupping squeal and released a dribble of warm urine over Nhongo's fingers. He felt the tiny, delicate bones under the too-warm fur. Little electric spasms seemed to be passing through it. Nhongo cuddled it to his chest and carried it to the car. He realized that it must be in terrible pain although he couldn't see—or feel—any blood anywhere on its fur. The eyes were wide, wide open, dazed, stunned. Looking into those eyes, he almost dropped it to the ground. Something he saw was beyond him and all of a sudden he didn't want to have anything to do with it—but he was there alone and he had to do something. Something, at least, to show them that he still could.

He didn't do anything. He held himself carefully together, unlocked the boot of the car, and carefully placed the hare in the boot, on some old sacks that he always carried during the rainy season. He shut the boot. He smoked two cigarettes to rid himself of the shaking in his hands.

"When is Mama coming back?" Sekai asked suddenly.

“Did you hit it, *Baba*?” Netsai asked.

“Shut up!” Ella said, under her breath and Nhongo would never forget the shock it gave him. In normal circumstances, he would have fired her for talking to his children like that. But these were not normal circumstances. Later on, he would recall how very close to Sara’s Ella’s voice had sounded.

“I am feeling cold, *Baba*,” Sekai said.

Nhongo took the blankets from the boot of the car. The children seemed to go to sleep immediately after he’d covered them up. Ella was very quiet. Nhongo remembered that she was only eighteen and he rebuked himself for having wished her to be more adult than her years. He wanted to make up for it, to explain, to apologize, to say something—anything. He found nothing to say.

Later, when they were turning off the main road, ten kilometres from Chivhu, onto the dusty track towards Rugunhe, he said: “One should never try to chase a hare crossing the road at night.” He looked behind him. Ella’s eyes stared back. They looked strangely white in the darkness of the car. She held on to her stony silence. He didn’t know why he’d spoken at all. Ahead of him, the bush track made such sudden twists and turns that he sometimes lost it under the wheels of the car. The lights made weird swings through the trees. He put pressure on the brake pedal. He asked himself: Where am I rushing to?

“Scared, are you?” Nhongo said without realizing it. There was just no way he couldn’t talk. They were crossing a sandy dry river-bed. On both sides of the track a curtain of darkness pressed in on them. Ella didn’t say anything but Nhongo sensed that she nodded her head twice. Fear communicates like lightning in the dark.

Then Nhongo became angry. There was no specific, immediate object at which to direct his anger but it seized him, a burning lump in his chest. The whole point was: it isn’t my fault. He felt, vaguely, that this wouldn’t have happened at all if Sara had been there. Somewhere deep within his tangled unexamined feelings: it was all Sara’s fault.

Married now for sixteen years, with four children, the first two, a boy and a girl, away at a secondary boarding school, Nhongo had felt that nothing could ever touch his family. He had risen to the position of section manager in the textile company that he worked for in Harare. He was getting good money and he was a Party-card holder, a respected member of the community both at work and in Zengeza where he and his family lived. A careful, security-conscious, family man, he strongly subscribed to the old dictum: God helps those who help themselves. He was not one to take risks. He respected and honoured all elders, especially his parents. Sara thought he was too afraid of his parents to respect or honour them. She could think what she wanted to think: who was she anyway?

He had made her pregnant while she was still doing her Form Three at Gutu Secondary School. He had left school and been working for two years. His parents were already thinking that, as the first son, he was taking too long about getting married. They had been very happy when one day two women—an elderly woman and a girl—paid them a visit. They sat just outside their yard, the girl's head and face covered by a *zambia*. They could tell that the younger woman was very pregnant. They had been very pleased to receive Sara into their family and Nhongo hadn't disappointed them. He seemed to have been prepared. He had been saving money for just such an occasion. And in less than a month, Sara's people and Nhongo's people had become brothers-and sisters-in-law.

Only Sara's mother seemed not to approve. Sara was her last child. The other four boys and a girl had all married and remained in the village where they still looked to their widowed mother for help with their expanding families. Sara had been her only hope. Sara was to achieve what she hadn't achieved, what her other children hadn't achieved, what even her husband—who had died a poor village bricklayer and everyone's errand boy—hadn't achieved. In Sara, Kariwo, Sara's mother, would be recreated. And then Sara had become pregnant in her third year at secondary school. An unusually bright child, she had had promise, unlike the rest of her children. Kariwo never recovered from the blow.

Sara, quiet, obedient but with a subtle, stubborn streak that only a husband would discern, had understood her mother's dreams and had wept quietly, while making herself impossible promises. The pregnancy had been as much a surprise to herself as to anyone else. Still young, she did not understand how her body could have betrayed her. Yet no thought of abortion or suicide ever entered her mind. From an early age, Sara had learned to face her problems head on. But for a time she had lost her normal cheerful being, and withdrew so far into herself that she created a people-less space around her.

Nhongo had been working, saving and preparing so that Sara would be able to go straight from the classroom into motherhood and a full-time career as a housewife. He didn't want her to endure that anxious probational uxorial period so charged with over-doses, poisons, pesticides and traditional abortion concoctions that it had become a time which every mother dreaded as they watched their daughters growing up.

Sara soon became the envy of most mothers and girls in the village. "How did you do it?" they asked her. She didn't know what they were talking about but she smiled and said, "I didn't do anything about it."

Sara didn't have to go down on bended knee to ask Nhongo to marry her. When she brought his hand to touch her changed belly he simply jumped from being a boy into fatherhood. And there had never been any

doubt about her love for him, Nhongo thought. She hadn't spoken much about it, she was not the demonstrative type, but Nhongo could see it in her eyes, in her actions. Or had he been wrong?

He could swear, hand on heart, that Sara had never lacked anything in their married life. She had gone about her childbearing business and her household chores cheerfully and he couldn't remember that she had ever complained about anything. Nhongo could also swear that Sara had never been unhappy with him. Or, at least, he hadn't seen her showing signs of being unhappy. But could he be sure?

One thing was certain, that when she came to live with him she was still too young to know what she wanted and if she had desperately wanted something, too shy, or afraid, to tell him. She had only been sixteen and he had been—what? Twenty-seven. Almost twice her age—well, not quite. But she must have felt intimidated. She must have looked at him as one of her brothers: *I am not going to pay your fees this term if you don't work harder.*

Nhongo mulled things over: trying to come to terms with a new Sara. He had never denied her anything. After their first two children, she had done a secretarial course, had even passed her intermediate exams, but had then abandoned the idea of ever getting an office job because she couldn't stand the managers who “look at my breasts all the time they are interviewing me.” Secretly, Nhongo had been relieved. It had solved a nagging problem without his having to commit himself. He had wanted Sara to have a job, to do what she felt she wanted to do. It was, after all, only what every woman was doing these days. But deep down, Nhongo was still a traditionalist, a tribesman, as he and his few friends liked to call themselves. What is a husband for, if his wife is going to work as well?

An example of what Nhongo and his friends believed lay in the story of Jokonya. Jokonya was headmaster of the primary school which Nhongo's children had attended. His wife was also a teacher at a nearby secondary school. Jokonya had sent his wife to University to do her B.A. and later her B.Ed. Now she was teaching. When she brought her first pay cheque home, Jokonya took it and tore it in half. “I can manage my family very well without a second cheque in the house,” Jokonya had told his wife. This was a bit extreme, Nhongo and his friends agreed, but Jokonya was only making a statement. A man should be allowed to have pride in his own home. The burden of running the household, the financial burden, should lie squarely on the husband's shoulders.

Fortunately for Nhongo, he had never been placed in a position where he had had to remind Sara of this—and they had been doing very well—that is until recently.

Nhongo hadn't been thinking of retiring from the textile company for another five years or more. He was a careful man who planned his life several years ahead—in detail. As long as he was alive and working as he was working, no one in his family would ever want for anything.

But then, one day, seemingly out of the blue, they told him that the company was going into liquidation. Nhongo, who had never been out of employment, thought this was a joke—at least he did at first.

A year later he was home. A loaf of bread cost about three times what it had done, two years previously. The older children were still in school. Sekai and Netsai hadn't even started! He had bought a car a year before the liquidation, and he owed the finance house a suicidal amount of money. He had to be very careful with the little they had given him in terminal benefits. (It was criminal!) This wasn't the time to think of going into private business. He had had to shelve his plans to move to the low-density suburbs. And they had to cut down on the amount of meat they ate every day and *No, Netsai. You had ice cream yesterday!*

Could this constant nag-nagging about money have driven her into it? Or was it possible that she had always dreamt of doing something, bidding her time, waiting until an opportunity presented itself?

She had started off innocently enough. Or rather, Nhongo didn't know exactly when she had started because he'd never really asked what she did when he was away at work. In their marriage, there had never been cause for distrust. Each of them knew where the other was at any time of the day. Or had he just thought he'd known this? Nhongo wasn't sure any more.

Anyway, what started her off, or what he thought started her off, hadn't been anything very much: just second-hand clothes.

As far as Nhongo could remember, Sara had never had any real friends, people who would visit them, spend time with them and vice versa. It wasn't that he had said anything about friends except, of course, about neighbours. Neighbours, as far as Nhongo was concerned, were the cause of most divorces or marital breakdowns. But still, the only people Nhongo had heard Sara talking or laughing with were his neighbours' wives. Mostly it was open-air gossip as they hung the nappies to dry on the clothes-lines in their backyards. Nothing that they wouldn't want their husbands to hear. How well the children were doing in school. The best way to cook *derere*. Where you could get the best out-of-season tomatoes or vegetables. Two of their neighbours had become a little closer to Sara because one was a nurse at the local clinic, and she had helped Sara with tablets and antibiotics for the children. The other had had a death in her family and Sara had sat up with her for two whole nights. Mrs. Gundani and Mrs Zimbwa were all right, Nhongo felt.

Yet someone had told her about *mupedzanhamo*, the second-hand clothes market in Mbare—on the other side of town. And one day, Nhongo came home to find Sara going through a pile of women’s and children’s clothes. “I would like to help,” she had said.

And he had said something— he had encouraged her, although he didn’t really like the thought of his wife going from door to door selling *mazitye*—the popular name for this kind of clothing which came mostly from Zambia and Mozambique. Busy looking for a job himself, he hadn’t paid any more attention to Sara and her business. Until one day when he returned home, he heard laughter in the house even before he reached the verandah.

“These are my friends,” Sara introduced the four women who were almost buried under mountains of clothes. Nhongo could have sworn that he had seen at least three of them around one of the downtown night-clubs.

He had grunted a greeting and gone into the bedroom. There he had lain on the bed, hands locked behind his head, listening to their laughter and the pounding of his heart. He had realized that they had reached a very delicate phase in their marriage.

In the lounge, the women were talking at the top of their voices, and laughing so loudly that they must have heard it at Chikwanha’s, three kilometres away. They were talking of Mozambique, Zambia, Botswana, South Africa. And even Mauritius.

Nhongo would hear of these countries for the next he couldn’t remember how many months. Sara now had friends. Her buying-and-selling friends. And it seemed that a completely new world had opened up to her and she was like a little child lost within it. Lost in wonder. This world frightened Nhongo. When her friends were there, Nhongo could hardly get a word in edgeways. They dominated everything. It felt to him as if he had built his house on the banks of a river and a flood was threatening to sweep it away. “Is it just the money?” he asked her once.

“Someone has to work,” she had said innocently.

Then she had showed him the passport. Her passport. She hadn’t told him that she was getting a passport. She hadn’t told him anything about anything at all and here she was, smiling, and showing him a brand new passport with *his* name and *her* maiden name in it. She asked him to guess how long he thought it had taken her to get the passport. “Six months?” he hazarded. He had heard that some kind of brake had been put on the issuing of passports. Some unscrupulous foreigners were taking advantage of the lax Zimbabwean passport regulations.

“No. Two hours.”

“*Two hours!*”

“Some friends of my friends got it for me.”

“Man or woman?” The words slipped out of Nhongo’s mouth and he immediately regretted them.

“What do you mean?” She had asked him defensively.

He had wanted to say sorry but he couldn’t. In the silence that followed, he felt they were becoming strangers to each other.

After that Sara didn’t try to explain anything to him. She simply told him that she would be going to Lusaka, or to Jo’burg, the following week or the following day. What struck him most, what stopped him from asking any further questions, was that she was quite cheerful about it all. She didn’t seem to feel that she was doing anything wrong, doing anything that he might not approve of. The word Nhongo found himself obliged to use about her attitude was “innocent.”

And this took place during the time when there were stories every day in the newspapers about the plight of the women border jumpers, or cross-border trippers. The stories were of arrests, nights spent in the cells at obscure border posts. Stories of murder, kidnap, rape and mugging. But Sara always returned radiant and bubbling with energy; she seemed almost unable to sit still, until she could make yet another trip over the border.

Nhongo had always considered himself to be fair, to be reasonable, to be loving and considerate. He had always wanted to be the husband she would want to talk about respectfully, lovingly, to her friends and neighbours. He didn’t think she could honestly accuse him of being jealous, least of all of being petty. He’s always felt that jealousy reduced people to non-people, it dragged people through the mud—jealousy left people exposed to all sorts of ill-winds.

But it was getting too much for him. It seemed to him as if they had begun to live their family life on their verandah, in sight of everyone. The worst of it was that Sara seemed to thrive. And he, Nhongo, felt helpless to do anything about it. (Was it because he had no money of his own?) Their laughter had become very loud. It jangled as if someone were suspending knives in the silence—the silence that was growing between them. Instantly Nhongo blamed himself. He had been so secure in her presence: Sara, the mother of his children, that he hadn’t bothered to discover whether she might have preferred an adjustment to their lifestyle. He had never really thought of her alone, independent, without the children. Someone with her own individual needs. This new game, from which he was completely excluded, amounted simply to a new hand of cards, which differed from the ones he had dealt her only in that she was now the major player.

Nhongo found he could only turn to the children on the days when Sara was away. Then he became conspiratorially friendly with them. And

Ella, what could he have done without Ella? She had become both mother and elder sister to the young girls.

And whenever Sara was home, Nhongo couldn't help—but silently, and through his body language—to hold her up for the children to look at: *Look at her. Look at your mother. Please just look at the bitch!*

Yet other people, Sara's friends for instance, felt it was Nhongo who was behaving badly. They called it jealousy. A husband's jealousy because a wife is proving that she can beat him at his own game, providing for the family. Because, it seemed, that Sara had been born with an instinctive sense of business.

If she saw that her husband was jealous, she didn't show it. She had become a new woman: yes. But she hadn't lost her love for her family. In fact, her new freedom to leave the house, to be among other people, seemed to have given a new dimension to their life as a family. She had never had any money of her own to buy anyone in the family anything. Now she indulged herself. She bought fancy shirts and jeans for Nhongo—clothes he would never have dreamed of buying for himself. She bought colourful T-shirts for the kids and she occasionally took the family out to eat at some expensive restaurant in town, or some international hotel like the Holiday Inn, the Sheraton or the Monomatapa.

Nhongo became scared at the speed at which their life was travelling. Relatives and neighbours began to talk. And he could feel other men's eyes cutting through his wife's tissue-thin clothing like rapacious knives. "Do you want to believe them?" Sara asked Nhongo. And he couldn't answer her. All he was aware of was the line of pale flesh above her knees, previously hidden from the predatory eyes of men by her old skirts.

Nhongo was also very aware of his dependence on her. Early in their marriage, he had told her that they shouldn't let money come between their love. He had been working then, earning money that was called money. Indeed he was so well-cushioned that he could afford to say that money didn't matter. Now, he realized, it was money that mattered all the time. The old song had it right—money made the world go round—and it was money that bound one human being to another. Nhongo longed to keep their old pretence intact: *our love is beyond money*. "It's your money," he was forced to shout one day after she had asked him if it would be all right if she bought her mother some clothes. "Your money," "my money." "Your mother," "my mother." Nhongo noticed that all these demeaning phrases had begun to infiltrate their conversations soon after he stopped working and Sara had begun the cross-border trips with her friends of the combis. "It's your bloody money." Sara had stood stock still. She had looked at him hard. And she had wept.

But she hadn't stopped going down south. Now it was mostly to South Africa. And then there was Mr. Magaso. "I got a lift from Mr. Magaso," she told him one day, as she came into the house at two in the morning.

"Has he got a wife?"

"Of course, he has. What can you be thinking of? He is much older than you are. He could almost be your father. Yet he is so understanding, and oh so full of stories."

"Why don't we go south together?" Sara suggested one day. Nhongo only gawked at her. Sara didn't seem to realize that there was a world of difference between people who crossed borders in combis and a former manager in one of the country's biggest textile companies.

Since then Sara had brought Mr. Magaso home and introduced him to Nhongo. Still, even that didn't rub out the big knot of bile which Nhongo felt each time Magaso drove Sara to the house at two in the morning after they had returned from Jo'burg—a trip they always did in one day, or so they said.

Mr. Magaso would give two short blasts on the horn of his BMW, and Nhongo, unable to sleep whenever Sara was away, would think: I'm damned if I'm going to unlock the gate for them. But then the children would clamour:

"Mummy's back!" "*Mai vauyawao-ho!*"

And there he would be, opening the door for her one more time.

And there she would be standing in the doorway with her bulging bags, all smiles, tired but jubilant, smelling of a new perfume—and she would turn back to Mr. Magaso and the others in the car: "What time do we leave on Sunday?"

"Be ready by one o'clock. By six we must hit Beitbridge!" As always, she would be loaded with goods for resale and clothes or toys for the children. And always a tie, a shirt or underpants for Nhongo. And it was on this last trip that she had bought him these fancy shoes. Very expensive by the look of them.

Nhongo had been too embarrassed to put them on for days. His children had yammered at him: "Try them on let's see, *Baba*."

But he simply stared at the shoes sitting on the coffee table as if they were a pair of cobras.

"Please, *Baba*! Please!" the children cried.

"Some other time," he had said, unable to tell them why he wouldn't try them on, why it wasn't easy for him to accept them: he belonged to a proud tradition that said the hunting is done by the man of the house. This incident made him suddenly aware of his own helplessness.

For several days after she had given him the shoes, Nhongo seemed to keep coming across the word "castration" each time he picked up something

to read. Walking down the street, or entering a room, he felt people turning to look at him. He was overwhelmed by the feeling that they could see everything that was inside him. And he would become aware of his whole body assuming a defensive posture—physically manifested by a slight forward stoop and his right hand dangling in front of his fly. He became obsessed with his feeling of his nakedness.

In secret, he found himself looking at and comparing himself with the men that Sara travelled among. Either they were younger than he was: the muscular, sporty types; or they were older in an unpleasantly worldly-wise way, and they seemed to pity Nhongo. Their laughter, when they laughed, was between themselves, although it included Sara, and it seemed to hide something that they didn't want Nhongo to know. A child, they seemed to be saying: he would only hurt himself if he knew. And when Sara waved at him through the window, she too seemed to feel sorry for him.

And then there were his cousins and friends from home. It was unheard of that a married woman, somebody's wife, had male friends and left her husband at home to go on business trips to foreign countries with them. The way they pronounced the word "business" made Nhongo's heart sink. They asked him if he were happy, only they didn't use these words. They were very much concerned with the *happiness* in his family. They even dared to ask who made the rules in his home.

What they meant, he knew, was: *did he still have his balls on him?* With lots of people from home talking about him, he *knew* that word had reached his parents.

They turned a bend in the road, the thick bush fell away and they were out in open country. The lights of the car fell on the whitewashed wall of an old abandoned store. In front of the store was the gate into Marondamashanu Communal Land.

Another ten-minute drive and they were home. Four grass-thatched huts: his parents' living-room and bedroom, the *hozi* or granary, and his own hut. He still had to build his own bedroom and *hozi*.

As soon as the lights swept across the buildings his father's elderly mongrel, Major, began to bark. His parents came rushing out of their living-room, despite their ages, and were standing in the full glare of the headlamps when the car came to rest at their feet. They lifted their hands to shield their eyes from the harsh light.

Major had stopped barking. He too was there to greet Nhongo when he got out of the car, jumping up and placing his paws on the man's chest, trying to lick his face, tail wagging. Nhongo was always amazed at how the dog remembered him, even after a three-year absence.

"*E-e veHarare,*" Nhongo's father greeted him, stretching his hand out to Nhongo.

“*Titambire*,” his mother said, clapping her hands and peering into the car. “Have you come alone?” Nhongo’s mother asked. “A-a, the whole family--no. It’s *Mainini* Ella! And the children,” his mother said as Ella got out of the car. The two women threw their arms round each other.

“Had you forgotten us, *Mainini* Ella?” Nhongo’s mother said.

“Wasn’t I here only two months ago?” Ella replied.

“Two months or two weeks—it’s too long for us,” the old woman responded.

“One day I shall come forever,” Ella said, in a low voice. But Nhongo overheard her, it sounded odd to him but in the flurry of unpacking, he didn’t think any more about it.

“And, how are the children?” his mother said quickly as if to cover up what Ella had said.

“They’re in the car. Asleep.”

“Hey, hey, wake up! *VaMangai*, Nhongo’s mother, leaned into the car and gently shook Netsai and Sekai.

“A-a, *Muroora*,” *VaJumo*, Nhongo’s father, responded to Ella’s greetings as she knelt, clapping her hands to Nhongo’s father.

For a second, Nhongo found himself comparing Sara with Ella. It wasn’t a fully conscious act. He just noted that Ella had wrapped an ankle-length cloth round her lower body. Sara would have been in a pair of jeans and she wouldn’t have knelt right down in the sand on both knees as Ella had done.

“A-a, my wives,” *VaJumo* said as he hugged Netsai and Sekai. “How are my wives?”

“Your beard is prickling my cheek,” Netsai said and everyone laughed.

“Baba, I want to sleep,” Sekai said.

“Say hello to Granny and Grandpa,” Ella told the children.

“*Mainini*,” *VaMangai* addressed Ella, “take them to bed. We will see them in the morning.”

Ella herded the two girls in the direction of *VaJumo*’s bedroom. *VaMangai* picked up some pieces of wood from the firewood stack and went into the kitchen. Nhongo and his father remained outside by the car.

“And where is the girls’ mother?” *VaJumo* asked.

“She has gone to Jo’burg.”

“Jo’burg?”

“Yes.”

“Who is in Jo’burg that she’s gone to visit?”

“No one.”

“No one?”

“No one.”

“Ho-oo?” *VaJumo* said and fell silent.

Nhongo's mother called out for them to come into the house. She had already put a kettle on the fire and she was sitting on her side of the fireplace. Ella came in a little later and joined *VaMangai* on the goatskin mat on the women's side of the fireplace. Nhongo and his father sat on an earthen bench along the wall of the room, opposite the women.

After some small talk about the rain and the weather, *VaMangai* said, "And where have you left the girls' mother?"

"He tells me she has gone to Jo'burg," *VaJumo* said.

"Jo'burg?"

"That's right. Jo'burg," *VaJumo* repeated ominously.

"She finds time to visit her relatives in Jo'burg and no time to come to see her own husband's parents?"

No one said anything. Nhongo looked down at the floor between his feet. The floor seemed very far away.

"Mother," Ella said, getting up onto her knees, "is there anything you would like me to do?"

"Go into the chicken coop. There is a useless old rooster. You know what to do: the water is about to boil, the knife is on that shelf over there."

Ella went out with the knife and a basin.

"Whenever she comes here she doesn't give herself a minute's rest," *VaMangai* said, nodding towards Ella. "She will make some lucky mother a good daughter-in-law."

"Why let her leave this home?" *VaJumo* said roguishly. "She would make some lucky man a good second wife."

"Whatever would you do with her?" *VaMangai* asked.

"Whatever do I do with you?" *VaJumo* winked at his son.

"Your father refuses to grow up," *VaMangai* said, laughing. Something knotted in Nhongo's guts. This conversation sounded too familiar. He felt as if he had heard it before, but not from them.

Ella came in with the cock in the basin, its head chopped off, the bloody stump of the neck still jerking in memory of its death spasms. She lifted the kettle of boiling water off the fire and poured the hot water over the cock. Then she turned it over and left it to soak. She put more water in the kettle and put it back on the fire. Then she sat down in her place.

"Do you have any groundnuts, *Ambuya*?" Ella asked.

"No, *Mainini*. You can do that tomorrow. It's late now."

"I would like to make peanut butter for the children," Ella said. The old couple exchanged glances before quickly averting their eyes. Nhongo felt like a stranger in his own home. *VaMangai* stood up and took a wicker basket from the wall and went out of the room. She came back a few minutes later with the basket full of groundnuts. She placed the basket

between herself and Ella. Then she sprinkled some water on the nuts to soften their shells, and she left them to soak for a while.

Nhongo's father began to talk of his days in Jo'burg. He called it Janana in a voice that made it sound like a place where people went and were never heard of again. It was only men, he said, and not just any man with nothing between his legs, who dared to go to Janana in those days—when he was still a young man. Most of the people who attempted the journey died in the jungles, from hunger, disease or wild animals. Those who got to Janana perished in the gold mines, the compounds or the streets. And those who finally made it back home brought nothing except their battered bodies, demented minds and crushed manhood. So, VaJumo sighed, laughing, now it was the women's turn to go to Janana was it? For what? The old man spat into the fire. "I hope to dear God in his Heaven you know what you are doing. I know nothing any more," he said, heavily. Ella began to pluck the rooster, starting with the big hard feathers.

"What do you mean you don't know any more?" VaMangai confronted her husband, "Why don't you just tell the boy that you are having none of it? It's your cattle that paid for her bride-price. Listen, Nhongo. When your wife comes back from Jo'burg, tell her I want to see her here. I would like to ask her why a dog shows its teeth but can't laugh. I want to know if her aunts—her people—asked her to treat us like this."

"She has only gone to Jo'burg, Mother. She'll be back," Nhongo said, feeling that his mother was being unfair to Sara. Actually, he didn't want to hear his mother's views because she only seemed to confirm his own suspicions. He desperately wanted someone to tell him that he was wrong.

"So she has only gone to Jo'burg, has she?" VaMangai said, looking at Nhongo with that pained look that made all sons wish they were still babies in their mother's laps.

Ella was dressing the rooster for the pot. She cut off its crop. She opened its belly, pulled out the innards and let them spill into the basin. Then she stood up, took a clean pot from the shelf and began to cut the bird into smaller pieces for the pot. When she thought she had enough for the number of people in the household, she put the lid on the pot and placed it on the open fire. She covered the rest of the rooster in a clean basin and stored it away.

"Have you brought us any onions and tomatoes, *Mainini*?" VaMangai asked Ella.

"Yes. But *Baba Sekai* doesn't like tomatoes or onions in fresh chicken. He says when he wants to eat chicken, he wants to taste chicken so he knows he is eating chicken."

Everyone laughed. Something tugged at Nhongo's loins and he felt something welling in his throat. Ella's words were true—and innocent

enough. But Ella's soft voice, self-consciously reduced to almost a whisper, shamelessly invoked a midnight bedroom scene in Nhongo's mind. His head swam as he felt himself melting.

The old couple quickly exchanged glances. *VaJumo* coughed, *VaMangai* unnecessarily pushed a piece of wood further into the fire.

Ella busied herself with preparing the meal. Nhongo, now very much aware of and registering each of Ella's movements, sat gratefully in the presence of his parents, helping to shell groundnuts. *VaMangai* began to talk about one of Nhongo's cousins. It appeared that this particular cousin's wife had returned home after two years away from her family. Her husband, Nhongo's cousin, had given her up as lost and useless, but the children, especially the first two sons and their sister, had gone out to Chivhu and brought her back home. She had been living with another man in Chivhu.

"Her sons beat her up horribly," *VaJumo* said.

"Beat up their mother?" Ella was scandalized.

"Beat up their own mother so badly that for days she couldn't eat. Her jaw broken," *VaMangai* said with a vengeful inner satisfaction.

"But it is not done," Ella said. "You can't beat up your own mother."

"Chizema's children beat up their own mother," *VaMangai* said. "This is one beating that I would forgive any child. Maybe this is one beating that the father hadn't given the mother. It's the one thing she wasn't getting from her husband. Of course, the children had to pay her for beating her up. Paying her for doing to her what their own father should have done to her years before they had been born."

"I never beat you up," *VaJumo* said.

"And I never did anything that would have made you want to beat me up, did I?"

"Women," *VaJumo* said, shaking his head, "Because the woman is a daughter-in-law, a stranger in the family, she must be beaten to tame her. They conveniently forget that they, too, are daughters-in-law in this same family."

"But—beating up your own mother?" Ella repeated; she couldn't get over it.

"It was wrong," *VaMangai* said. "But she is back with her family now and seems quite happy. Really, I blame Chizema. He gave his wife too much freedom. Anything she wanted to do, she did. He wouldn't say no."

"But he doesn't sleep with her any more, does he?" *VaJumo* said in a voice that seemed to remind *VaMangai* of something she seemed to have forgotten.

"What do they want? Sleeping together at that age!"

"We still sleep together."

“She was stupid, running away from her children. Now her sons will look after her. And when she dies, they will be there to bury her.”

Sadza was ready. *VaMangai* asked *Ella* to divide it into three portions: one for *VaJumo*, one for herself and the third for *Ella* and *Nhongo*. *Ella* protested: she couldn’t eat from the same plate as *Nhongo*. Tradition forbade it. *VaMangai* told her that every once in a while it didn’t matter. After all, brothers and sisters ate from the same plate. What was there to be ashamed of? Unless of course—and here *VaMangai* looked directly at *Ella*—unless, she said, *Ella* herself had something on her mind, or had done something that made her feel ashamed to eat from the same plate as *Nhongo*?

Both parents looked from *Ella* to *Nhongo* and from *Nhongo* to *Ella*. Neither *Nhongo* nor *Ella* looked at each other nor at the elderly couple. *VaMangai* looked at her husband. *VaJumo* returned his wife’s look.

Nhongo washed his hands and began to eat. *Ella* also washed her hands and began to eat. Both ate, careful not to look at each other. As they ate, *VaMangai* would look up now and again to check if *Nhongo* and *Ella* still had food on their plates. “Want some more *huku*, *Mainini Ella*?” *VaMangai* offered.

“No, we still have enough,” *Ella* said. But at one point *VaMangai* simply ladled some pieces of chicken onto *Nhongo* and *Ella*’s plate.

“But, Mother,” *Ella* protested.

“But nothing. I don’t want it said that we didn’t feed you when you came to visit us.”

The two women laughed.

Nhongo washed his hands and said he was going to sleep. *VaJumo* got off the earthen bench and sat on the floor, his back resting against the bench and his legs stretched out in front of him.

VaJumo snored heavily and loudly. Then he broke wind. *VaMangai* nudged him with the cooking stick and told him to leave the room and go to sleep. *Ella* laughed without showing it, then hid her embarrassment by collecting up the plates and putting them in a dish. She started to do the washing up.

VaJumo made a groaning and grunting effort, then stood up. He looked at *Ella* for a long time as she worked on the plates.

“See you tomorrow, *Muroora*,” *VaJumo* said.

“It is tomorrow, *Baba*,” *Ella* responded softly, head bowed. In his bedroom, *Nhongo* heard the sound of the plates and above them, his mother and *Ella* talking and laughing. Once more, he was surprised at how easily *Ella* got along with his mother. And it struck him again how little he knew about the lives of his own people. He realized he didn’t know this *Ella* who could talk and laugh so loudly and freely with his mother. He

had heard Ella talking to Sara and now that he thought about it, although she wouldn't be this loud, she had shown that she was quite at ease with her too. He had heard what they were talking about once, Sara and Ella. Money. They talked like two grown-up women, seriously, like equals. They also talked about the health of the children. He had never heard them talking about other people.

Now, what would Ella talk about with his mother? He found himself becoming suspicious, like someone guilty of something. He didn't know why but he had a feeling that they talked about him. And Sara. Once he thought this, he felt it was true and he began to agonize over it. Who was Ella to talk so freely about Sara whom she hardly knew? And again he was assailed by the fact of his own ignorance. Maybe she knew something that he didn't know about Sara. Maybe in those long idle hours that they had always shared—Ella had been with them for four years—maybe in those hours when he had been at work they had discussed all sorts of things? Sara might have revealed things she would never have told her own husband. Ella had been recommended to them by Sara's sister who lived in Gokwe. All that Nhongo knew about her was that she desperately needed a job. She had stopped going to school after her father had got a second wife and now she needed money to help her mother keep their large family alive. That was all he knew about Ella. And now here were his parents, forcing him to think about Ella. He knew that since his arrival all their talk had hinged on making him aware of the presence of Ella. Ella. And he suddenly felt that Ella knew about all this. She hadn't been just a dumb innocent player. He was suddenly convinced that his parents had discussed the issue with her. There had been plenty of time to do that. Sara hardly ever visited her in-laws. Instead, she sent Ella at the end of every month with groceries or money.

She had been nothing when she came to live with them. She had just been part of the house, as far as Nhongo was concerned, just like the furniture. He had hardly even talked to her, or at least he couldn't remember ever having had a real conversation with her. But now he realized that even if he hadn't talked to her, she knew about him all the same: knew him in such detail that Nhongo had been shocked into looking up and at her. If he didn't remember talking to her, she had talked to him. *Baba aSekai* doesn't like onions or tomatoes in fresh chicken. This was the kind of intimate detail that only Sara was supposed to know and utter. What else did Ella know? And did Sara know what she knew? Maybe, the two women? Nhongo shut his mind to the possibilities of the women's relationship concerning him.

It had not been long ago that Nhongo had begun to see Ella in a new light. She had grown bigger, prettier, but in a way that your sister grew

bigger and prettier. As he continued to think about her, Nhongo realized that his heart had quickened. Ella had come to his house in rags. Sara had given her some of her old dresses. The old ankle-length dresses which he had bought her.

Now Ella was buying her own dresses and they all seemed to be replicas of dresses Nhongo used to buy Sara. Nhongo felt wide awake. As Sara began to buy her own dresses, they had become shorter, knee-length, sometimes—shockingly—the hem-line was even slightly above her knees.

Nhongo felt justifiably angry—even vindicated—whenever Sara found herself forced to pull her skirts over her knees as she sat down in the presence of other people. It seemed he had identified the reason for the vague amorphous irritation he had begun to feel towards Sara. He hadn't been able to place or trace it before—the new Sara embarrassed him. The length of her dresses against her age. The pale pink paint on her lips and fingernails.

The change hadn't been anything sudden or revolutionary. No: it had been slow, and almost imperceptible: the bath tub left unscrubbed one day, then again on the second day, until you stopped paying attention to it, so that by the tenth day it seemed normal. Or his underpants which she wouldn't let anyone else wash except herself, no matter how late or tired she might be. Until one day she had asked Ella to collect them from the clothes-line. And on another, she had left them soaked in the washbasin and (Mr Magaso's car was idling outside) she had called out to Ella to rinse them for her as she had run out of time. And now Ella washed his underpants as well. Nhongo couldn't believe it. Had his parents noticed all this—over how long? As Sara's dresses had become shorter and more liberated (she'd even begun to wear trousers), Ella's had become longer, more housewifely, and more motherly.

The difference—revealed in people's eyes when the three of them went walking together—became clear to Nhongo. And as Sara's trips to South Africa and Botswana became more frequent, Ella had begun to assume the role of mother. And people, the neighbours, frequently began to see Nhongo and Ella in each other's company—with the children, of course. The process had been so slow, so apparently natural, that Nhongo hadn't noticed.

He couldn't believe it. He wanted to protest but he knew no one would believe him: Was everyone else right and he wrong about Sara? What about the children? And the clothes that she bought him? And the shoes? And everything she did to make them a happy family? The cheap pictures and coloured prints she brought home, to cheer up the place they lived in? Wall hangings, she called them. Nothing artistic or imaginative about them. He knew a bit of modern art, he read books, her wall hangings

Nhongo left the room. Outside, he saw Sekai playing nhodo in the sand by the car. “Good morning, Sekai,” Nhongo said. Sekai didn’t answer. Nhongo bent to stroke her hair but Sekai ducked her head, stood up, opened the door of the car, went in, slammed the door shut and locked all the car doors from inside.

Nhongo found his father working on a plough in the toolshed. Soon after an exchange of good mornings, VaJumo began to talk about the importance of a home and a herd of cattle in a man’s life. The city was all right if you were still young and had a job. But jobs in the city were not life. The blackman’s wealth is a home out in the country among his own people. But a home, a family, meant a good hard-working wife.

Her VaJumo paused in his talk and looked towards the living room where Nhongo could hear his mother talking to Ella.

When VaJumo was certain that Nhongo had understood what he meant, he went on, without a wife, a hard-working wife, there was no home; a faithful wife is what makes a man a father. Any man can be a man but very few were fathers. He should strive to be a father, not just a man. And he couldn’t be a father without there being a mother.

“Think very hard about this,” his father told Nhongo. Ella came out of the living-room towards the toolshed. She knelt down in the gritty sand on both knees. Nhongo could almost feel the pain of the sand grains biting into the flesh of her knees, through the thin material of the cloth she had wrapped around her from waist to ankle. Ella told Nhongo that his bath was ready. Nhongo suddenly felt great remorse. He could sense the sacrifice she was making, the desire to be accepted. And after she had been accepted?

“No,” Nhongo said, “I don’t need a bath. It’s only an hour’s drive to Harare.”

“But I have already.”

“You clean up the children and let’s go.”

They had breakfast in the living-room. They were all very quiet, subdued, as if they were accomplices in something that they couldn’t bring themselves to talk about. VaMangai made it a point of not looking at Nhongo and Ella, addressing everything she said to her husband as if seeking approval and support for something very important she wasn’t certain she could do alone.

Nhongo and Ella hardly said anything. Sekai wouldn’t eat breakfast. It was clear she was accusing somebody of something but she couldn’t say who or what it was.

Netsai was having fun feeding Grandfather VaJumo porridge. He would pretend to be blind and each time Netsai brought the spoon to his mouth, he would make her miss it.

After breakfast, VaMangai packed some groundnuts, cobs of maize, cucumbers, two pumpkins (from the last rainy season) and a tin of peanut butter into a plastic bag. She presented Ella with a live chicken, its legs tied together with a piece of string.

“Next time it will be a nanny-goat,” VaMangai said.

“And after that, a cow,” VaJumo added. They all laughed except Nhongo and Sekai.

“Don’t forget us,” VaMangai said.

“Thank you for your kindness, Amai,” Ella said, clapping her hands, on her knees as she received the proffered chicken.

Nhongo thought she was about to cry.

“What kindness? I am only doing what any mother would do for her daughter.” VaMangai said, with a look at VaJumo. VaJumo nodded: it was the only proper thing to do.

VaJumo asked Sekai to come to him. Then, with the girls on either side of him, his arms round their waists, he said, “And when are my wives coming back to cook for me?”

Netsai laughed and said, “I am not going to be the wife of such an old man as you.” Everybody laughed. Sekai remained pointedly quiet. After prayers to the God of the Christians and to their Ancestors, they all went out of the room.

As he opened the boot of the car to load in their things, Nhongo’s heart stopped. The hare lay in the bottom of the car trunk. It was dead. He dumped the plastic bag into the trunk and closed it.

Nhongo’s parents and Major, the dog, watched as they all climbed into the car. The children got into the back seat and Ella sat in front with Nhongo.

“You come and sit with us in the back,” Sekai said. “That’s Mama’s seat.

“Yes,” Netsai chanted, “that’s Mama’s seat.”

“Do you want me to kick you out of the car?” Nhongo said.

Sekai looked down at the floor of the car and fell silent. Netsai looked at Sekai, seemingly betrayed by her silence.

They said good-bye. “Come back and see us soon, *Mainini* Ella,” VaMangai said, earnestly. They drove off. Nhongo saw them in the rearview mirror, waving, Major, the dog, rubbing itself against VaJumo’s leg and wagging its tail. This was always the hardest moment for Nhongo. The loneliness he felt his parents must feel, alone, with just the dog, cut him to the quick.

Ella lifted her arm and put it along the back of Nhongo’s seat. A whiff of strong perfume wafted through the car. Nhongo felt tears stinging his eyes. “You stole Mama’s perfume,” Sekai said ruthlessly. Ella removed her arm from the back of Nhongo’s seat self-consciously. She held her hands

tightly together in her lap.

“I saw you walking out of Mama’s room this morning,” Sekai said again. The car grazed a tree by the side of the dust track. Nhongo quickly brought it under control.

It began to rain as soon as they got onto the Masvingo-Harare highway. Within ten minutes, the rain was coming down in a thick sheet. Visibility was almost reduced to zero but Nhongo kept driving. They passed other cars distorted to extra-terrestrial beings parked by the side of the road, hazard lights on. Nhongo drove on as if someone were holding a gun to his head.

From the corner of his eye, Nhongo saw tears rolling down Ella’s cheeks. He put out his hand and laid it on her knee. Ella bent down and laid her forehead on top of Nhongo’s hand. A sob as big as the world caught in Ella’s throat. Her shoulders shook.

Sekai looked over the top of the seat and saw Ella’s head resting on her father’s hand which was resting on Ella’s knee.

She made a cluck-cluck-cluck sound of contempt and pulled a face. Nhongo heard the sound and looked up and saw the dirty-word face in the rearview mirror. Nhongo removed his hand from Ella’s knee.

“I saw you,” Sekai said. “I saw your hand on Ella’s knee.”

Nhongo drove onto the left shoulder of the road and stopped the car. He turned round in his seat and faced Sekai. The child pulled her head into her shoulders, put up her hands to shield her ears and shut her eyes tightly.

Nhongo raised his left hand, and with the back of it clapped Sekai on one side of her face and as his open palm was about to repeat the same on the other side of her face, Ella quickly grabbed Nhongo’s hand in mid-air.

“Don’t! Not in my presence!” Everyone jerked up to look at Ella. Her face was set in such a hard, determined way that Nhongo’s immediate thought was: she is years older than I am. Instinctively, he quailed. Ella’s grip on his arm, just below the wrist, was vice-like and so steady his own arm shook and ached up to the shoulder socket.

Nhongo felt like pleading: Please you are hurting me. And the children saw it, too. Their eyes opened wide, in wonder—and admiration at Ella’s strength. They looked as if they couldn’t take their eyes off her. They had watched enough wrestling movies on TV and knew what this meant.

For a moment, the silence that fell inside the car was louder than the throbbing rain outside.

Then, slowly, Ella seemed to realize what she had done and whom she had done it to and who she was to do it to him, and, slowly, very slowly, her fingers relaxed and her hand slid down to the seat. Then, quickly,

without looking at anyone, Ella opened the door and slid out into the rain and began to walk along the road.

Nhongo's arm was still in the air, in the position Ella had caught and held it. It seemed as if he didn't know what to do with it.

Then Sekai's door swung violently open and she was out and away, running after Ella, the rain pelting on her as she shouted: "Mummy! Mummy!" And Ella stopped. But she did not look back. Nhongo saw her standing out there, in the rain, still like a pillar of rock.

And to him, she seemed to grow taller and taller and he felt as if she was falling on top of him.

And as his head slumped against the steering wheel, he heard Sekai's voice echoing in his mind: "Mummy! Mummy!"

Permission to reprint this story from *Walking Still* (Harare: Baobab Books, 1997) has been generously given by the author.