

A VIRGIN TWICE

In the early evening, as the jacaranda trees opened their blossoms to do battle with the stale heat of the day, a small boy appeared on Kevin's stoop. It was less than four hours since the incident with Mdongo.

"*Ko ko*," the boy said. "Sah, sah!"

Kevin came to the door and the boy was on one knee, his eyes averted.

"You don't have to do that," Kevin said. "It's not necessary." He realized it was foolish of him to say it, yet he always felt compelled to say it. Sometimes he did, and sometimes he didn't.

"Yes, sah," the boy said, but kept his eyes and knee to the ground. His head was powdered with fine dust and his back rose and fell rapidly.

"Yes?" Kevin said.

"I am sent by Kgosi Lesetedi. He is calling you," the boy said, breathlessly.

“Yes, of course he is,” Kevin said, still feeling numb about the whole thing. “There you go.”

“Go to where, sah?”

“Not you. I meant—it’s an expression.”

“Yes, sah.”

“Okay, you can tell the kgosi that I’m coming.”

“Will I wait for you?”

“No, I need to wash first. Just tell him I’m coming.”

“Yes, sah,” the boy said. He remained on the ground, waiting to be dismissed.

“What is your name?” Kevin asked.

“Mosimanegape, sah,” the boy said.

In his mind, Kevin flipped the pages of his language manual. “What does it mean?”

“It means ‘Another boy,’ sah.”

Kevin looked down at Mosimanegape. His back was covered, in a manner, by a brown schoolboy’s shirt, tattered at the collar and threadbare at the broad of the shoulders. “You’re not one of my students, are you?” Kevin said.

“No, sah. But next year I will have you for maths.”

“Looking forward to it?”

“Yes, sah,” the boy said.

Kevin nodded, but the boy didn’t see it. “Mosimanegape, just for my information, when would a boy like you be allowed to stand and talk to an adult?”

The boy kept his eyes to the ground while he thought about it. “I have never thought about it, sah,” he said, finally.

“Never? Let’s say that you were sixty years old, would you look me in the eye when you talk to me?”

The boy giggled, embarrassed by the thought. “No, sah,” he said.

“Why is that?”

“Because when I am sixty, you will be dead.”

“Well,” Kevin said. “You know your maths, at any rate.”

“Yes, sah.”

“Just tell him I will be there soon,” Kevin said. He hesitated for a moment. “Okay, you may go.”

The boy stood up and backed away, his eyes still to the ground. When he reached the main gate, he turned, waved, and sprinted off.

Kevin walked back to his tiny kitchen and picked up his yet untouched gin and tonic. He decided against it, and placed it back on the shelf next to some tin plates and cups. He took a brown paper bag and placed it over the drink, to shield it from bees.

He went into his bedroom to dress for the occasion. He was, after all, meeting with the chief of the entire village. He decided shorts would be too informal, and a T-shirt would be close to disrespectful. He settled on clean khaki trousers and an ugly African-print safari shirt, one that he'd bought early on at Patel's Haberdashery in Gaborone. He hadn't even liked the shirt when he saw it, but bought it anyway, reasoning that it was the type of shirt that would bring him closer to the people. Within days he realized he hadn't seen a single African man wearing the same type of shirt. They were all whites—British expatriates, development workers, people like him. When he checked the label and saw it had been manufactured in Taiwan, he considered throwing it away. Still, he was sentimental about it, and held onto the shirt. It was a landmark shirt.

Kevin stripped down to his waist and rubbed the bruise on his shoulder where Mdongo, who was both

the headmaster of the school and a madman, had bitten him. Mdongo had not, in the words of the medical manual Kevin used to treat himself, “impugned the integrity of the skin.” Still, he was grateful for delivery from tetanus or God knows what. It was God knows what that could kill a person out here. The nearest hospital was half a day’s ride.

He examined the scraped knuckles of his right hand, and doused them again with hydrogen peroxide. The liquid bubbled and fizzed, raising a stinging strawberry parfait on his knuckles. He vaguely recalled that a student had snatched Mdongo’s tooth from the ground after it had left the headmaster’s mouth and arced in slow motion, tumbling through the air before it hit the dust. The student no doubt still had the tooth, and would later use it as a fetish, insurance against bad grades and capricious discipline.

Five minutes later Kevin was dressed and out of the house. The jacaranda mingled with the acrid smoke of acacia-wood cooking fires, as women prepared dinners throughout the village. As he walked, small children darted in and out of the compounds, chewing on a chicken leg here, pushing a toy truck constructed from soft drink tins there. Some stopped and stared when they saw him, calling out, “Mista Keveen!” But when he looked back at them, they averted their eyes and giggled.

Miss Ndlovu’s compound was subdued. A few children chased goats from the plastic water basins, but most of her people would be at the kgosi’s place, waiting to hear the story. Miss Ndlovu was, of course, well on her way to the hospital, if not already there.

Peter Zimunya’s rondavel was also dark and quiet. Kevin was sure his friend was already sitting with Kgosi

Lesetedi, exchanging pleasantries about the weather and lack of rain, or about the status of cattle diseases this year.

Kevin approached the entrance to the school and saw a small crowd gathered around the staffroom. Some simply peered, awestruck, through the burglar-barred windows. Others talked excitedly and pointed at Kevin as he walked by. “Jesus,” he said to himself. “What now?”

The crowd was at a distance, so he tried to wave them off. Some waved back, good-naturedly, misinterpreting his gesture. In the crowd he spotted Rose, a woman he’d been sleeping with. He would have preferred to say that he was having a relationship, even affair, with her, but she would have no part of those words. “The village is too small,” she’d told him. “I cannot be seen with a *lek-goa*. When your contract is over, then who will I be? The woman whose white boyfriend left her.”

Still, at the instant Kevin saw Rose, he felt a warm rush of energy along his spine and, this interested him, his sinuses. And as they nodded discreetly to each other, he had two simultaneous thoughts: “What am I, a cave-man?” and “I need to get a bigger bed.”

Kevin approached Kgosi Lesetedi’s place just as darkness fell on the village. He paused at the entrance to the compound. “*Ko ko*.”

“*Dumela*,” came a reply from the dimly lit circle of huts. “*Tsena*.”

Kevin crouched and walked toward a circle of older men seated around a low fire. He spotted Kgosi John Lesetedi at the far end of the circle, seated on a stool slightly higher than the others. Peter Zimunya sat next to the old man, still shaken and looking for all the world as if he were sitting on a puff adder. Kevin knew the

whole scene would be harder on Peter than on him, only because, and this was the irony of his life in Botswana, it was Peter's country, not his. Because he was a foreigner, he was excluded from certain culpabilities. At the same time, he knew his mistakes and inept handling of what had turned out to be an incomprehensible language made him a great source of entertainment throughout the village.

For example: Soon after his arrival, Kevin had struck up a conversation with a woman at the water pump. She'd had a baby swaddled in blankets resting on her back. In his mind, Kevin formed the sentence, "Your baby is beautiful."

"Your baby is a rabbit," he'd said.

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Kevin nodded at Peter, and crouched lower, eyes averted, approaching Kgosi Lesetedi while extending his right arm. "*Dumela, kgosi,*" he said.

"*Dumela ngwanaka, o tsogile jang?*" Hello, son, how did you arise? Kgosi Lesetedi asked. They shook hands.

"*Eh,*" Kevin replied. Fine.

"Sit, Mister Mahoney," Kgosi Lesetedi said. His voice was like sand and his eyes rheumy. He seemed tired. Greetings were passed between Kevin and the rest of the men. No women were visible in the circle, but Kevin knew they stood in the darkness, tending to chores, listening to every word.

"I would like to speak English," Kgosi Lesetedi said.

"We can speak Setswana," Kevin said. "I'll try."

"I don't mean to insult you," Kgosi Lesetedi said, "but we have important things to discuss. We are not talking about rabbits."

The men snickered and Kevin thought, not unkindly, at least I give these people pleasure.

“Pardon me,” Kgosi Lesetedi said. “The point is, I don’t want you to miss anything. Besides, I enjoy English isn’t it.”

Kevin looked to the other men for a reaction. Several nodded assent.

“Don’t worry,” Kgosi Lesetedi said. “What they don’t understand, I will tell them later. English?”

“Okay,” Kevin said.

“Mister Zimunya?”

“*Eh*,” Peter said.

“Well, then,” Kgosi Lesetedi said. He leaned forward. “What do you think of the Bruins this year?”

“Sir?”

“The ice hockey team, the Boston Bruins.”

“Yes, I know them.”

“You are from Boston?”

“South Boston, sir. But I don’t really . . . I mean, I’m not sure.”

“You are wondering how I know of this game isn’t it. I know of Boston. Popcorn and hot dogs, you see. And this game fascinates me. We have all seen ice, of course, but a field of ice, a lake of ice? No, never. I can’t conceive it. It is a dream of mine, to see an ice hockey field.”

“Do you actually follow the team, then?” Kevin asked.

“No, in point of fact, I am a fan of the New York Rangers.” He paused for effect. “You may very well ask, how is that? It would be an intelligent question.”

Kevin remained silent, slightly stunned. The old men, even Peter, smiled.

“Well?” Kgosi Lesetedi said.

“How is that, sir?” Kevin said.

Kgosi Lesetedi leaned back into the darkness and hissed. A young girl appeared, and, as near as Kevin could understand, the kgosi told her to fetch something from inside. He leaned back. “Wait,” he said, satisfied. Then, as a second thought, he leaned back into the darkness and shouted, “And bring tea!”

After a moment the girl emerged from the darkness with a shiny photo album. She dropped to one knee and handed the album to the kgosi, who took it slowly, and with some reverence. He took a pair of bent bifocals from his breast pocket and brought them to his grooved and stubbled face. Nevertheless, he squinted as he searched the album.

“Ah,” he said. “There.” He handed a photo to Kevin.

In the photo, a young man, as dark as a glass of merlot and made darker by the cap and gown he sported, made darker still by an overcast day, held a diploma out to the camera. He was alone in the photo.

“My son,” Kgosi Lesetedi said. “The third-born. Columbia University of New York City.”

The young man was long and elegant, and wore his cap at an angle. He smiled broadly. “What is his degree?” Kevin asked.

Kgosi Lesetedi frowned and leaned back into the darkness. “*A re eng?*” What did he tell us?

A woman’s voice came from the darkness and filled the circle of men. “Biology,” she said, in English, “pre-med.”

“Precisely,” Kgosi Lesetedi said. “He is still there, in New York. He is going to be a medical doctor.”

Kevin nodded. “You must be proud.”

“Of course. It is expected,” Kgosi Lesetedi said,

softly. "And it is he who sends me news of the New York Rangers. But you know, I have always wanted to ask him something. What precisely is a hot dog?"

"Ah," Kevin said, glad he could help. "Well, it's ground meat in a tube. Sort of, I guess, like a sausage."

"Yes of course. And the meat? What type of meat is it?"

"Meat? To tell the truth," Kevin said, "I really don't know."

"Beef? Lamb? Is it in fact, perhaps, dog?"

"Dog? No, no," Kevin said. He thought about it for a moment. "God, no."

"Good. Then, why is it you call it that?"

"Well, I'm not exactly sure," Kevin said. "It's just English, I suppose. As a matter of fact, we call a lot of things 'dogs.' Feet, food, even people. It's a peculiarity."

"All languages have it, I suppose isn't it," Kgosi Lesetedi said, and he smiled. He leaned back and let out a long breath. "At any rate, you have knocked some teeth out of Mister Mdongo's head."

"Oh," Kevin said. "One tooth, actually."

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This is what Kevin knew of Kgosi John Lesetedi: He was the paramount chief of Bobokong village of northern Botswana, a man clearly venerated by his people, and, by Kevin's count, his nine living wives, fourteen living children, and uncountable grandchildren and great grandchildren. He seemed to be a man used to being loved. They said he once was tall and broad, but now he stooped slightly, and had grown a flawlessly round belly. He still showed power around the eyes and mouth.

Kgosi Lesetedi was something of an eccentric. He

wore several garish rings on his fingers, and had two gold teeth and a walking stick made from the mummified penis of an elephant—at least that was what he claimed. Kevin was not quite sure, he had never to his knowledge seen an elephant's penis, let alone a mummified penis, so he took the kgosi's word for it. It was long and black and had the appearance of an oversized fruit roll, and did indeed seem to be the mummified remains of something. If the kgosi was having him on, Kevin thought, so be it.

The kgosi owned a short wave radio, and listened to the news of the world daily, from Russia, the UK, France, and so on. This, even though he spoke only Setswana, English, and Afrikaans. He had learned English and Afrikaans in South Africa, during several years of education there. His English was proper, the queen's language. But he listened to the foreign language news nonetheless. It fascinated him, he said, to hear other languages.

Kgosi Lesetedi was a devout Roman Catholic, though that never stopped him from relentlessly marrying throughout his entire adult life. One of his daughters was, in fact, a Catholic nun. Kgosi Lesetedi had once told Kevin that he also listened to the news from Vatican City, for he had great admiration for the pope, who was, in his words, the most important man on earth, limited only in that he could not marry. Kgosi Lesetedi, however, suspected that the pope must have several children, because, even though it is true that we are all his children, how could he not resist having a few of his own, who looked like him? No man could.

The overriding impression Kevin had of Kgosi Lesetedi, after having lived in the village these six months, was that the chief was a powerful and slightly

sad man who did not take his duties lightly, and he was a man with dignity.

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“One tooth, actually,” Kevin said.

Kgosi Lesetedi nodded his head slowly.

“I didn’t intend to.”

Kgosi Lesetedi turned to Peter. “Mister Zimunya?”

“Yes, I also hit him,” Peter said in a tremulous voice. “I think.”

“How do you think?”

“It all happened so fast.”

“That is why we are here. To make it happen slowly, so we can understand. So, who would like to start?”

Kevin exchanged glances with his friend, and knew Peter would start because he was the elder of the two, by three or four years. It was custom, like children kneeling in the presence of adults. Peter cleared his throat.

“Before I begin, sir, I beg your permission. There is a problem we should soon resolve.”

Kgosi Lesetedi nodded.

“It is Mister Mdongo. He is locked in the staffroom, even as we speak.”

The photo album girl arrived with tea, and placed the tray behind Kgosi Lesetedi. As Peter talked, she served each man a cup of the same formula: bush tea, a dollop of sweetened condensed milk, and two spoonfuls of sugar. As always, Kevin would nurse his cup for an hour or more.

Kgosi Lesetedi frowned. “Yes, I have heard as much. It was necessary at the time isn’t it. Has he been attended to?”

“He has water, and a bucket for toilet. I have instructed my girl to bring some *palache* to him later.”

“What is preventing him from leaving?”

“The windows have burglar bars, and I have the key to the door in my pocket. The girl will pass the food through the windows.”

“How long has he been in the room?”

Peter shrugged his shoulders, and Kevin realized he was the only one in the crowd with a watch. “About five hours,” Kevin said.

“And his wounds?”

Kevin jumped in again. “I think it was only the tooth. He didn’t seem to be in much pain, at least when we put him in the staffroom.”

Kgosi Lesetedi sighed. “Pain has a way of coming later. You will release him after our meeting, and tell him to see me tomorrow morning.”

Peter and Kevin exchanged glances. “Sir,” Peter said. “He is mad.”

A shimmer of amusement furrowed the kgosi’s forehead, then subsided. “He has not always been mad isn’t it. Now, tell your story.”

Peter took a deep breath and began.

“I was in my classroom, during the afternoon study period. Mister Mahoney was in the room next to mine, with his class. Then, suddenly, from the direction of the headmaster’s office, I heard a woman’s scream. It was very terrible.”

Kgosi Lesetedi turned to Kevin. “Mister Mahoney, you heard this as well?”

“Yes, sir.” It was, as Peter had said, a chilling scream.

“So I poked my head out of the classroom,” Peter

continued, “and in the next moment Miss Ndlovu burst from the headmaster’s office, followed by Mister Mdongo. She was howling, and he had a hoe, a garden hoe, in his hands. He beat her on the head and body with the hoe as she ran from him—”

“Why is it that he had a garden hoe in his office?”

“Well,” Peter said, “that is where we store our agricultural class supplies.”

“Interesting,” Kgosi Lesetedi said, stroking his chin like a detective. “Continue.”

“Yes, sir,” Peter said. “Anyway, he ran after her, the both of them screaming all the while.”

“What did he say?” Kgosi Lesetedi asked.

“It was, ahh, something impolite.”

“Which was?”

“He referred to Miss Ndlovu’s mother’s vagina.”

A quiet murmur emitted from the men seated around the circle, signaling that some understood what had been said. A teacup clattered to its saucer.

“Then what happened?” Kgosi Lesetedi asked.

“Then, well, it all happened very fast. There was such a clamor, I am not sure. The next thing I remember was that everyone, students and all, poured out from the classrooms, and I ran with Mister Mahoney toward the headmaster and Miss Ndlovu.”

Peter took a breath. “By the time we got to them, Miss Ndlovu had fallen to the ground and the hoe had broken. Mister Mdongo was beating her with the stick, and kicking her while she was on the ground. I reached him first.

“I don’t recall clearly, but I think I grabbed him from behind. His eyes were black and small, and he had foam

on his lips, coming from the corners of his mouth. All this while the children were shouting and jeering and making a racket.”

Kgosi Lesetedi shook his head from side to side and made a clucking sound. “And Mister Mahoney,” he said, “you reached Mister Mdongo as well?”

Kevin cleared his throat. “Yes, Mister Zimunya held Mister Mdongo from behind. Miss Ndlovu was on the ground, bleeding, but I went to help Mister Zimunya with Mister Mdongo. He was screaming and kicking out with his feet.” Mdongo was a small man, but Kevin remembered the strain in Peter’s eyes and neck. “That’s when Mister Mdongo bit me.”

“He bit you? How extraordinary. I would like to see.”

Kevin unbuttoned the top of his ugly landmark shirt and pulled it down over his shoulder. The kgosi took out his bifocals again, and stood up to examine the bite, brushing it slightly with his coarse fingers. He nodded to the men, who, in turn, stood up to examine the bite mark. Even Peter stood up to have a look.

“That is when you hit him?” Kgosi Lesetedi said, after all were settled again.

“Not exactly. I pulled his head back and pushed him away, and that is when he kicked me.”

“He kicked you.”

“Yes, in the . . . groin area.”

The men raised some eyebrows, and Kgosi Lesetedi smiled. He turned to the men and, in the way of translation, pointed to his crotch. Several men winced.

“And that is when you hit him?” Kgosi Lesetedi asked.

“It was a reaction, more or less,” Kevin said. “I didn’t really think about it. I just punched out.”

“Yes isn’t it,” Kgosi Lesetedi said, to no one in particular.

“But it had the effect of stopping Mdongo,” Peter said. “He deflated in my arms, like a baby. He wasn’t unconscious, he merely gave up. But he continued to shout at Miss Ndlovu as we carried him away.”

“Then we carried him to the staff room, and shut him in, and locked the door,” Kevin said. “We left him pacing, cursing to himself, like—”

“Like a wild animal,” Kgosi Lesetedi said.

“He was mad, sir,” Peter said.

“Mmm,” Kgosi Lesetedi said. He reached into his back pocket and pulled out a bandana, and wiped his forehead and bifocals. He placed the rag back in his pocket, and stared at the ground, drumming his knee with his fingers. He drummed for a full minute. Kevin timed it.

“Well,” Kgosi Lesetedi finally said, still staring at the ground. “It certainly has been a wretched sort of day. Mister Mahoney, I must apologize for my countryman. Now, do either of you have an idea why Mister Mdongo would attack Miss Ndlovu in such a way?”

Kevin did not. Not the slightest. So much happened—he realized this with full force now—so much happened in and around his life in Botswana about which he was utterly oblivious, that he felt like a ten-year-old in the company of adults. Which was why he knew at that instant what Peter’s response had to be.

“I think I know,” Peter said. He hesitated until he was sure of everyone’s attention. “It was love. Mdongo

had been proposing love for many months to Miss Ndlovu, and she refused him.”

“Ah ha,” Kgosi Lesetedi said. The other men nodded in agreement, as if this explained why a man would become perfectly demented in the middle of a working day and attempt to kill a woman with a garden hoe.

“He was taken with her, then,” Kgosi Lesetedi said.

“She refused him,” Peter said.

“I guess he didn’t get the message,” Kevin said. No one responded. “Anyway, isn’t he married or something?” He winced as soon as he said it.

“He has some wives in Zimbabwe,” Peter said, nonchalantly. “But they are far away.”

“*Banna le basadi*,” one of the men said. Men and women. The others nodded.

Kgosi Lesetedi leaned back and sighed with some resignation, as if the incident was now in perspective. “I will hear Mister Mdongo’s side of the story tomorrow isn’t it,” he said.

“But, I mean,” Kevin said, “wives or no wives, he beat Miss Ndlovu severely. They took her to the hospital, she’s there right now.”

“I know this. It was my truck that took her there. One of my sons drove,” Kgosi Lesetedi said. “Still, I will have to hear Mister Mdongo’s side.”

“And Miss Ndlovu’s side,” Kevin said, before he could stop himself. One of the men coughed. Peter averted his eyes.

Kgosi Lesetedi squinted, as if he’d seen Kevin for the first time. “And Miss Ndlovu’s side,” he said slowly. “Now, I think it is time you released Mister Mdongo. He cannot spend the night in the staffroom. Tell him to meet me first thing in the morning, and since tomorrow

is Saturday, you'll have no classes to worry about isn't it."

"*Eh*," Peter said. "But, with respect, what if he is still mad?"

"He won't be. But if he is, Mister Mahoney can punch him again isn't it." Kgosi Lesetedi laughed. "The old one-two!"

Kevin forced a laugh, and the men joined in.

The meeting was over. After several minutes, Peter and Kevin excused themselves, and backed away from the circle until they reached the darkness. Peter took out his flashlight, "torch" he called it, and they walked toward the school.

"What do you make of it?" Kevin asked.

"Kgosi Lesetedi will listen to Mdongo, and Miss Ndlovu later, but I think he has his mind made up already."

"Which is?"

"Which is that Mdongo is not only a man, but he is the headmaster. Ndlovu is a teacher. There is hardly a contest. Mdongo will be punished, but lightly. He will be seen as a fool, but a fool blinded by a woman. Maybe he'll pay a small fine."

"Get out of town!" Kevin said. "You—"

"Pardon?" Peter said.

"It's an expression. What I mean is, you can't tell me that after Mdongo has beaten one of his own teachers in public, has most likely fractured her arm, he'll be allowed to return as headmaster?"

"That is exactly what I am telling you. He will probably pay a small fine, and that will be that. And what is more, Miss Ndlovu will be very happy with the judgment, I am telling you."

"How?"

“My friend, listen. Miss Ndlovu will be happy after Mdongo returns, because he will no longer bother her. She now has the power.”

“Power? What power? He beat her up, not the other way around.”

“Yes but he humiliated himself in public. He is a buffalo. And that is *her* power. She emerges with strength, and so do you and I, by the way. Any one of us could rub his face in cow dung now, and he would not retaliate.”

“You’re saying that Mdongo will never strike out at her again, not out of anger, not because of this humiliation. Not even because he is crazy. I mean, he is mad, you said it yourself.”

“Yes, I said it. Who knows, maybe it was madness over a woman, not real madness. Then again, he may be a genuine lunatic. Who can tell?”

“Are you saying Kgosi Lesetedi can tell?”

“He is the kgosi. I know you don’t get it,” Peter said. “That is because you are from out of town. Don’t worry, it is perfect.”

They approached the staffroom, and noticed a small candlelight glow from within. The crowd had disappeared, and from the distance, they heard Mdongo’s voice. He was singing, lightly, to himself.

“What is that?” Kevin asked.

“It is a baby’s song, how do you say it?”

“A lullaby.”

They reached the door. “*Ko ko*,” Peter said.

The singing stopped. “*Eh*,” Mdongo said.

Kevin peered inside and saw Mdongo seated, his feet up on a desk, his hands behind his neck. He was relaxed.

“Sir,” Peter said through the window.

“Ah, you’re here,” Mdongo said, and he lowered his legs to the floor.

“Yes, sir,” Peter said.

Mdongo stood up and smoothed his jacket, straightened his tie. He was a thin man, and short. He reminded Kevin of Sammy Davis Jr. He had Sammy Davis Jr.’s eyes as well, quick-moving and slightly skewed. There were small flecks of dirt and dust on his white collar, and Kevin saw a thin, dried trickle of blood at the corner of his mouth.

“May we come in?” Peter asked, in English.

“The real question, Mister Zimunya, is may I come out.” Incredibly, Mdongo laughed.

“Is everything fine?” Peter asked, warily.

“Fine? Mr. Zimunya,” Mdongo said from behind the door, “you sound like an airline stewardess. Yes, I am fine, if you don’t count being held here against my will. I have suffered no lasting wounds. And, Mister Mahoney, the tooth seems to have come out clean, I feel no real pain.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” Kevin said. He debated what to say next, and went with convention. “I’m sorry.”

“No, I am the one who is sorry,” Mdongo said. “I believe I struck you first. And if you two are worried that I will try something, I can allay your fears. I have control. I am as calm as a sleeping baby.”

Peter nodded at Kevin. Kevin shrugged.

“Mister Zimunya?” Mdongo said.

Peter fumbled with the keys for a moment, and opened the staffroom door.

Mdongo stepped out and Peter’s torch displayed his smile, wide and almost silly. Mdongo clapped his hands

to his chest and thumped. “Ahh!” he said. “Freedom!” He raised his arms to the night sky, as if to embrace the stars, and for one horrible moment, Kevin thought he might try to hug them both.

“Yes,” Mdongo said to himself and the stars. “The jacaranda is in the air. It smells like chalk and old tea bags in there.” He breathed deeply through his nose and chortled.

“I’m sorry, it was the only place we could think of.” Peter’s voice trailed off.

“To stash me away while I calmed down? Well, and a good thing, too. I am almost grateful you did so.”

“We had no choice,” Kevin said, horrified by Mdongo’s composure.

“Of course not,” Mdongo said, and clapped his hands together in the gesture of a person who wants to be somewhere else. He restraightened his jacket and tie, and said, “Well, it is getting late. I think a good night’s sleep will do us all well.”

“Kgosi Lesetedi asks that you see him first thing in the morning,” Peter said.

“All the more reason for a good night’s sleep,” Mdongo said, not skipping a beat. He was almost jovial.

“Mister Mdongo,” Kevin said. “Miss Ndlovu is in the hospital.”

“Of course, of course,” Mdongo said. “I’ve heard. They took her there in Kgosi Lesetedi’s truck.”

“Her arm is fractured,” Kevin said.

Mdongo stopped rubbing his hands. “Then it is good she is at the hospital, I would say.”

“Mister Mahoney,” Peter said, “didn’t you have some books you wanted to collect at my house?”