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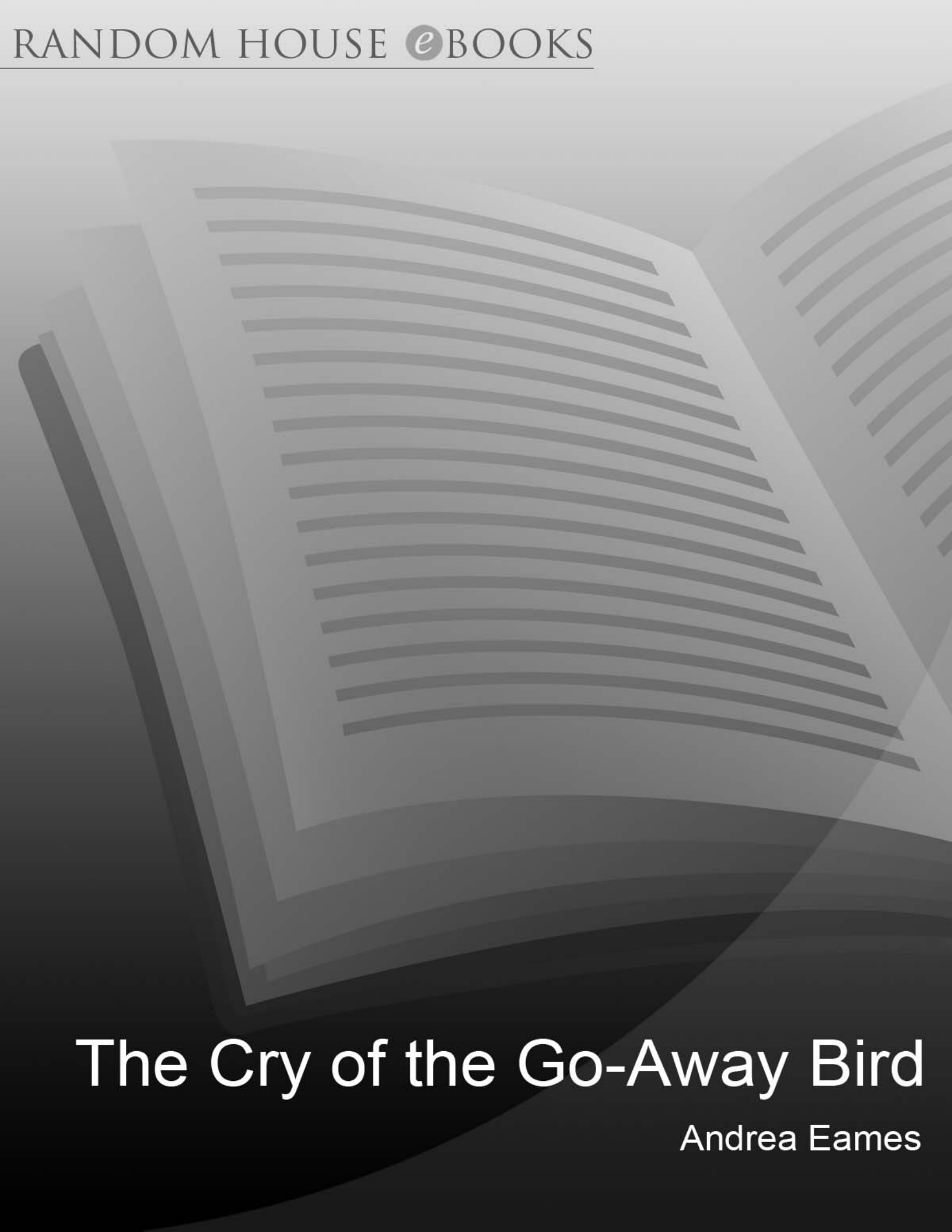

The Cry of the Go-Away Bird

Andrea Eames

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Andrea Eames

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Prologue

‘Where is it?’

‘How should I know?’

‘You said you knew.’

‘I said I thought it would be a good place to find one.’

The place at the bottom of the garden, over a small hill, where almost nothing grew – only a straggly acacia tree with white thorns, and a few tufts of khaki grass. An old, rusted tap dripped red water into a small pool fringed with weed and dotted with water-boatmen, insects with long, oar-like legs that rowed in jerky strides across the surface. Away from human eyes; quiet; near water. The perfect place for a *tokoloshe*.

‘Maybe we have to wait till night-time.’ I flopped down in the one scraggy patch of shade that had escaped the glaring sun. It was a hot, humming afternoon, alive with bees and flies, scented with honey and grass seeds.

My cousin Hennie sat on the ground next to me. He looked a bit like a *tokoloshe* himself – small and brown, with white hair like a dandelion clock and feet that were even harder and dirtier than my own. We had competitions where we compared bruises, cuts, blisters and calluses, and Hennie nearly always won.

‘I’m not waiting here all day,’ he said.

‘It’ll only be a couple of hours.’

‘Where’s the food?’

I had liberated five Marie biscuits from the pantry, a little soggy, but still edible, as well as a torch, a map and an apple for the *tokoloshe*. I did not know what they ate – although I had an uncomfortable feeling that it might be

children – but I thought an apple might serve as good bait or a helpful distraction.

My nanny, Beauty, had often told me the story of the *tokoloshe* she saw when she was a little girl. One day, when she went to the pump to get water for washing, as she did every day, there was a child-like figure standing there. When it turned around, she saw that it had the face of an old, old man. No eyes; just sockets, scarred and burnt as if someone had gouged them out.

‘I was very afraid,’ said Beauty. ‘But I needed water. It stood there watching me. I thought that perhaps it wanted to drink but did not know how to work the pump. It stepped back and let me pump some water into my bucket, and when I had finished it grabbed my bucket with its monkey hands and took a drink. Then it ran away.’

I had caught glimpses of what could be *tokoloshes* now and then, but never close enough to tell for sure. I wanted to see one for myself, up close.

My cat Archie materialised as soon as he heard the packet of biscuits crinkling. I pulled one out and divided it carefully into three. Archie swallowed his piece in one gulp. Hennie also finished his quickly. I had a special method that involved eating all around the edge again and again until it was gone, and so mine took longer. By the time I had finished, my two followers were drooping again.

‘I want some juice.’

‘I didn’t bring any juice.’

‘I’m going back to the kitchen.’ Hennie stood up.

I grabbed his hand to stop him. ‘You can’t.’

Archie strolled over to the kitchen and collapsed on the cool concrete steps outside. A startled lizard shot off the steps and up the wall.

Hennie seemed to resign himself. ‘Okay. What do we do now?’

I was not really sure. I had a vague plan of using a stick as a spear and creeping through the undergrowth, but the only

sticks were thorny ones and there was no real undergrowth; only a few patches of brittle grass. It was the sneaky kind, that drew its blade along the back of your knees and left red welts.

‘We wait,’ I said with finality. Hennie looked unimpressed.

‘Can we eat the rest of the biscuits?’

I thought about it. ‘I suppose so.’

We divided up the biscuits and ate. Then we sat looking at the acacia tree and listening to the slow plonk, plonk of the rusty tap dripping into the puddle.

Hennie started to get grumpy. He got up. ‘I’m going home.’

‘You can’t go home! We haven’t found the *tokoloshe* yet.’

But my older cousin authority had lost its power for the day. Hennie stomped off, and I settled down to wait alone.

The sun cooked the top of my head and turned my saliva into thick peanut butter. After what felt like several hours, I wondered if I could go back to the house and get some juice. That felt like cheating, though, and so I stayed, making a little rock garden out of pebbles and twigs. And then I sat for a bit longer.

Mum came to check on me, wearing a stained apron and flip-flops and shielding her eyes from the glare. ‘Are you okay? Do you want to come in for some tea?’

She had not heard about the expedition, but was used to my games.

‘I can’t come in, I’m waiting.’

Mum disappeared, then reappeared with a sandwich and a green plastic cup full of juice. She also brought a hat, which she wedged firmly on to my head. ‘What have I told you about wearing a hat?’

‘Agh, Mum.’

‘It’s important. Are you sure you don’t want to come inside?’

‘*Ja.*’

‘All right then. Don’t take the hat off.’

I ate my tea. Time passed. The tap dripped. A persistent fly tried to land on my face. A beetle climbed over my toe. The swift African sunset came: the shadows grew longer, the air cooled and the first mosquito of the evening whined in my ear, followed by an ominous silence when it found a spot of skin on which to feed. I heard the clinking of plates from the kitchen – Mum making dinner – and saw a silhouette at the kitchen window. I sniffled a little, feeling sorry for myself. It was a luxurious sniffle, because I knew that, if I wanted, I could go inside where it was safe and cosy, but I had chosen to stay and fulfil my quest. There was a strange satisfaction in it.

The sun fell away, and it was dark. I clicked on my torch, shone it into the sky and wondered if people in Space could see me. The light made a dusty, pale cone for a few metres and then vanished.

Night-time was noisy in Zimbabwe. Crickets ululated and the mosquitoes droned like faraway aeroplanes. The grass rustled and snapped. As the night grew darker, hunting a *tokoloshe* no longer seemed like a game. I turned off my torch and sat in the dark. A feeling like fear, but not quite, spread from my chest down both of my arms.

Something moved in the acacia tree. I bit my lip, and tasted blood. I stayed very still. Too late, I remembered the apple, still in the bag, that I had saved for the *tokoloshe*. Hennie might as well have eaten it, because I was paralysed and could not get it out.

A pair of round, pale eyes appeared in the tree, watching with ancient cunning. I stared back. I did not know what to do. Was I planning to catch the *tokoloshe*, like Pooh and Piglet setting a trap for the Heffalump? No chance of that. The air seemed to thicken and concentrate itself around that glowing paleness, and I knew that I had made a mistake, that you could not go looking for something if you did not want to find it.

I forced my eyes downwards, away from those of the *tokoloshe*. I heard a low chittering, and then nothing.

I ran to the house. My limbs felt like thick sap, bendy and unreliable. The kitchen light and the moths fizzing and dying around it were the most comforting things I had ever seen.

When I burst into the kitchen, sobbing, Mum asked me if I was all right. I could not explain.

Later, Mum told me that it must have been a bushbaby. ‘It’s unusual, though,’ she said. ‘You hardly ever see them up here.’

I had seen bushbabies on the farm before. They had round, yellow eyes that blinked down from trees. But I knew what I had seen. And I knew what I found the next day, under the tree where I saw the *tokoloshe*: a small bundle of herbs, a crow feather and a porcupine quill, tied together. A talisman to ward off evil spirits.

Chapter One

Beauty's skin was smooth and many-coloured, like the patina on old copper. When I was a baby, I sat with my nose buried in the sweet, meaty smell of her armpit, where it curved to meet her breast. Now, at twelve years old, I sat beside her, legs outstretched, back against the sun-warmed wall. The proper way for a woman to sit.

I listened to a stream of Shona, a language that lingered on long vowels. Each sentence was met by a chorus of women's voices, in agreement or mild horror or quiet amusement.

'Eh-eh.'

'Oh-oh.'

Comfortable, lazy sounds. They had settled in for a long gossip. I could understand most of what they said, but some words stood out like bright pebbles in muddy water. *Amai*: mother, or a term of respect for an older woman. *Aiwa*: No. *Maiwe!* – variously, oh my goodness, you don't say, I can't believe it.

The earth was red and baking, the sun almost invisible in a white-hot sky. I stared at the ground, an endless source of amusement, covered in ants, worms, *chongololos* and beetles. I watched red ants swarm over the body of a rhino beetle stranded on his back, who rocked back and forth in dumb bewilderment until Beauty reached out a hand and flicked him over on to his front. I was torn between happiness at the beetle's redemption and faint disappointment that I could not watch him die.

The women sat around the cooking fire, drinking greasy tea from enamel mugs. Occasionally a man passed by the coven; tall or short, fat or thin, he always wore overalls of

thick, scratchy fabric over a bare chest, and usually had no shoes. The women became more subdued when a man passed, only a few daring to laugh at him or call a remark. I knew that black men (apart from the gardener, and other men the family knew personally) were something to be feared, like strange dogs, and I stayed silent. They flicked me quick glances – who was this white kid sitting with the women? I was the whitest of whites, I knew, with freckles and pale eyes that blinked and burned in the sun, but I did not feel white.

I loved to sit with the women in the *khaya*, even though Mum did not approve of me spending too much time there.

'It's dirty,' she said. She was proven right when I came home sick one day after drinking water from the pump, and she made me promise not to go back. I did not feel guilty for breaking that promise, however, because the Elise who sat quietly and did her homework in the white house at the top of the hill was very different from the Elise who played with the workers' children, threw stones at pigeons and helped pluck the chickens for supper.

'You are going back to school soon?' one of the women said in English. Her hair was glistening and oily under her *dhuku*, a brightly coloured tangle of cloth tied over her head.

'She starts Grade Seven next week,' said Beauty, also speaking in English.

'Just one more year, and then to high school!'

She smiled at me. I looked away. I did not want to think about high school just yet.

'Oh-oh.' The other woman said something in Shona that I could not catch.

'We must go now.' Beauty stood up with a great deal of exclaiming and brushing away of dirt and ants.

'Do we have to?' I asked.

'Your *Amai* will be wondering where you are.'

We made our way up the road, passing women who carried their babies in slings on their backs. Little round macadamia-nut faces peeped over their shoulders.

‘*Mangwanani*!’ the women said as they passed. I imagined the word like a *chongololo*, a black and yellow centipede, unfurling.

The road on the farm was red dust and tyre tracks. Eventually it led to the houses of the farm managers, and huts gave way to whitewashed walls and green lawns. All the other grass, especially in the Bush, was golden brown like baked bread, but the grass by the houses was broad-leaved and squeaky to walk on. Sprinklers sput-sputted along the side of the road, unwinding and spinning backwards with a hiss.

Our house was at the top of the *kopje*, just in front of the Bush, a prickly, dry tangle of thorns, branches and grasses full of buzzing things that bit. Ever since I was little, Beauty had told me that the Bush was also full of spirits. You must not insult the spirits. If you did, they would make you get lost for ever.

When I was small, my uncle had taken me walking in the Bush. He put a red cloth down where we stood. ‘We’ll see the red cloth and know that this is where we started,’ he said. He shook the compass a little and started the needle swinging. ‘And the compass makes sure that we know how to get back.’

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

‘Bluddy flies,’ said Uncle Pieter. I wondered if this counted as insulting the Bush. ‘We’ll go back now.’

We turned around and followed the compass. After a few minutes Uncle Pieter began to look worried. We could not be very far from the house, but it was impossible to tell – every part of the Bush looked exactly the same.

I asked if we were lost.

‘No, no,’ said my uncle.

The spirits were mischievous and quick to take offence. I did not know how to appease them. The Bush suddenly looked malicious, and the light was fading. I blinked, and through the film of tears saw a sharp face winking from a tree. I looked again, and it was gone. I did not know if I had imagined it.

‘Ah, here it is,’ said Uncle Pieter. He reached up and took the red handkerchief down from a branch. ‘I wonder how it got up there.’

I knew how, but did not say anything in case the *tokoloshes* were listening.

I had lived on the farm all my life, in the little house on top of the *kopje*, and I knew all the best ways to spend my time. Spotting an antlion’s tiny burrow in the red soil, and mimicking the footsteps of an ant with a slender twig. Watching the antlion emerge in an avalanche of dust, pounce on the stick, then disappear beneath the surface, disappointed.

Finding a chameleon on a branch and letting it walk along your hand, feeling its scaly feet loop and scrape along your fingers like Velcro. Spending half an hour with a sharp rock and a concrete slab, trying to break open a macadamia nut. Catching black beetles and keeping them in an old ice-cream tub with some grass and a bottle-cap of water.

‘Be careful,’ Mum always said.

I knew that we were not welcome here. Too many things could kill us: snakes, leopards, hippos, hyenas, charging elephants, spiders. Potential death or pain in every step. Even the plants were out to get us. Walking barefoot, I grew hard and crusty soles on my feet to protect against acacia thorns lurking on the ground. Every expedition outside was accompanied by insect repellent, sunscreen, a hat and calamine lotion, and Mum eternally dabbed things on me,

pulled out splinters or bee stings and slapped on plasters. A day did not pass without a cut or bruise.

My mother, however, was someone I saw in the mornings and at night, and for some parts of the weekends: it was Beauty who made me breakfast, Beauty who walked with me to school every day, Beauty who was waiting for me at the gates when the final bell rang. Beauty heard all my stories about the teachers and the other kids. Beauty put plasters on my knees when I grazed them, and promised not to tell Mum that I had not eaten my apple again.

Beauty had come to live with us when my dad died, which was before I can remember. Dad had worked with Uncle Pieter on the farm, and when he died, we stayed there.

‘Shall we go and get a Penny Cool?’ asked Beauty.

Penny Cools were little tubes of flavoured ice in a plastic bag. I liked to bite a hole in the top, squish them in my hands until the ice warmed up and melted a little, and then squeeze the slush out through the hole.

The village shop was full of colourful things: Freddo Frog bars; white Milko chocolate; Mazoe orange juice; cream soda; fake cigarettes made from sugar and food colouring; real cigarettes; Coke; a lost chicken chased out by a broom. The man behind the counter wore blue overalls and was missing a tooth.

‘Would you like a wem?’ he asked.

‘A wem?’

‘A jelly wem,’ he explained.

‘Oh, a worm!’ I said, over-pronouncing the word. ‘Yes please.’

The man did not seem to mind my arrogance. He opened a jar and pulled out a long, multicoloured strand of gelatine. ‘Here is your wem.’

‘Thank you,’ I said.

‘No, no.’ The man cupped his hands together and clapped them with a hollow clock clock sound. ‘You must say *mazvita tatenda*.’

I copied his movement. '*Mazvita tatenda*.' Two words both meaning 'thank you'.

'Why don't you just say one word?' I had often wondered this.

'Because you are very grateful for the free wem.'

When we got home, there were visitors on the stoep. There were always visitors.

Chinhoyi was a small town where everybody knew everybody. People were always coming up to me and pinching my cheek, or patting me on the head, because they knew my parents. They had names like Hennie and Nicky and Marie, but I had to call them all 'Auntie' or 'Uncle', even though they were not related to me at all. The men wore shorts and long socks like Uncle Pieter, and they had hairy legs. The women had sunglasses pushed back on the top of their heads.

There was always some new gossip. When people came over they drank gin and tonics in short glasses and complained about their servants, who always seemed to be stealing or doing something stupid.

'Did you hear about Hendrik?'

'*Ja*, his houseboy took off with their safe, hey.'

'Typical bluddy *munt*.'

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

'You can't trust them.' Someone stubbed out a cigarette. Everyone was smoking, and the ashtray overflowed.

'It's his own fault for putting temptation in their way.'

'*Ja*, no, hey.'

'*Ja*, no, hey' was a long way of saying 'yes' or 'no'. If you meant 'yes' you nodded your head and raised your eyebrows. If you meant 'no' you said the 'no' part louder and shook your head.

Everyone agreed that Hendrik was too soft with his servants. If you were too soft and sweet, you were snapped up like a fat buck by a crocodile.

‘Those bluddy *munts*. If we hadn’t come here they would still be killing each other.’

They were always saying things like this. Or they said that the blacks would still be slashing and burning, there would be no land for farming, there would be no water, hospitals, roads, schools. But all this didn’t matter. You could not win.

‘They should be bluddy grateful.’

I knew from listening to the adults that black people were like children, but also that they were cunning and not to be trusted. I knew that they did all the jobs like packing bags at the supermarket and driving buses. There were lots of them, like busy worker ants scurrying about around spilled juice on the kitchen floor. Adults said that it was hard to tell them apart unless you knew them personally. Women were always ‘girls’ and men were always ‘boys’, no matter how old they were. White men and women were ‘Baas’ and ‘Medem’.

The whites were special, somehow. They did the important jobs; had nicer clothes and bigger houses. You never saw a poor white person. I thought that we must have done something to earn all these nice things. It made sense.

Chapter Two

Beauty smelled like Vaseline and Sunlight Soap in the mornings, and, as the day went on, she started to smell of fresh sweat and cooking fires as well. She had taught me a song about five green frogs many years ago, and we sang it together as she did the washing up or polished silver on newspaper sheets laid out on the lawn.

‘Five green frogs
Five green frogs
(The word ‘frogs’ must be shouted)
Where can they be?
Where can they be?
(Here you shaded your eyes with one hand and looked around)
Hiding away
Hiding away
Hiding away
From me!’

Beauty had also taught me how to count to ten in Shona. I said the numbers over and over until I could recite them without thinking. ‘*Poshi piri tatu china shanu tanatu nomwe sere pfumbamwe gumi*.’ Years later, I still said the words to myself just for the pleasure of their sounds and the way they felt in my mouth. I learned a strange mixture of English and Shona words that had the farm workers cackling with delight when I visited them.

Beauty told me about totems. ‘*Mitupo* are the animal spirits that protect the family,’ she said. She was polishing the floors, which always put her in a contemplative mood. I sat on a rag, legs crossed, so as not to spoil her work with footprints. ‘My totem is the buffalo. Like the buffalo, I am strong.’

‘Does it also mean you are fat like a buffalo?’

Beauty took a swipe at me with the duster. ‘Don’t be cheeky.’

‘What’s my animal?’

Beauty sat back on her haunches. ‘I do not know if you have one.’

‘A cat?’

‘Why not?’ She clicked her tongue and got back to her work. ‘Remember, it is unlucky to kill your totem animal.’

‘I’m not going to kill a cat.’ I remembered a dead kitten I had found on the farm – one of the wild ones. There were farm cats that lived in the barns and gave birth to endless litters of tiny tabby kittens. This one had not survived. When I found it, it was partly eaten away by maggots, its body falling apart into sandy crumbs when I poked it with a stick. It exerted a horrible fascination over me and I went back to visit it every day until it disappeared – either removed by one of the farm workers or carried off by some animal.

‘Still, you remember,’ said Beauty, and I nodded. It felt like a solemn vow.

On the weekends, Beauty dressed in white robes and went to meetings. She did not talk about where she went, but I knew it was to some kind of church. When we were driving to our church on Sundays, I saw big groups of people, all in white, standing under trees and singing. It looked a lot more exciting than our church, where we had to stand up, sit down and kneel as if we were playing a big game of Simon Says. I asked Beauty if her church was like that. She pursed her lips.

‘It is not exactly like yours.’

‘What do you do?’

‘We sing, and we praise God.’

‘Why?’

‘Because we are grateful.’

‘What for?’

‘Everything.’

Beauty wore a cross around her neck. Sometimes I thought it was strange that she wore a cross and carried a talisman at the same time. I asked her about it and Beauty explained that, although she worshipped God and Jesus, she also had to be careful of the spirits and make sure to keep her ancestors happy. When I told this to Mum, she shook her head and smiled, but did not say anything.

Mum had been behaving oddly lately. She had changed her perfume from something light and flowery, like the pot-pourri in our bathroom, to something smokier. It smelled good, but dangerous.

She had also started cooking in the evenings. Usually Beauty made one of the five things we ate during the week: meatloaf, roast chicken, spaghetti Bolognese, sausage and mash, and, on glorious Fridays, *sadza*, white and stodgy as mashed potatoes, and relish which I could eat with my hands.

Now, however, Mum started to make curries – yellow ones, with swollen raisins floating in them.

'What's this?' I asked, pushing at it with my fork. The raisins wobbled.

'Chicken tikka masala,' said Mum.

I gave Archie my plate to lick after dinner, but he did not like it either.

'Elise,' said Mum. I looked up. Mum only used my name when I was in trouble – otherwise it was Treasure or Darling or nothing at all.

'*Ja*?'

'Do you miss your dad?'

I thought about it. He had been dead for so long and I was so young when he died that his death was really only a way to garner sympathy. I felt guilty for not being sadder. 'No, not really.'

Mum touched my hair. 'I thought so,' she said.

Soon after that, I went with Beauty to consult the *N'anga*, the witch doctor. Someone in her family was very sick and she thought they had been cursed. I was sworn to secrecy.

'Why is your aunt cursed?' I asked with great interest.

'Shush.'

'Did she do something bad?'

'*Kwete*.' No.

'But why would someone . . .'

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

A worrying thought occurred to me. 'Could I be cursed? If I go to visit him?'

'I do not think so.'

'Why not?'

'I do not think our curses work on white people.'

'Oh.' I thought about this. 'What if a white person cursed me?'

'White people do not have magic like this.'

I felt insulted. 'We might have.'

'No.' Firmly. 'Now we have to go. Stay quiet, hey?'

I followed Beauty to a part of the workers' compound to which I had never ventured before. No grass or flowers here, just red dirt. People stood in front of their houses sweeping the ground until all the grass had gone and it was all red and dusty. Uncle Pieter called these people Sweepers.

'Now there is a Red-breasted Sweeper,' he would say, pointing out of the car window to a man in a red shirt. 'It is a shy and retiring specimen.'

In this part of the farm, there were more Sweepers than I could count. There were also thin dogs with their ribs showing and their tails down, and *piccanins* in shorts and colourful shirts. They looked at me curiously as I walked beside Beauty.

'Hello! Hello! How are you?' they shouted, showing off their English. I glanced at them, secure in my position as a Baas's daughter, and said nothing.

We passed a shebeen, a drinking hall. There were a few men outside, sitting on the edge of the stoep and drinking Chibuku Scud – a sweet beer that came in big plastic tubs. I had persuaded the gardener to let me have a sip once, and it tasted like milky sweetcorn and batteries.

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

'The *N'anga* lives here,' said Beauty. She looked nervous. 'You must be quiet, you hear?'

I nodded. There was a sign outside, written in blue paint on a white-washed stone. Two words, and a number.

'What does it say, Beauty?'

Beauty had her High School Certificate and liked to show off her learning.

'NGANGA. WITCH DOCTOR. 122.'

'What does the number mean?'

'It is his address.'

Of course. I followed Beauty as she walked up to the hut door and knocked.

'*Gogogoi*.' Meaning 'knock, knock,' like the jokes.

The *N'anga* was a younger man than I had expected. From a distance he had always looked stooped and old, but up close his face was only slightly lined. He wore a mangy, feathered headdress, one feather sticking out at a rakish angle over his ear, and a leopard skin was draped across his shoulders. It was smelly and looked dusty, but I knew that to wear a leopard skin was a sign of great power; the leopard was an important animal that produced potent *muti*, and this particular leopard had been an old man-eater that had killed a three-year-old boy. When the hunters caught and killed it, they brought it to the *N'anga*, who cut its heart out and ate it in front of the whole village. It imbued him with power.

'Come, come, come.' The *N'anga*'s speech was fast. 'Come inside, sister.' He saw me and said something in Shona that I did not catch. Beauty replied, and started to

usher me outside to wait for her, but the witch doctor grabbed my arm.

‘No, no, she must come in.’ He grinned, showing a gold tooth. His hand felt dry and scaly and his palm was bright pink.

Beauty looked worried, but did not contradict him. ‘You stay with me,’ she hissed.

I was delighted. The opportunity to see inside a *N’anga*’s hut was too good to pass up.

It was very clean. The floor was swept and there was a small pit for a cooking fire. There was a tidy pile of bones in one corner of the room, and I positioned myself with my back to it.

‘Now, how can I help?’ The witch doctor spoke in English rather than Shona, giving me a sidelong glance from one yellow eye. Showing off.

Beauty told him the story of her aunt: how she had suddenly become sick, was coughing and covered in sweat, getting thinner and thinner.

The *N’anga* nodded gravely. ‘She has indeed been cursed,’ he said. ‘It is because of something your ancestors did. But I can help.’

He picked up a handful of stones and chips of bone, muttered something and threw them on the ground. He spent a while staring at them while we waited. Then he heaved himself to his feet, straightened his loincloth and wandered over to the shelves. He selected a jar of something orange and powdered. ‘You must give this to her to mix in water and drink,’ he said. ‘I will also make spells for you tonight and tomorrow night, asking for the curse to be lifted.’

‘Thank you, *N’anga*,’ said Beauty respectfully. She clapped her cupped hands together in the traditional gesture of a woman receiving something from a man. I watched as she gave him a bundle of crumpled notes. I could see it was a lot of money.

‘And you,’ he said, ruffling my hair with his scaly hand. ‘You are well behaved?’

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘Sir,’ I added.

‘Good, good.’ He brought down a little plastic bag of brown powder.

‘This is for you.’

‘For me?’ I glanced at Beauty uncertainly.

‘You must drink this. Will make you grow up strong.’ He passed it to Beauty, who hesitated and then took it.

‘What is it?’ I asked.

The witch doctor bent down until his face was only inches from mine. I could feel his spit land on my nose, but didn’t dare move. ‘You have misfortune following you,’ he whispered. ‘I can see the eyes of your ancestors behind you, and they have told me.’

My eyes were dry. I realised I had not blinked. ‘Why?’ I asked.

Beauty put her hand on my shoulder. ‘We must go, *N’anga*.’

‘Something has happened to you,’ the *N’anga* said, still staring at me. ‘You have been marked.’

‘Elise.’ Beauty looked worried. ‘It is time to go home.’

The witch doctor seemed taller, his eyeballs like egg yolks in his dark-leather face. He was grinning. The relentless hum of the crickets outside sawed and screeched at my ears. I blinked, and when I opened my eyes again the room seemed lighter and I could hear the birds above the crickets’ song.

‘Drink the powder,’ said the *N’anga*. He patted me on the head. ‘It will make you strong.’

Beauty tugged at my arm. ‘Come along.’

We left the *N’anga*’s hut with both our little packets.

‘*Fambai zvakanaka*,’ he said as we walked away. ‘Go well.’ It was what you said to someone going on a journey.

‘Beauty,’ I said as we walked away, ‘Can I carry my medicine?’

‘No,’ she said curtly.

‘Why not?’

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

‘But it’s mine!’

‘Shush.’

‘He said I was cursed.’

‘He did not say that. He said he saw misfortune behind you.’

‘Same thing.’ I reached for the packet, but Beauty held it out of reach.

‘The *N’anga* is old. He does not know what he is saying.’

‘Okay.’ I stuck my hands in my pockets and kicked at a stone. I would persuade Beauty to give it to me later, I thought.

Before I could form a plan, however, Beauty took out the packet of powder and opened it. She shook it out. A fine brown film floated down to the red dust of the road and was lost.

‘Beauty!’

‘This medicine is not good for whites,’ said Beauty. Her mouth was set in a straight line. ‘Come along.’

‘But what about the evil spirits?’ I asked.

Beauty reached into the pocket of her uniform and pulled out a little bundle. I could see feathers, twigs and leaves, tied together with twine. A talisman. ‘This keeps you safe from *tokoloshes*. Or *ngozi*.’

I had never heard of *ngozi*. ‘What are those?’

‘Ghosts who are looking for revenge.’ Beauty put the bundle back into her pocket.

‘Can I have one too?’

‘I will make you one.’

I thought about the visit to the witch doctor. He was nothing like the white people’s doctor, who was a very old man with a white coat and a jar of sweets on his desk. The white doctor did not believe in spirits.