LEILA ABOULELA

Leila Aboulela was born in 1964 to an Egyptian mother and a Sudanese father. She grew up in Sudan, studying at the Khartoum American School and a Catholic missionary high school. Graduated from the University of Khartoum in 1985 with a degree in statistics, she earned MSc and MPhil degrees at the London School of Economics. Aboulela was awarded the first Caine Prize for African Writing in 2000 for the story "The Museum" and published the story collection Coloured Lights in 2001. She is the author of three novels: Minaret (2005), The Translator (a New York Times Notable Book in 2006), and Lyrics Alley (fiction winner of the Scottish Book Awards in 2011). All of these novels were long-listed for the Orange Prize. Aboulela, who has lived in Abu Dhabi and Aberdeen, currently lives in Qatar.

The Museum
(1997)

At first Shadia was afraid to ask him for his notes. The earring made her afraid; the straight long hair that he tied up with a rubber band. She had never seen a man with an earring and such long hair. But then she had never known such cold, so much rain. His silver earring was the strangeness of the West, another culture shock. She stared at it during classes, her eyes straying from the white scribbles on the board. Most times she could hardly understand anything. Only the notation was familiar. But how did it all fit together? How did this formula lead to this? Her ignorance and the impending exams were horrors she wanted to escape. His long hair was a dull colour between
yellow and brown. It reminded her of a doll she had when she was young. She had spent hours combing that doll’s hair, stroking it. She had longed for such straight hair. When she went to Paradise she would have hair like that. When she ran it would fly behind her; if she bent her head down it would fall over her like silk and sweep the flowers on the grass. She watched his ponytail move as he wrote and then looked up at the board. She pictured her doll, vivid suddenly, after years, and felt sick that she was daydreaming in class, not learning a thing.

The first days of term, when the classes started for the M.Sc. in Statistics, she was like someone tossed around by monstrous waves—battered, as she lost her way to the different lecture rooms, fumbled with the photocopying machine, could not find anything in the library. She could scarcely hear or eat or see. Her eyes bulged with fright, watered from the cold. The course required a certain background, a background she didn’t have. So she floundered, and the other African students, the two Turkish girls, and the men from Brunei. Asafa, the short, round-faced Ethiopian, said, in his grave voice—as this collection from the Third World whispered their anxieties in grim Scottish corridors, the girls in nervous giggles—“Last year, last year a Nigerian on this very same course committed suicide. Cut his wrists.”

Us and them, she thought. The ones who would do well, the ones who would crawl and sweat and barely pass. Two predetermined groups. Asafa, generous and wise (he was the oldest), leaned over and whispered to Shadia: “The Spanish girl is good. Very good.” His eyes bulged redder than Shadia’s. He cushioned his fears every night in the university pub; she only cried. Their countries were next-door neighbours but he had never been to Sudan, and Shadia had never been to Ethiopia. “But we meet in Aberdeen!” she had shrieked when this information was exchanged, giggling furiously. Collective fear had its euphoria.

“That boy Bryan,” said Asafa, “is excellent.”
“The one with the earring?”
Asafa laughed and touched his own unadorned ear.

“The earring doesn’t mean anything. He’ll get the Distinction. He was an undergraduate here; got First Class Honours. That gives him an advantage. He knows all the lecturers, he knows the system.”

So the idea occurred to her of asking Bryan for the notes of his graduate year. If she strengthened her background in stochastic processes and time series, she would be better able to cope with the new material they were bombarded with every day. She watched him to judge if he was approachable. Next to the courteous Malaysian students, he was devoid of manners. He mumbled and slouched and did not speak with respect to the lecturers. He spoke to them as if they were his equals. And he did silly things. When he wanted to throw a piece of paper in the bin, he squashed it into a ball and aimed it at the bin. If he missed, he muttered under his breath. She thought that he was immature. But he was the only one who was sailing through the course.

The glossy handbook for overseas students had explained about the “famous British reserve” and hinted that they should be grateful, things were worse further south, less “hospitalable.” In the cafeteria, drinking coffee with Asafa and the others, the picture of “hospitalable Scotland” was something different. Badr, the Malaysian, blinked and whispered, “Yesterday our windows got smashed; my wife today is afraid to go out.”

“Thieves?” asked Shadia, her eyes wider than anyone else’s.

“Racists,” said the Turkish girl, her lipstick chic, the word tripping out like silver, like ice.

Wisdom from Asafa, muted, before the collective silence: “These people think they own the world . . .” and around them the aura of the dead Nigerian student. They were ashamed of that brother they had never seen. He had weakened, caved in. In the cafeteria, Bryan never sat with them. They never sat with him. He sat alone, sometimes reading the local paper. When Shadia walked in front of him he didn’t smile. “These people are strange . . . One day they greet you, the next day they don’t . . .”
Leila Aboulela

On Friday afternoon, as everyone was ready to leave the room after Linear Models, she gathered her courage and spoke to Bryan. He had spots on his chin and forehead, was taller than her, restless, as if he was in a hurry to go somewhere else. He put his calculator back in its case, his pen in his pocket. She asked him for his notes, and his blue eyes behind his glasses took on the blankest look he had ever seen in her life. What was all the surprise for? Did he think she was an insect? Was he surprised that she could speak?

A mumble for a reply, words strung together. So taken aback, he was. He pushed his chair back under the table with his foot.

"Pardon?"

He slowed down, separated each word. "Ah'll have them for ye on Monday."

"Thank you." She spoke English better than he did! How pathetic. The whole of him was pathetic. He wore the same shirt every blessed day. Grey and white stripe.

On the weekends, Shadia never went out of the halls and, unless someone telephoned long-distance from home, she spoke to no one. There was time to remember Thursday nights in Khartoum: a wedding to go to with Fareed, driving in his red Mercedes. Or the club with her sisters. Sitting by the pool drinking lemonade with ice, the waiters all dressed in white. Sometimes people swam at night, dived in the water—dark like the sky above. Here, in this country's weekend of Saturday and Sunday, Shadia washed her clothes and her hair. Her hair depressed her. The damp weather made it frizz up after she straightened it with hot tongs. So she had given up and now wore it in a bun all the time, tightly pulled back away from her face, the curls held down by pins and Vaseline Tonic. She didn't like this style, her corrugated hair, and in the mirror her eyes looked too large. The mirror in the public bathroom, at the end of the corridor to her room, had printed on it: "This is the face of someone with HIV." She had written about this mirror to her sister, something foreign and sensational like hail, and cars driving on the left. But she hadn't written that the mirror made her feel as if she had left her looks behind in Khartoum.

On the weekends, she made a list of the money she had spent: the sterling enough to keep a family alive back home. Yet she might fail her exams after all that expense, go back home empty-handed without a degree. Guilt was cold like the fog of this city. It came from everywhere. One day she forgot to pray in the morning. She reached the bus stop and then realized that she hadn't prayed. That morning folded out like the nightmare she sometimes had, of discovering that she had gone out into the street without any clothes.

In the evening, when she was staring at multidimensional scaling, the telephone in the hall rang. She ran to answer it. Fareed's cheerful greeting: "Here, Shadia, Mama and the girls want to speak to you." His mother's endearments: "They say it's so cold where you are . . ."

Shadia was engaged to Fareed. Fareed was a package that came with the 7UP franchise, the paper factory, the big house he was building, his sisters and widowed mother. Shadia was going to marry them all. She was going to be happy and make her mother happy. Her mother deserved happiness after the misfortunes of her life. A husband who left her for another woman. Six girls to bring up. People felt sorry for her mother. Six girls to educate and marry off. But your Lord is generous: each of the girls, it was often said, was lovelier than the other. They were clever too: dentist, pharmacist, architect, and all with the best of manners.

"We are just back from looking at the house." Fareed's turn again to talk. "It's coming along fine, they're putting the tiles down . . ."

"That's good, that's good," her voice strange from not talking to anyone all day.

"The bathroom suites. If I get them all the same colour for us and the girls and Mama, I could get them on a discount. Blue, the girls are in favour of blue," his voice echoed from one continent to another. Miles and miles.

"Blue is nice. Yes, better get them all the same colour."

THE MUSEUM
He was building a block of flats, not a house. The ground-floor flat for his mother and the girls until they married, the first floor for him and Shadia. When Shadia had first got engaged to Fareed, he was the son of a rich man. A man with the franchise for 7UP and the paper factory which had a monopoly in ladies' sanitary towels. Fareed’s sisters never had to buy sanitary towels; their house was abundant with boxes of Pinky, fresh from the production line. But Fareed’s father died of an unexpected heart attack soon after the engagement party (five hundred guests at the Hilton). Now Shadia was going to marry the rich man himself. “You are a lucky, lucky girl,” her mother had said, and Shadia had rubbed soap in her eyes so that Fareed would think she was weeping about his father’s death.

There was no time to talk about her course on the telephone, no space for her anxieties. Fareed was not interested in her studies. He had said, “I am very broad-minded to allow you to study abroad. Other men would not have put up with this . . .” It was her mother who was keen for her to study, to get a postgraduate degree from Britain and then have a career after she got married. “This way,” her mother had said, “you will have your in-law’s respect. They have money but you will have a degree. Don’t end up like me. I left my education to marry your father and now . . .” Many conversations ended with her mother bitter; with her mother saying, “No one suffers like I suffer,” and making Shadia droop. At night her mother sobbed in her sleep, noises that woke Shadia and her sisters.

No, on the long-distance line, there was no space for her worries. Talk about the Scottish weather. Picture Fareed, generously perspiring, his stomach straining the buttons of his shirt. Often she had nagged him to lose weight, without success. His mother’s food was too good; his sisters were both overweight. On the long-distance line, listen to the Khartoum gossip as if listening to a radio play.

On Monday, without saying anything, Bryan slid two folders across the table towards her as if he did not want to come near her, did not want to talk to her. She wanted to say, “I won’t take them till you hand them to me politely.” But smarting, she said, “Thank you very much.” She had manners. She was well brought up.

Back in her room, at her desk, the clearest handwriting she had ever seen. Sparse on the pages, clean. Clear and rounded like a child’s, the tidiest notes. She cried over them, wept for no reason. She cried until she wetted one of the pages, smudged the ink, blurred one of the formulas. She dabbed at it with a tissue but the paper flaked and became transparent. Should she apologize about the stain, say that she was drinking water, say that it was rain? Or should she just keep quiet, hope he wouldn’t notice? She chided herself for all that concern. He wasn’t concerned about wearing the same shirt every day. She was giving him too much attention thinking about him. He was just an immature and closed-in sort of character. He probably came from a small town, his parents were probably poor, low-class. In Khartoum, she never mixed with people like that. Her mother liked her to be friends with people who were higher up. How else were she and her sisters going to marry well? She must study the notes and stop crying over this boy’s handwriting. His handwriting had nothing to do with her, nothing to do with her at all.

Understanding after not understanding is fog lifting, pictures swinging into focus, missing pieces slotting into place. It is fragments gelling, a sound vivid whole, a basis to build on. His notes were the knowledge she needed, the gap filled. She struggled through them, not skimming them with the carelessness of incomprehension, but taking them in, making them a part of her, until in the depth of concentration, in the late hours of the nights, she lost awareness of time and place, and at last, when she slept she became epsilon and gamma, and she became a variable, making her way through discrete space from state “i” to state “j.”

It felt natural to talk to him. As if now that she had spent hours and days with his handwriting, she knew him in some
way. She forgot the offence she had taken when he had slid his folders across the table to her, all the times he didn't say hello.

In the computer room, at the end of the Statistical Packages class, she went to him and said: "Thanks for the notes. They are really good. I think I might not fail, after all. I might have a chance to pass." Her eyes were dry from all the nights she had stayed up. She was tired and grateful.

He nodded and they spoke a little about the Poisson distribution, queuing theory. Everything was clear in his mind; his brain was a clear pane of glass where all the concepts were written out boldly and neatly. Today, he seemed more at ease talking to her, though he still shifted about from foot to foot, avoiding her eyes.

He said, "Do ye want to go for a coffee?"

She looked up at him. He was tall and she was not used to speaking to people with blue eyes. Then she made a mistake. Perhaps because she had been up late last night, she made that mistake. Perhaps there were other reasons for that mistake. The mistake of shifting from one level to another.

She said, "I don't like your earring."

The expression in his eyes, a focusing, no longer shifting away. He lifted his hand to his ear and tugged the earring off. His earlobe without the silver looked red and scarred.

She giggled because she was afraid, because he wasn't smiling, wasn't saying anything. She covered her mouth with her hand, then wiped her forehead and eyes. A mistake had been made and it was too late to go back. She plunged ahead, careless now, reckless. "I don't like your long hair."

He turned and walked away.

The next morning, Multivariate Analysis, and she came in late, dishevelled from running and the rain. The professor, whose name she wasn't sure of (there were three who were Mc-something), smiled, unperturbed. All the lecturers were relaxed and urbane, in tweed jackets and polished shoes. Sometimes she wondered how the incoherent Bryan, if he did pursue an academic career, was going to transform himself into a professor like that. But it was none of her business.

Like most of the other students, she sat in the same seat in every class. Bryan sat a row ahead which was why she could always look at his hair. But he had cut it, there was no ponytail today! Just his neck and the collar of the grey and white striped shirt.

Notes to take down. In discriminant analysis, a linear combination of variables serves as the basis for assigning cases to groups.

She was made up of layers. Somewhere inside, deep inside, under the crust of vanity, in the untampered-with essence, she would glow and be in awe, and be humble and think, this is just for me, he cut his hair for me. But there were other layers, bolder, more to the surface. Giggling.

Wanting to catch hold of a friend. Guess what? You wouldn't believe what this idiot did!

*Find a weighted average of variables...* The weights are estimated so that they result in the best separation between the groups.

After the class he came over and said very seriously, without a smile, "Ah've cut my hair."

A part of her hollered with laughter, sang: "You stupid boy, you stupid boy, I can see that, can't I?"

She said, "It looks nice." She said the wrong thing and her face felt hot and she made herself look away so that she would not know his reaction. It was true though, he did look nice; he looked decent now.

She should have said to Bryan, when they first held their coffee mugs in their hands and were searching for an empty table, "Let's sit with Asafa and the others." Mistakes follow mistakes. Across the cafeteria, the Turkish girl saw them together and raised her perfect eyebrows. Badr met Shadia's eyes and quickly looked away. Shadia looked at Bryan and he was different, different without the earring and the ponytail, transformed in some way. If he would put lemon
“And my mother,” she blew the truth up out of proportion, “comes from a very big family. A ruling family. If you British hadn’t colonized us, my mother would have been a princess now.”

“Ye walk like a princess,” he said.

What a gullible, silly boy! She wiped her forehead with her hand and said, “You mean I am conceited and proud?”

“No, Ah didnac mean that, no . . .” The packet of sugar he was tearing open tipped from his hand, its contents scattered over the table. “Ah shit . . . sorry . . .” He tried to scoop up the sugar and knocked against his coffee mug, spilling a little on the table.

She took out a tissue from her bag, reached over and mopped up the stain. It was easy to pick up all the bits of sugar with the damp tissue.

“Thanks,” he mumbled and they were silent. The cafeteria was busy: full of the humming, buzzing sound of people talking to each other, trays and dishes. In Khartoum, she avoided being alone with Fareed. She preferred it when they were with others: their families, their many mutual friends. If they were ever alone, she imagined that her mother or her sister was with them, could hear them, and she spoke to Fareed with that audience in mind.

Bryan was speaking to her, saying something about rowing on the River Dee. He went rowing on the weekends, he belonged to a rowing club.

To make herself pleasing to people was a skill Shadia was trained in. It was not difficult to please people. Agree with them, never dominate the conversation, be economical with the truth. Now, here was someone to whom all these rules needn’t apply.

She said to him, “The Nile is superior to the Dee. I saw your Dee, it is nothing, it is like a stream. There are two Niles, the Blue and the White, named after their colours. They come from the south, from two different places. They travel for miles over countries with different names, never knowing they will meet. I think they get tired of running alone, it is such a long way to the sea. They want to reach
the sea so that they can rest, stop running. There is a bridge in Khartoum, and under this bridge the two Niles meet. If you stand on the bridge and look down you can see the two waters mixing together."

"Do ye get homesick?" he asked. She felt tired now, all this talk of the river running to rest in the sea. She had never talked like this before. Luxury words, and this question he asked.

"Things I should miss I don't miss. Instead I miss things I didn't think I would miss. The azan, the Muslim call to prayer from the mosque. I don't know if you know about it. I miss that. At dawn it used to wake me up. I would hear 'prayer is better than sleep' and just go back to sleep. I never got up to pray." She looked down at her hands on the table. There was no relief in confessions, only his smile, young, and something like wonder in his eyes.

"We did Islam in school," he said. "Ah went on a trip to Mecca." He opened out his palms on the table.

"What!"

"In a book."

"Oh."

The coffee was finished. They should go now. She should go to the library before the next lecture and photocopy previous exam papers. Asafa, full of helpful advice, had shown her where to find them.

"What is your religion?" she asked.

"Dunno, nothing I suppose."

"That's terrible! That's really terrible!" Her voice was too loud, concerned.

His face went red again and he tapped his spoon against the empty mug.

Waive all politeness, make him dislike her. Badr had said, even before his windows got smashed, that here in the West they hate Islam. Standing up to go, she said flippantly, "Why don't you become a Muslim then?"

He shrugged. "Ah wouldn't mind travelling to Mecca, I was keen on that book."

Her eyes filled with tears. They blurred his face when he stood up. In the West they hate Islam and he... She said, "Thanks for the coffee," and walked away, but he followed her.

"Shadiya, Shadiya," he pronounced her name wrongly, three syllables instead of two, "there's this museum about Africa. I've never been before. If you'd care to go, tomorrow..."

No sleep for the guilty, no rest, she should have said no, I can't go, no I have too much catching up to do. No sleep for the guilty, the memories come from another continent. Her father's new wife, happier than her mother, fewer worries. When Shadia visits she offers fruit in a glass bowl, icy oranges and guavas, soothing in the heat. Shadia's father hadn't wanted a divorce, hadn't wanted to leave them; he wanted two wives, not a divorce. But her mother had too much pride, she came from fading money, a family with a "name." Of the new wife her mother says, bitch, whore, the dregs of the earth, a nobody.

Tomorrow she need not show up at the museum, even though she said that she would. She should have told Bryan she was engaged to be married, mentioned it casually. What did he expect from her? Europeans had different rules, reduced, abrupt customs. If Fareed knew about this... her secret thoughts like snakes... Perhaps she was like her father, a traitor. Her mother said that her father was devious. Sometimes Shadia was devious. With Fareed in the car, she would deliberately say, "I need to stop at the grocer, we need things at home." At the grocer he would pay for all her shopping and she would say, "No, you shouldn't do that, no, you are too generous, you are embarrassing me." With the money she saved, she would buy a blouse for her mother, nail varnish for her mother, a magazine, imported apples.

It was strange to leave her desk, lock her room and go out on a Saturday. In the hall the telephone rang. It was Fareed. If he knew where she was going now... Guilt was like a hard-boiled egg stuck in her chest. A large cold egg.
“Shadia, I want you to buy some of the fixtures for the bathrooms. Taps and towel hangers. I’m going to send you a list of what I want exactly and the money . . .”

“I can’t, I can’t.”

“What do you mean you can’t? If you go into any large department store . . .”

“I can’t, I wouldn’t know where to put these things, how to send them.”

There was a rustle on the line and she could hear someone whispering, Fareed distracted a little. He would be at work this time in the day, glass bottles filling up with clear effervescent, the words 7UP written in English and Arabic, white against the dark green.

“You can get good things, things that aren’t available here. Gold would be good. It would match . . .”

Gold. Gold toilet seats!

“People are going to burn in hell for eating out of gold dishes, you want to sit on gold!”

He laughed. He was used to getting his own way, not easily threatened. “Are you joking with me?”

“No.”

In a quieter voice, “This call is costing . . .”

She knew, she knew. He shouldn’t have let her go away. She was not coping with the whole thing, she was not handling the stress. Like the Nigerian student.

“Shadia, gold-coloured, not gold. It’s smart.”

“Allah is going to punish us for this, it’s not right . . .”

“Since when have you become so religious!”

Bryan was waiting for her on the steps of the museum, familiar-looking against the strange grey of the city streets where cars had their headlamps on in the middle of the afternoon. He wore a different shirt, a navy-blue jacket. He said, not looking at her, “Ah was beginning to think you wouldn’ae turn up.”

There was no entry fee to the museum, no attendant handing out tickets. Bryan and Shadia walked on soft carpets; thick blue carpets that made Shadia want to take off her shoes. The first thing they saw was a Scottish man from Victorian times. He sat on a chair surrounded by possessions from Africa: overflowing trunks, an ancient map strewn on the floor of the glass cabinet. All the light in the room came from this and other glass cabinets and gleamed on the waxed floors. Shadia turned away; there was an ugliness in the lifelike wispiness of his hair, his determined expression, the way he sat. A hero who had gone away and come back, laden, ready to report.

Bryan began to conscientiously study every display cabinet, to read the posters on the wall. She followed him around and thought that he was studious, careful; that was why he did so well in his degree. She watched the intent expression on his face as he looked at everything. For her the posters were an effort to read, the information difficult to take in. It had been so long since she had read anything outside the requirements of the course. But she persevered, saying the words to herself, moving her lips . . . “During the 18th and 19th centuries, northeast Scotland made a disproportionate impact on the world at large by contributing so many skilled and committed individuals. In serving an empire they gave and received, changed others and were themselves changed and often returned home with tangible reminders of their experiences.”

The tangible reminders were there to see, preserved in spite of the years. Her eyes skimmed over the disconnected objects out of place and time. Iron and copper, little statues. Nothing was of her, nothing belonged to her life at home, what she missed. Here was Europe’s vision, the clichés about Africa: cold and old.

She had not expected the dim light and the hushed silence. Apart from Shadia and Bryan, there was only a man with a briefcase, a lady who took down notes, unless there were others out of sight on the second floor. Something electrical, the heating or the lights, gave out a humming sound like that of an air conditioner. It made Shadia feel as if they were in an aeroplane without windows, detached from the world outside.
"He looks like you, don't you think?" she said to Bryan. They stood in front of a portrait of a soldier who died in the first year of the twentieth century. It was the colour of his eyes and his hair. But Bryan did not answer her, did not agree with her. He was preoccupied with reading the caption. When she looked at the portrait again, she saw that she was mistaken. That strength in the eyes, the purpose, was something Bryan didn't have. They had strong faith in those days long ago.

Biographies of explorers who were educated in Edinburgh; they knew what to take to Africa: doctors, courage, Christianity, commerce, civilization. They knew what they wanted to bring back; cotton—watered by the Blue Nile, the Zambezi River. She walked after Bryan, felt his concentration, his interest in what was before him and thought, "In a photograph we would not look nice together."

She touched the glass of a cabinet showing papyrus rolls, copper pots. She pressed her forehead and nose against the cool glass. If she could enter the cabinet, she would not make a good exhibit. She wasn't right, she was too modern, too full of mathematics.

Only the carpet, its petroleum blue, pleased her. She had come to this museum expecting sunlight and photographs of the Nile, something to relieve her homesickness: a comfort, a message. But the messages were not for her, not for anyone like her. A letter from West Africa, 1762, an employee to his employer in Scotland. An employee trading European goods for African curiosities. It was difficult to make the natives understand my meaning, even by an interpreter, it being a thing so seldom asked of them, but they have all undertaken to bring something and laughed heartily at me and said, I was a good man to love their country so much...

Love my country so much. She should not be here, there was nothing for her here. She wanted to see minarets, boats fragile on the Nile, people. People like her father. The time she had sat in the waiting room of his clinic, among pregnant women, a pain in her heart because she was going to see him in a few minutes. His room, the air conditioner and the smell of his pipe, his white coat. When she hugged him, he smelled of Listerine mouthwash. He could never remember how old she was, what she was studying; six daughters, how could he keep track. In his confusion, there was freedom for her, games to play, a lot of teasing. She visited his clinic in secret, telling lies to her mother. She loved him more than she loved her mother. Her mother who did everything for her, tidied her room, sewed her clothes from Burda magazine. Shadia was twenty-five and her mother washed everything for her by hand, even her pants and bras.

"I know why they went away," said Bryan. "I understand why they travelled." At last he was talking. She had not seen him intense before. He spoke in a low voice. "They had to get away, to leave here..."

"To escape from the horrible weather..." She was making fun of him. She wanted to put him down. The imperialists who had humiliated her history were heroes in his eyes. He looked at her. "To escape..." he repeated.

"They went to benefit themselves," she said, "people go away because they benefit in some way."

"I want to get away," he said.

She remembered when he had opened his palms on the table and said, "I went on a trip to Mecca." There had been pride in his voice.

"I should have gone somewhere else for the course," he went on. "A new place, somewhere down south."

He was on a plateau, not like her. She was fighting and struggling for a piece of paper that would say she was awarded an M.Sc. from a British university. For him, the course was a continuation.

"Come and see," he said, and he held her arm. No one had touched her before, not since she had hugged her mother goodbye. Months now in this country and no one had touched her.

She pulled her arm away. She walked away, quickly up the stairs. Metal steps rattled under her feet. She ran up the
stairs to the next floor. Guns, a row of guns aiming at her. They had been waiting to blow her away. Scottish arms of centuries ago, gunfire in service of the empire.

Silver muzzles, a dirty grey now. They must have shone prettily once, under a sun far away. If they blew her away now, where would she fly and fall? A window that looked out at the hostile sky. She shivered in spite of the wool she was wearing, layers of clothes. Hell is not only blazing fire, a part of it is freezing cold, torturous ice and snow. In Scotland's winter you have a glimpse of this unseen world, feel the breath of it in your bones.

There was a bench and she sat down. There was no one here on this floor. She was alone with sketches of jungle animals, words on the wall. A diplomat away from home, in Ethiopia in 1903: Asafa's country long before Asafa was born. *It is difficult to imagine anything more satisfactory or better worth taking part in than a lion drive. We rode back to camp feeling very well indeed. Archie was quite right when he said that this was the first time since we have started that we have really been in Africa—the real Africa of jungle inhabited only by game, and plains where herds of antelope meet your eye in every direction.*

"Shadiya, don't cry." He still pronounced her name wrongly because she had not told him how to say it properly.

He sat next to her on the bench, the blur of his navy jacket blocking the guns, the wall-length pattern of antelope herds. She should explain that she cried easily, there was no need for the alarm on his face. His awkward voice: "Why are ye crying?"

He didn't know, he didn't understand. He was all wrong, not a substitute . . .

"They are telling lies in this museum," she said. "Don't believe them. It's all wrong. It's not jungles and antelopes, it's people. We have things like computers and cars. We have 7UP in Africa, and some people, a few people, have bathrooms with golden taps . . . I shouldn't be here with you. You shouldn't talk to me . . ."
STEVE CHIMOMBO

Steven Bernard Miles Chimombo was born in 1945, in Zomba, Malawi. He received his BA from the University of Malawi and a teaching diploma in English as a second language from the University of Wales. He earned an MA and PhD in teaching at Columbia University in New York City. After studying at the University of Leeds in the UK, he returned to Malawi, where he edited the literary bulletin *Outlook-lookout*. Currently, Chimombo is Professor Emeritus of English at Chancellor College at the University of Malawi. He has published in a variety of genres: plays, poetry, novels, short stories, children's literature, and criticism. Among his books are the novels *The Basket Girl* (1990) and *The Wrath of Napoló* (2000), the plays *The Rainmaker* (1978) and *Sister! Sister!* (1995), the collections of stories *Tell Me a Story* (1992), *The Hyena Wears Darkness* (2006), and *Of Life, Love, and Death* (2009), and a work of literary criticism, *The Culture of Democracy: Language, Literature, and the Arts and Politics in Malawi, 1992–1994* (1996).

Another Day at the Office
(2009)

He joined the throng of people at the top of the small street leading from the marketplace. The main road marked the central artery of the main stream of people. They formed a vague column of marching feet kept in line by the fact that where the shops did not prevent them from leaving the main column, the ditches or the embankment did so further down.
A quarter to seven. Plenty of time. From the shop at the corner, the street leading from the marketplace to the office would only take fifteen minutes using Adam’s mode of transport. The bells and the whirl of bicycle chains sounded a quicker form of locomotion which kept to the edges of the tarmac. This ensured that they were not directly in the path of the four-wheeled monsters that were the owners of that black road. But sometimes the cyclists violated this truth, only to be rudely reminded by the horn of an irate motorist and an oath that tore past at fifty miles per hour to leave the culprit shivering from its passage.

His faded, size seven brown shoes pinched a little after turning the corner. As traffic was heavier here on the main road, he was forced to keep to the pedestrian path. The dust formed a fine film over the polish his wife had applied that morning, as he hurriedly washing his face and gargling his mouth to get on the road in time. The shoe repairer who worked opposite the vegetable stall in the marketplace had remarked in a friendly manner, “Why don’t you let me keep this pair for patches on other customers’ shoes? Another repair job on them and the makers won’t recognize their handiwork.”

He had muttered something to the effect that he did not see anything remarkable in the shoes. Just because he wanted another patch added to the areas where they pinched most did not warrant that he should turn into a charitable institution. Did he want him to go barefooted to the office? Still, the man had done a good job. It would be another two months of daily wear before the customary slight limp reappeared.

The familiar face he met at the top of the street leading from the marketplace had greeted him amiably enough. “How are you this morning, Chingaie?”

All he got in reply was the most overused cliché in the Civil Service—“Fifty-fifty”—which could be understood to mean anything from “I’m broke” to “I’ve got the grandfather of all hangovers.” After that, Chingaie did not show any signs of interest in developing the theme. The familiar face continued on its way, silently falling in behind Chingaie.

The street leading from the marketplace was flanked by the Indian shops. Old structures built in a random, absent-minded fashion. Garish colors and dusty spaces sprinkled with wild grass. But as soon as you turned the corner at the top, you met the shops that made a pretense at being modern: cemented car parks for the customers, wide shop windows boasting imported merchandise. Chingaie did not glance at them. His vision always centered on a spot vaguely ten feet in front of him.

The sound of water forming the background to the hum of engines, whirl of bicycle chains, and voices informed him he had left the shops far behind and was nearing the bridge over the small river they called Mzimundilinde. This receded as he climbed the long hill, still in the column of other workers heading for duties.

It usually took only fifteen minutes to walk from the top of the street leading from the marketplace to the office. Chingaie noted subconsciously that he must have used ten minutes already, for the column of which he formed a part was now noticeably thicker and faster-moving. The October sun was already making itself felt. He traced the course of a trickle of sweat from his armpit along his ribs down to where his vest, shirt, underwear constricted him round his waist on account of the leather belt he used to keep his trousers up. The trickle down his thighs was from a different source altogether.

Chingaie had dressed with his usual care. In spite of the hurry in the morning, he had looked at himself in the mirror to see that the parting on top of his head followed the usual groove. The spiked bamboo comb he used for this purpose never failed him. He could perform this action in the dark if the need arose. The small knot on the cotton tie had been slightly to the left. He had pulled it right and shouted to his wife, Nambe, in the kitchen, that he was off. Apparently, she had not heard him. The children, who were preparing to go to school, were making too much noise.
The road rose steeply after the river. Chingaie felt the tie round his neck also constrict him, but he did not loosen the knot. The Higher Clerical Officer would give him a cold, disapproving stare if he noticed something faulty in the appearance of his clothes. Chingaie's cheeks puffed a little and he breathed with some difficulty as he trundled up the steep incline. Only fifty yards to go.

He checked a little as he turned into the drive that led to the department he worked in. It was a huge, sprawling building that had belonged to some top government official in the pre-independence days. With the shortage of offices, the government had converted the residence into a block of offices, without changing the original design or the gardens surrounding it. The green corrugated iron roof was also the same. If you wanted to use the front door, you climbed the steps and came to a short passageway that led to what used to be the drawing room. It was now used by half-a-dozen young clerks, fresh from their School Certificate. Chingaie's desk occupied one corner of this room.

The smaller path led to the back of the house—now office. You went through a bewildering maze of little rooms, including the bathroom and toilet, before you came to the same drawing room—now office—where Chingaie had his desk.

Chingaie took the smaller path to the back door. He always used the back door to his office, and every morning the Higher Clerical Officer's short but effective speech came to his mind: "Mr. Thomson has approached me about having a word with you lot in this room. Miss Prim, his secretary, has complained that, each time you clerks pass her desk by the front door in the next office, you stare at her. She doesn't like the way you look at her. Where are your manners, you people? Have you never seen a white lady before in your lives? Why do you have to gape at her each time you walk past her desk? Imagine all six, no, seven, of you marching past with eyes on her. What do you think she feels with fourteen eyes piercing her? You should be ashamed of yourselves. From now on, all junior clerks, typists, messengers, and telephone operators must use the back door to get to this room. That's not all. The toilet and bathroom on the other side of this room are closed to all junior staff. You're to use the toilets in the servants' quarters at the back of the house. I don't want to hear any more of this nonsense. Is that clear to everybody? I am going to write a memo to that effect right now. Copy to Mr. Thomson, one to Miss Prim, and a third to be pinned on that notice board to remind all of you."

Chingaie opened the back door. It was seven o'clock. It seemed the only people around were the messengers and laborers. The rooms were so quiet. Even the girl who operated the switchboard had not yet made her appearance.

It was cooler inside. Chingaie breathed a little easier. He passed the Executive Officer's office. The next one was the Higher Clerical Officer's. Both had originally been bedrooms. The drip, drip, drip was from the bathroom.

Chingaie opened the door to the lounge—now office. It was empty. He crossed the room to the far corner where his desk stood. He opened the window nearest to him and sat down with a sigh. He eased his feet a little out of the shoes to rest them. He dared not take them off all the way—the Higher Clerical Officer might walk in suddenly and find him in his holey socks.

He took the plastic cover off the typewriter, folded it carefully, pulled open the bottom right-hand drawer, laid it on the top of the papers there, and pushed the drawer shut. The keys stared blankly at him. He glanced at the two trays on the desk. The "IN" tray looked as full as it had been yesterday morning, the day before yesterday, last week, last month. It never seemed to be empty. The only empty one was the "OUT" tray.

Chingaie put his hands on the desk, looked at his fingers for a brief moment, and pulled the top right-hand drawer open. He felt inside for what he wanted, and his hand came out with a razor blade. He proceeded to cut his nails slowly, piling the bits in the ashtray in front of him.

The other clerks found him sharpening a pencil, and to
their enquiries about his state of health he said, without turning (he faced the window with his back to the room), “Half-half.”

He recognized the individuals behind each voice and his tone of voice reflected how he felt about each of them. The six “Half-half’s” varied slightly in their lukewarm nature. He felt rather out of place in this room. They were all products of secondary school, compared to his old Standard Three, taken twenty years ago. They must have thought him a bit odd too. Him with his slight limp, tight jacket, and baggy trousers, banging away like a thing possessed at an equally battered typewriter amidst their loud talk and sometimes lewd jokes.

Chingaipie looked up and noticed that the laborers outside had started work. That meant that the Higher Clerical Officer was coming. He opened the top file from the “IN” tray, took out a rough draft, and laid it on top. He pulled open the top left-hand drawer and took out three blank sheets of typing paper. He shut it, pulled open the drawer beneath, and counted two sheets of carbon paper, which he put between the typing paper. He shut the drawer and inserted all the sheets into the machine. He set the typewriter margins and began to type:

“Dear Sir,

With reference to your communication dated . . .”

He could not type as fast as Miss Prim. There had been a time when he could have competed with her and not come off the worse. What did she type for Mr. Thomson which he didn’t or couldn’t anyway? Her with her superior secretarial airs. She was just a wisp of a woman really. Short, thin, almost angular. Long nose, thin lips. No bosom, no buttocks, no meat. Did she really think the young African clerks had any designs upon her? They might be fresh, but they knew there was no juice from that quarter. If it had been the telephone operator . . . Now she was altogether different. The type that they really would turn and look at.

Not that they had not, but they had come to grief. They were no match for her. That girl could be rude. He remembered the time he had been ready to go for the lunch break. She had preceded him into the passage with a friend. She had been speaking Yao so he could not understand, or so she had thought.

“At four o’clock, Chingaipie will knock off,” she announced. “Hurry to his wife. Mrs. Chingaipie will stop pounding maize and hurry to the kitchen. She’ll prepare food for the tired husband who is a copy typist in a big government office. Ha! Ha! Ha!”

The girl had not realized how close to the truth she had been. Chingaipie paused in his typing. Neither had she realized how it had cut him to the core to be dissected and classified as she had done. True, his wife prepared food for him as soon as he reached home after work. Only because he did not go for lunch like the Executive Officer, like Miss Prim, like Mr. Thomson, like the telephone operator and her numerous well-paid boyfriends. The other junior staff had formed the Lunch Break Union and had their meals of mgiawa and dried fish prepared for them by one of the laborers in the servants’ quarters at the back of the house. The rest contented themselves with boiled or raw cassava and bananas down by the Post Office.

He did not go to lunch. He could not start now. He had trained his stomach not to expect such a luxury. Instead, he drank a glass of water at noon and then went in the usual direction to a definite spot under a tree in the extensive gardens. There he loosened his tie, took off his jacket and shoes, and with obvious relief lay down to sleep, ignoring the inevitable rumblings of his stomach.

The beginning of the afternoon session always found him back at his desk banging away furiously. He could go on like that the whole afternoon, the noises of the keys interrupted at intervals by the loud guffaws of laughter from the secondary school kids.

There were six of them, four boys and two girls. Chingaipie knew intuitively who was going out with whom from
the occasional snatches of dialogue he caught while changing carbons or rummaging in his drawers or puzzling over the handwriting of the Higher Clerical Officer. In one of them, he had heard the kid called Mavuto talking to the older girl.

"Of course, there are different types of hair," he had remarked loudly.

"Mine is called love hair," she had replied, unabashed.

"I'm not talking about your wig, baby."

They would have gone on and on like that if one of the others had not noticed how rigidly Chingaipe had sat and so told the two to shut up. Chingaipe had continued to grope about the bottom right-hand drawer, embarrassed. He did not know where the world was going to. In his day... In his day... He found what he was looking for.

True, he did not go to lunch and his wife prepared a meal for him as soon as he reached home after work. Nambew. Up at half past five to heat the water for her husband. Up at half past five to prepare porridge for their children to eat before going to school. One of them was now at secondary school. Chingaipe hoped he would not turn into a brash, unmannered kid like Mavuto, in an office like this. He was trying to teach his children the meaning of work, determination, perseverance. Nambew. Up at half past five to get her husband and children ready for the day. Nambew, washing dirty pots and plates. Cleaning. Pounding grain for flour. Nambew in her missionary blue chirundu and nyakura, a load of firewood on her head down the mountain slopes. Nambew, smiling tenderly at him before they went off to sleep at night. Nambew...

Chingaipe brought the puncher near the typewriter. He stood up with a sheaf of papers and inserted them in the space ready to punch holes in them. He tensed the muscles of his right hand and pressed down. Crunch. There was only one hole in the papers. The other half of the puncher had broken under the force, and fell on the floor with a loud clink.

The office was very still as Chingaipe groped about the floor for the broken piece. He looked from it back to the puncher. He pulled the sheaf of papers and laid them flat on the table. He sat down again and stared at the single hole.

Nambew. Up at half past five to...

Chingaipe stood up again. He picked up the puncher and the broken piece and went past the now busy young clerks ostentatiously poring over their files. He opened the door to the passage and knocked on the door marked "Higher Clerical Officer" in large letters. He entered on hearing the growl, "Come in."

He stood in front of the huge desk littered with trays, files, notebooks, ledger cards, and looked at the man behind. The Higher Officer was in his late forties. He had sparse hair—a fact which he attempted to hide by having his hair cut very short each time he went to the barber's. But one cannot hide a fast receding hairline. The cheap spectacles he wore glinted dully as he looked up slowly.

"Yes?"

"The puncher is broken, sir," Chingaipe said slowly.

"The puncher is broken, sir," mimicked the Higher Clerical Officer. "You mean 'I broke the puncher,' don't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"You junior clerks, copy typists, and messengers," he spat out, "you can't be trusted to do even a simple job without a catastrophe happening. What will happen to this department if equipment is broken every day?"

"I was only trying to punch holes in a few letters I had typed, sir," Chingaipe explained.

"And you decided to break the puncher in the process?" the Higher Clerical Officer enquired. "You will have to see Mr. Thomson about this. We cannot allow this sort of thing to happen every day. I'm tired of all you junior clerks' tricks and inefficiency on the job. I swear some of you will get the sack before month end."

Chingaipe stood quite still as the Higher Clerical Officer's face swam in front of him. Nambew. Up at half past five to...
“You must report this personally to Mr. Thomson immediately,” the Higher Clerical Officer announced. “I cannot deal with this case myself.”

“Yes, sir.”
Chingaipa walked mechanically out of the room and down the passage, the puncher heavy in his hand. He went on, knocked, and entered Mr. Thomson’s office.

“Good afternoon, Chingaipa.”
“Good afternoon, sir,” Chingaipa stammered. “The Higher Clerical Officer told me to see you, sir. I was trying to punch holes...”

“And the puncher broke?”
“Yes, sir.”
“Gosh!” Mr. Thomson exclaimed. “You must be strong, Chingaipa.”

Chingaipa was silent.

“Tell the Higher Clerical Officer to make out a local purchase order for a dozen punchers.”

“Yes, sir.”

Four o’clock. Time to go home. Chingaipa opened the bottom right-hand drawer. He took out the dust cover, locked the typewriter, and covered it. He stood up to go. The “IN” tray was empty. So was the building as he left. He said a tired goodbye to the night watchman.

“Tidzaonananso mawa, achimwene.”

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CHARLES MUNGOSHI

Mungoshi was born in 1947 near Chivhu, Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), to a Shona-speaking family. An acclaimed writer in both English and Shona, he has worked as a bookstore clerk, an editor at the Literature Bureau, literary director at Zimbabwe Publishing House, and writer-in-residence at the University of Zimbabwe. Many of his stories illustrate the tension within families as their members wrestle with maintaining loyalty to traditional, rural values that are in conflict with their desire to be successful in modern cities and a Western European educational system. His work has both won government prizes and been banned; his most prominent novel, Waiting for the Rain (1972), is now required reading at many Zimbabwean schools. Mungoshi is also a poet, and the author of the memoirs Stories from a Shona Childhood (1989), One Day Long Ago: More Stories from a Shona Childhood (1991), and Walking Still (1997). Among his many awards are the Commonwealth Literature Prize for Africa and two Rhodesian PEN awards.

Who Will Stop the Dark? (1980)

The boy began to believe what the other boys at school said about his mother. In secret he began to watch her—her face, words and actions. He would also watch his father's bare arched back as he toiled at his basket-weaving from day to day. His mother could go wherever she wanted to go. His father could not. Every morning
“Sekuru?” The boy didn’t always understand most of the grown-up things the old man said.

“I said get on with the work. Nothing ever came out of a muscular mouth and snail-slime hands.”

The boy disappeared into the hut while the old man sat on, smoking.

Zakeo loved doing the household chores for his grandfather: sweeping out the room and lighting the fire, collecting firewood from the bush and fetching water from the well and cooking. The old man would just look on, not saying anything much, just smoking his pipe. When he worked the boy didn’t talk. Don’t use your mouth and hands at the same time, the old man had told him once, and whenever he forgot the old man reminded him by not answering his questions. It was a different silence they practiced in the old man’s house, the boy felt. Here, it was always as if his grandfather was about to tell him a secret. And when he left his parents’ place he felt he must get back to the old man at the earliest opportunity to hear the secret.

“Have you ever gone hunting for rabbits, boy?” his grandfather asked him one day.

“No, Sekuru. Have you?”

The old man didn’t answer. He looked away at the darkening landscape, puffing at his pipe.

“Did you like it?” the boy asked.

“Like it? We lived for nothing else, boy. We were born hunters, stayed hunters all our life and most of us died hunters.”

“What happened to those who weren’t hunters?”

“They became tillers of the land, and some, weavers of bamboo baskets.”

“You mean Father?”

“I am talking of friends I used to know.”

“But didn’t you ever teach Father to hunt, Sekuru?” The boy’s voice was strained, anxious, pained. The old man looked at him briefly and then quickly away.

“I taught him everything a man ought to know,” he said distantly.

“Basket-weaving too?”

“That was his mother,” the old man said and then silently went on, his mother, your grandmother, my wife, taught your father basket-weaving. She also had been taught by a neighbor who later gave me the lumbago.

“You like basket-weaving?” he asked the boy.

“I hate it!” The old man suddenly turned, surprised at the boy’s vehemence. He took the pipe out of his mouth for a minute, looking intently at the boy, then he looked away, returning the pipe to his mouth.

“Do you think we could go hunting together, Sekuru?” the boy asked.

The old man laughed.

“No, Sekuru?” The boy was puzzled.

The old man looked at him.

“Please?”

The old man stroked the boy’s head. “Talk of fishing,” he said. “Or mouse-trapping. Ever trapped for mice?”

“No.”

“Of course, you wouldn’t have.” He looked away. “You go to school these days.”

“I don’t like school!” Again, the old man was taken by surprise at the boy’s violence. He looked at his grandson. The first son of his first son and only child. The boy’s thirteen-year-old fists were clenched tightly and little tears danced in his eyes. Could he believe in a little snotty-arise boy’s voice? He looks earnest enough. But who doesn’t, at the I-shall-never-die age of thirteen? The old man looked away as if from the sight of the boy’s death.

“I tell you I hate school!” the boy hissed.

“I hear you,” the old man said quietly but didn’t look at him. He was aware of the boy looking at him, begging him to believe him, clenching tighter his puny fists, his big ignorant eyes daring him to try him out on whatever milk-scented dream of heroics the boy might be losing sleep over at this difficult time of his life. The old man felt desolate.

“You don’t believe me, do you, Sekuru?”
"Of course. I do!"

The boy suddenly uncoiled, ashamed and began to wring his hands, looking down at the ground.

That was unnecessarily harsh, the old man felt. So he stroked the boy’s head again. Thank you, ancestors, for our physical language that will serve our sons and daughters till we are dust. He wished he could say something in words, something that the boy would clearly remember without it creating echoes in his head. He didn’t want to give the boy an echo which he would later on mistake for the genuine thing.

"Is mouse-trapping very hard, Sekuru?" the boy asked, after some time.

"Nothing is ever easy, boy. But then, nothing is ever really hard for one who wants to learn."

"I would like to try it. Will you teach me?"

Physically, the old man didn’t show anything, but he recoiled inwardly, the warmth in the center of him turned cold. Boys’ pranks, like the honey-bird luring you to a snake’s nest. If only it were not this world, if only it were some other place where what we did today weren’t our future, to be always there, held against us, to always see ourselves in...

"And school?" he asked, as if he needed the boy to remind him again.

It was the boy’s turn to look away, silent, unforgiving, betrayed.

As if stepping on newly-laid eggs, the old man learned a new language: not to touch the boy’s head any more.

"There is your mother," he said, looking away, the better to make his grandson realize the seriousness of what he was talking about. From the corner of his eye he watched his grandson struggling with it, and saw her dismissed—not quite in the old way—but in a way that filled him with regrets for opportunities lost and a hopeless future.

"And if she doesn’t mind?" the boy asked mischievously.

"You mean you will run away from school?" The old man restrained from stroking the boy’s head.

"Maneto ran away from school and home two weeks ago. They don’t know where he is right now."

Echoes, the old man repeated to himself. "But your mother is your mother," he said. After all is said and done, basket-weaving never killed anyone. What kills is the rain and the hailstorms and the cold and the hunger when you are like this, when the echoes come.

"I want to learn mouse-trapping, Sekuru," the boy said. "At school they don’t teach us that. It’s always figures and numbers and I don’t know what they mean and they all laugh at me."

The grandfather carefully pinched, with right forefinger and thumb, the ridge of flesh just above the bridge of his nose, closed his eyes and sighed. The boy looked at him eagerly, excited, and when he saw his grandfather settle back comfortably against the wall, he clapped his hands, rising up. The old man looked at him and was touched by the boy’s excitement and not for the first time, he wondered at the mystery that is called life...

"Good night, Sekuru," the boy said.

"Sleep well, Zakeo. Tell her that I delayed you if she asks where you have been." But the boy had already gone. The old man shook his head and prepared himself for another night of battle with those things that his own parents never told him exist.

They left the old man’s hut well before sunrise the following day.

The boy had just come in and dumped his books in a corner of the room and they had left without any questions from the old man.

The grandfather trailed slowly behind the boy who ran ahead of him, talking and gesticulating excitedly. The old man just listened to him and laughed with him.

It was already uncomfortably warm at this hour before sunrise. It was October. The white cowtracks spread out straight and flat before them, through and under the new thick flaming musasa leaves, so still in the morning air.
Through patches in the dense foliage the sky was rustymetal blue, October-opaque; the end of the long dry season, towards the gukurahundi, the very first heavy rains that would cleanse the air and clean the cowdung threshing floors of chaff, change and harden the crimson and brightyellow leaves into hard green flat blades and bring back the stork, the millipede and the centipede, the fresh water crickets and the frogs, and the tiny yellow bird—jesa—that builds its nest on the river-reeds with the mouth of the nest facing down.

The air was harsh and still, and the old man thought, with renewed pleasure, of how he had almost forgotten the piercing whistle of that October-thirst bird, the nonono, and the shrill jarring ring of the cicada.

The cowtracks fell toward the river. They left the bush and came out into the open where the earth, bare and black from the chirimo fires, was crisscrossed with thousands of cattle-tracks which focused on the water-holes. The old man smelt wet river clay.

“It’s hot,” the boy said.

“It’s October, Gumiguru, the tenth and hottest month of the year.” The old man couldn’t resist telling the boy a bit of what he must be going through.

The boy took off his school shirt and wound it round his waist.

“With a dog worth the name of dog—when dogs were still dogs—a rabbit goes nowhere in this kind of terrain,” the old man said, seeing how naturally the boy responded to—blended in with—the surroundings.

“Is that why people burn the grass?”

“Aa, so you know that, too?”

“Maneto told me.”

“Well, it’s partly why we burn the grass but mainly we burn it so that new grass grows for our animals.”

Finally, the river, burnt down now by the long rainless months to a thin trickle of blood, running in the shallow, sandy bottom of a vlei. But there were still some fairly deep water holes and ponds where fish could be found.

“Who will stop the dark?”

“These ponds are great for muramba,” the old man said. “You need fairly clean flowing water for magwaya—the flat short-spear-blade fish.”

They dug for worms in the wet clay on the river banks. The old man taught the boy how to break the soft earth with a digging stick for the worms.

“Worms are much easier to find,” the old man said. “They stay longer on the hook. But a maggot takes a fish faster.” Here the old man broke off, suddenly assailed with a very vivid smell of three-day-old cowdung, its soft cool feel and the entangled wriggling yellow mass of maggots packed in it.

“Locusts and hoppers are good too, but in bigger rivers, like Munyati where the fish are so big they would take another fish for a meal. Here the fish are smaller and cleverer. They don’t like hoppers.”

The old man looked into the coffee tin into which they were putting the worms and said, “Should be enough for me one day. There is always some other place we can get some more when these are finished. No need to use more than we should.”

“But if they should get finished, Sekuru? Look, the tin isn’t full yet.” Zakeo looked intently at his grandfather. He wanted to fit in all the fishing that he would ever do before his mother discovered that he was playing truant from school. The old man looked at him. He understood. But he knew the greed of thirteen-year-olds and the retribution of the land and the soil when well-known laws were not obeyed.

“There will always be something when we get where these worms run out.”

They walked downstream along the bank, their feet kicking up clouds of black and white ash.

The sun came up harsh and red-eyed upstream. They followed a tall straight shadow and a short stooped one along the stream until they came to a dark pool where the water, though opaque, wasn’t really dirty.

“Here we are. I will get us some reeds for fishing rods
while you prepare the lines. The hooks are already on the lines.”

The old man produced from a plastic bag a mess of tangled lines and metal blue-painted hooks.

“Here you are. Straighten these out.”

He then proceeded to cut some tall reeds on the river bank with a pocket knife the boy had seen him poking tobacco out of his pipe with.

“Excellent rods, look.” He bent one of the reeds till the boy thought it was going to break, and when he let go, the rod shot back like a whip!

“See?” the old man said.

The boy smiled and the old man couldn’t resist slapping him on the back.

The boy then watched the old man fasten the lines to the rods.

“In my day,” the old man said, “there were woman knots and men knots. A woman knot is the kind that comes apart when you tug the line. A knot worth the name of whoever makes it shouldn’t fall apart. Let the rod break, the line snap, but a knot, a real man’s knot, should stay there.”

They fished from a rock by a pool.

“Why do you spit on the bait before you throw the line into the pool, Sekuru?”

The old man grinned. “For luck, boy, there is nothing you do that fate has no hand in. Having a good hook, a good line, a good rod, good bait or a good pool is no guarantee that you will have good fishing. So little is knowledge, boy. The rest is just mere luck.”

Zakeo caught a very small fish by the belly.

“What’s this?” he asked.

“A very good example of what I call luck! They aren’t usually caught by the belly. You need several all-way facing hooks in very clear water even without bait—for you to catch them like that!”

The boy laughed brightly and the old man suddenly heard the splash of a kingfisher as it flew away, fish in beak, and this mixed with the smell of damp-rotting leaves and moisty river clay made the old man think: nothing is changed since our time. Then, a little later: except me. Self-consciously, with a sly look at the boy to make sure he wasn’t seeing him, the old man straightened his shoulders.

The boy’s grandfather hooked a frog and dashed it against a rock.

“What’s that?” the boy asked.

“Know why I killed that—that—criminal?” he asked the boy.

“No, Sekuru.”

“Bad luck. Throw it back into the pool and it’s going to report to the fish.”

“But what is it?”

“Uncle Frog.”

“A frog!” The boy was surprised.

“Shhh,” the old man said. “Not a frog. Uncle Frog. You hear?”

“But why Uncle Frog, Sekuru?”

“Just the way it is, boy. Like the rain. It comes on its own.”

Once again, the boy didn’t understand the old man’s grown-up talk. The old man saw it and said, “That kind of criminal is only good for dashing against the rock. You don’t eat frogs, do you?”

The boy saw that the old man was joking with him. “No,” he said.

“So why should we catch him on our hook when we don’t eat him or need him?”

“I don’t know, Sekuru.” The boy was clearly puzzled.

“He is the spy of the fish,” the old man said in such a way that the boy sincerely believed him.

“But won’t the fish notice his absence and wonder where he has gone to?”

“They won’t miss him much. When they begin to do we will be gone. And when we come back here, they will have forgotten. Fish are just like people. They forget too easily.”

It was grown-up talk again but the boy thought he would better not ask the man what he meant because he knew he wouldn’t be answered.
They fished downriver till they came to where the Chambara met the Suka River.
“From here they go into Munyati,” the old man said to himself, talking about his old hunting grounds; and to the boy, talking about the rivers.
“Where the big fish are,” the boy said.
“You know that too?” the old man said, surprised.
“Maneto and his father spent days and days fishing the Munyati and they caught fish as big as men,” the boy said seriously.
“Did Maneto tell you that?”
“Yes. And he said his father told him that you, Sekuru, were the only hunter who ever got to where the Munyati gets into the big water, the sea. Is that true?”
The old man pulled out his pipe and packed it. They were sitting on a rock. He took a long time packing and lighting the pipe.
“Is it true?” the boy asked.
“I was lost once,” the old man said. “The Munyati goes into just another small water—but bigger than itself—and more powerful.”
The boy would have liked to ask the man some more questions on this one but he felt that the old man wouldn’t talk about it.
“You aren’t angry, Sekuru?” the boy asked, looking up earnestly at his grandfather.
The old man looked at him, surprised again. *How do these milk-nosed ones know what we feel about all this?*
“Let’s get back home,” he said.
Something was bothering the old man, the boy realized, but what it was he couldn’t say. All he wanted him to tell him was the stories he had heard from Maneto—whether they were true or not.
They had caught a few fish, enough for their supper, the boy knew, but the old man seemed angry. And that, the boy couldn’t understand.
When they got back home the boy lit the fire, and with directions from the old man helped him to gut and salt the fish. After a very silent supper of sadza and salted fish the boy said he was going.
“Be sure to come back tomorrow,” the old man said.
And the boy knew that whatever wrong he had done the old man, he would be told the following day.
Very early the following morning the boy’s mother paid her father-in-law a visit. She stood in front of the closed door for a long time before she knocked. She had to collect herself.
“Who is there?” the old man answered from within the hut. He had heard the footsteps approaching but he did not leave his blankets to open up for her.
“I would like to talk to you,” she said, swallowing hard to contain her anger.
“Ah, it’s Zakeo’s mother?”
“Yes.”
“And what bad winds blow you this way this early, mur-oora?”
“I want to talk to you about my son.”
“Your son?”
She caught her breath quickly. There was a short silence.
The old man wouldn’t open the door.
“I want to talk about Zakeo,” she called.
“What about him?”
“Please leave him alone.”
“You are telling me that?”
“He must go to school.”
“And so?”
She was quiet for a minute; then she said, “Please.”
“What have I done to him?”
“He won’t eat, he won’t listen to me, and he doesn’t want to go to school.”
“And he won’t listen to his father?” the old man asked.
“He listens to you.”
“And you have come here this early to beat me up?”
She swallowed hard. “He is the only one I have. Don’t let him destroy his future.”
“He does what he wants.”
“At his age? What does he know?”
“Quite a lot.”
She was very angry, he could feel it through the closed door.
She said, “He will only listen to you. Please, help us.”
Through the door the old man could feel her tears coming. He said, “He won’t even listen to his father?”
“His father?” he heard her snort.
“Children belong to the man, you know that,” the old man warned her.
And he heard her angry feet as she went away.
Zakeo came an hour after his mother had left the old man’s place. His grandfather didn’t say anything to him. He watched the boy throw his school bag in the usual corner of the hut; then after the usual greetings, he went out to bring in the firewood.
“Leave the fire alone,” the old man said. “I am not cold.”
“Sekuru?” The boy looked up, hurt.
“Today we go mouse-trapping in the fields.”
“Are we going right now?”
“Yes.”
“I’ll make the fire if you like. We can go later.”
“No. Now.” The old man was quiet for some time, looking away from the boy.
“Are you all right, Sekuru?”
“Yes.”
“We will go later when it’s warm if you like.”
The old man didn’t answer him.
And as they came into the open fields with the last season’s corn crop stubble, the boy felt that the old man wasn’t quite well.
“We can do it some other day, Sekuru.”
His grandfather didn’t answer.
They looked for the smooth mouse-tracks in the corn stubble and the dry grass. Zakeo carried the flat stones that the old man pointed out to him to the places where he wanted to set up the traps. He watched his grandfather setting the traps with the stone and two sticks. The sticks were about seven inches long each. One of them was the male and the other the female stick. The female was in the shape of a Y and the male straight.
The old man would place the female stick upright in the ground with the forked end facing up. The male would be placed in the fork parallel to the ground to hold up one end of the stone across the mousepath. The near end of the male would have a string attached to it and at the other end of the string would be the “trigger”—a matchstick-sized bit of straw that would hold the bait-stick against the male stick. The stone would be kept one end up by the delicate tension in the string and if a mouse took the trigger would fly and the whole thing fall across the path onto the unfortunate victim.
The boy learned all this without words from the old man, simply by carefully watching him set about ten traps all over the field that morning. Once he tried to ask a question and he was given a curt, “Mouths are for women.” Then he too set up six traps and around noon the old man said, “Now we will wait.”
They went to the edge of the field where they sat under the shade of a mutsamwi tree. The old man carefully, tiredly, rested his back against the trunk of the tree, stretched himself out, sighed, and closing his eyes, took out his pipe and tobacco pouch and began to load. The boy sat beside him, looking on. He sensed a tension he had never felt in his grandfather. Suddenly it wasn’t fun any more. He looked away at the distant hills in the west. Somewhere behind those hills the Munyati went on to the sea, or the other bigger river which the old man hadn’t told him about.
“Tell me a story, Sekuru,” Zakeo said, unable to sit in his grandfather’s silence.
“Stories are for the night,” the old man said without opening his mouth or taking out the pipe. “The day is for watching and listening and learning.”
Zakeo stood up and went a little way into the bush at the edge of the field. Tears stung his eyes but he would not let himself cry. He came back a little later and lay down
"That must have been a very bad dream," the old man said.

Zakeo rubbed the sleep out of his eyes and blinked. He stared at the old man, then the sun which was very low in the west, painting everything with that ripe mango hue that always made him feel sad. Tall dark shadows were creeping eastward. He had that strange feeling that he had overslept into the next day. In his dream his mother had been shouting at him that he was late for school. A rather chilly wind was blowing across the desolate fields.

"Sit down here beside me and relax," the old man said. "We will give the mice one more hour to return home from visiting their friends. Or to fool themselves that it’s already night and begin hunting."

Zakeo sat beside his grandfather and then he felt very relaxed.

"You see?" the old man said. "Sleep does you good when you are tired or worried. But otherwise don’t trust sleeping during the day. When you get to my age you will learn to sleep without sleeping."

"How is that?"

"Never mind. It just happens."

Suddenly, sitting in silence with the old man didn’t bother him any more.

"You can watch the shadows or the setting sun or the movement of the leaves in the wind—or the sudden agitation in the grass that tells you some little animal is moving in there. The day is for watching and listening and learning."

He had got lost somewhere in his thoughts when the old man said, "Time for the traps."

That evening the old man taught him how to gut the mice, burn off the fur in a low-burning flame, boil them till they were cooked and then arrange them in a flat open pan close to the fire to dry them so that they retained as little moisture as possible which made them firm but solidly pleasant on eating.

After supper the old man told him a story in which the hero seemed to be always falling into one misfortune after another, but always getting out through his own resourcefulness only to fall into a much bigger misfortune—on and on without the possibility of a happily ever after. It seemed as if the old man could go on and on inventing more and more terrible situations for his hero and improvising solutions as he went on till the boy thought he would never hear the end of the story.

"The story had no ending," the old man told him when he asked. He was feeling sleepy and he was afraid his mother would put a definite stop to his visits to the old man’s place, even if it meant sending him out to some distant relative.

"Carry her these mice," the old man said when Zakeo said good night and stood up to go. "I don’t think she will beat you tonight. She loves mice," he said with a little laugh.

But when he got home his mother threw the mice to the dog.

"What did I tell you?" she demanded of him, holding the oxhide strop.

Zakeo didn’t answer. He was looking at his mother without blinking, ready to take the strop like Ndatofa, the hero in the old man’s story. In the corner of his eye he saw his father working at his baskets, his eyes watering from the guttering smoking lamp he used to give him light. The crow’s-feet round his eyes made him appear as if he were wincing from some invisible pain.

"Don’t you answer when I am talking to you?" his mother said.

The boy kept quiet, sitting erect, looking at his mother. Then she made a sound which he couldn’t understand, a sound which she always uttered from some unliving part of her when she was mad. She was blind with rage but the boy held in his screams right down there where he knew screams and sobs came from. He gritted his teeth and felt the scalding lashes cutting deep into his back, right down to where they met the screams, where they couldn’t go any farther. And each time the strop cut into him and he didn’t
They are not my friends. They are always laughing at me.

"What about?"

"O, all sorts of silly things."

"That doesn't tell me what sort of things."

"O, O, lots of things!" The boy's face was contorted in an effort to contain himself. Then he couldn't stop himself, "They are always at me saying your father is your mother's horse. Your mother rides hyenas at night. Your mother is a witch. Your mother killed so-and-so's child. Your mother digs up graves at night and you eat human flesh which she hunts for you." He stopped. "O, lots of things I don't know!" The boy's whole body was tensed with violent hatred. The old man looked at him, amused.

"Do they really say that, now?"

"Yes and I know I could beat them all in a fight but the headmaster said we shouldn't fight and Father doesn't want me to fight either. But I know I can lick them all in a fight."

The old man looked at the boy intensely for some time, his pipe in his hand; then he looked away to the side and spat out brown spittle. He returned the pipe to his mouth and said, "Forget them. They don't know a thing." He then sighed and closed his eyes once more and settled a little deeper against the tree.

The boy looked at him for a long time and said, "I don't want to go to school, Sekuru."

"Because of your friends?"

"They are not my friends!" He glared blackly at his grandfather, eyes flashing brilliantly and then, ashamed, confused, rose and walked a short distance away.

The old man looked at him from the corner of his eyes and saw him standing, looking away, body tensed, stiff and stubborn. He called out to him quietly, with gentleness, "Come back, Zakeo. Come and sit here by me."

Later on the boy woke up from a deep sleep and asked the old man whether it was time yet for the traps. He had come out of sleep with a sudden startled movement as if he were a little strange animal that had been scared by hunting dogs.
scream his mother seemed to get madder and madder. His father tried to intervene but he quickly returned to his basket-weaving when the strop cracked into his back twice in quick merciless succession. It was then that Zakeo almost let out a deafening howl. He closed his eyes so tightly that veins stood out in his face. He felt on fire.

"I could kill you—you—you!" He heard his mother scream and he waited, tensed, for the strop and then suddenly as if someone had told him, he knew it wasn't coming. He opened his eyes and saw that his mother had dropped the strop and was crying herself. She rushed at him and began to hug him.

"My Zakeo! My own son. What are you doing this to me for? Tell me. What wrong have I done to you, ha? O, I know! I know very well who is doing this to you. He never wanted your father to marry me!"

He let her hug him without moving but he didn't let her hugging and crying get as far as the strop lashes. That was his own place. He just stopped her hugs and tears before they got there. And when he had had enough, he removed her arms from round him and stood up. His mother looked at him, surprised, empty hands that should have contained his body becoming emptier with the expression on her face.

"Where are you going, Zakeo?" It was as if he had slapped her.

"Do you care?"

"Zakeo! I am your mother! Do you know that? No one here cares for you more than I do! Not him!" pointing at his father. "And not even him!"—indicating in the direction of his grandfather's hut.

"You don't know anything," Zakeo said, without understanding what he meant by that but using it because he had heard it used of his classmates by the old man.

"You don't know anything." He repeated it, becoming more and more convinced of its magical effect on his mother who gaped at him as if she was about to sneeze.

As he walked out he caught sight of his father who was working furiously at his baskets, his head almost touching his knees and his back bent double.

The old man was awake when Zakeo walked in. "Put another log on the fire," the old man said. Zakeo quietly did so. His back ached but the heat had gone. He felt a little relaxedly cool.

"You didn't cry today."

The boy didn't answer.

"But you will cry one day."

The boy stopped raking the coals and looked at the old man, confused.

"You will cry one day and you will think your mother was right."

"But—" The boy stopped, lost. The night had turned suddenly chilly, freaky weather for October. He had been too involved with something else to notice it when he walked the half mile between their place and the old man's. Now he felt it at his back and he shivered.

"Get into the blankets, you will catch a cold," the old man said.

Zakeo took off his shirt and left the shorts on. He got into the blankets beside the old man, on the side away from the fire.

"One day you will want to cry but you won't be able to," the old man said.

"Sekuru?"

"I said get into the blankets."

The boy lay down on his left side, facing the wall, away from the old man and drew up his knees with his hands between them. He knew he wouldn't be able to sleep on his back that night.

"Thirteen," the old man said, shaking his head.

"Sekuru?"

"Sleep now. I must have been dreaming."

Zakeo pulled the smoke-and-tobacco-smelling ancient blankets over his head.

"Who doesn't want to cry a good cry once in a while but there are just not enough tears to go round all of us?"

"Sekuru?"

"You still awake?"
"Yes."
"You want to go to school?"
"No."
"Go to sleep then."
"I can't."
"Why?"
"I just can't."
"Try. It's good for you. Think of fishing."
"Yes, Sekuru."
"Or mouse-trapping."
"And hunting?"
"Yes. Think all you like of hunting."
"You will take me hunting some day, won't you, Sekuru?"

"Yes," the old man said and then after some time, "When the moon becomes your mother's necklace."
"You spoke, Sekuru?"
"I said yes."
"Thank you, Sekuru. Thank you very much."
"Thank you, Sekuru, thank you very much." The old man mimicked the boy, shook his head sadly—knowing that the following day the boy would be going to school. Soon, he too was fast asleep, dreaming of that mountain which he had never been able to climb since he was a boy.