

## Not a house girl:

*In setting up my flat in the teachers' compound of Gokomere Mission, Zimbabwe, I hired a domestic helper. I could probably have managed the cooking and cleaning on my own (as I had at my previous posting near Harare) were the washing and ironing without machines not so onerous. Meanwhile unlike in the previous school, nearly every teacher at Gokomere had a "house girl" (the degrading term was still used). For expatriates like me who were somewhat squeamish about perpetrating a colonial practice—the standard justification was that hiring a domestic helper provided modest local employment.*

*As for the uneasiness: when I had been in Kano, Nigeria, I had hired a local lad called Sanusi, who came to my house on the school compound twice a week for sweeping and washing my clothes. Then at the Weru-Weru girls' school in Tanzania, a local Chagga lady called Ester came to my quarters 5 days a week for cleaning and preparing lunch. In a gesture to Tanzanian socialism, Ester had lunch with me and she was paid a little more than the going rate of the local teachers. Thereby, the sting of depending on a lowly paid servant was somewhat assuaged.*

*In my second contract in Zimbabwe ('85-'88) with a radically changed domestic situation—my wife and I relied on the help of 2 local women: Dorika, at Kutama, and then Calista, at Sandringham. Along with performing housekeeping chores they helped in minding our infant daughters.*

*Back in 1983, having no such need for full-time domestic help, I agreed to share on a 50-50 basis the employment of a domestic with my neighbour and fellow Canadian. However advised that naïve generosity could incur resentment of the local teachers, I still insisted on paying her slightly more than the going rate. I also intended to follow a similar arrangement as in Tanzania whereby I would strictly avoid any semblance of the old Rhodesian 'baas' /servant dynamic.*

*So it was through the following year, Angela M. (her name has been fictionalized) worked for me for 3 days a week. Following the routine with Ester in Tanzania, Angela and I often had lunch together.*

*Angela was a robust woman in her mid-20s, dark-complexioned with a bright smile and warm laugh. In contrast to Tanzanian Ester who knew little English (thereby acting as my informal Kiswahili tutor), Angela spoke excellent English. She had a keen sense of humour and colourful imagination. Responding to my casual questions, she became a voluble and articulate Shona 'cultural informant'. Her matter of fact tone often lent her superstitious beliefs a jarring credibility. Unfortunately, she was also subject to mood swings—some disturbing incidents of which are depicted here.*

*However sympathetic I was with her trials as a single mother, her temper outbursts eventually became intolerable. With her announcing that she had decided to move away from her father's compound to the town of Gweru—a face-saving explanation was provided for ending her employment.*

*Finally, for the record—at the time these notes were taken I was not fully awakened to the ethical concerns of 'representation'. This is not to say that I was blind to the socio-*

*historical context of a country where the wounds of racial injustice were still raw. Indeed, in employing a domestic helper, I could not imagine perpetrating in any fashion, such injustice as depicted by Doris Lessing in “The Grass is Singing” or Ousmane Sembene in “Black Girl.” Yet no ‘European’ in Zimbabwe in 1983, no matter of what political persuasion, could possibly have been a passive observer.*

*35 years later, I fully acknowledge the challenge of reliability in my one-sided narration of these episodes. In any case—as memory serves—the following excerpts from my 1983-‘84 journals are accurate renditions of my interactions with a remarkable woman who was definitely not a house girl:*

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Jan. '83

*The arrangement with Angela was for her to work Mon.-Weds.-Fri. with me while working alternate days with my fellow Canadian, Ferg (his name has also been fictionalized). One Sunday morning just a few weeks after the start of her employment, Angela dropped by my place "for a friendly visit":*

I was wheeling my bike back from a ride along the path outside the Mission gate, just as I saw from the road that Angela in her Sunday dress was standing smiling by my door. I rolled up to the door, puzzled.

"This is your day off," I said with a frown.

"Oh, I won't bother you," she said, smiling. "I was just passing by after church. I thought I would just pop in to say 'hi'".

An hour later I was slumped in the far side of the room marking exercise books, while Angela, who on a workday would be humming along with the strokes of her broom, sat at the table patiently pecking at the typewriter. Earlier in the week in a break from washing clothes, she had asked if she could practice typing. Today she claimed she wanted to write a letter to her beloved mom, 8 years dead.

"I'm just getting this out of my system," she said when she finally rolled out the paper with satisfaction.

"Do you mind if I see?" I stood at her back craning at the lines she'd typed:

*'Sometimes the tongue of the stepmother of mine is so bitter,' she typed, 'I think I will find myself in an asylum speaking to tin cans.'*

"That's well written," I said pretending to stifle a yawn as I went back to my marking.

A few minutes later, she seemed to take the hint.

"OK, I'm going now— bye, bye."

For a moment, I stared at the wind slammed door. Really, what had she been angling for? Maybe this was just a "friendly visit" for which I have no need to be suspicious or perhaps the casual conversational approach is being misinterpreted. Maybe things would less complicated if I just stuck with the customary 'baas' servant commands.

**Feb. '83**

*As the weeks progressed, Angela became ever more at ease. Typically, during the afternoon break between my classes when she was in her chatty mood, she would take a break from sweeping, washing or ironing and sit down with me in the living room. After small talk often accompanied by snorts of laughter—she would tell me another strange story:*

In today's anecdote, Angela told of an unexpected discovery she made a few years ago, after carrying to her home in Kwe-Kwe a bundle of firewood that she bought from an old man. When she dropped the bundle in the corner of her cooking hut, a glittering nugget dropped out of it. She took it to a mineworker who assayed it with acid and confirmed that it was gold.

Once the secret was out, she feared being robbed or even murdered by greedy neighbours. She decided to go to the police "to confess." She then described how thereafter "detectives from the gold section" brought her back to her house and confiscated the nugget.

"This belongs to the government," they said, "if you open your mouth about this or you'll be behind bars."

Then they interrogated her to get more details. "Try to remember where you got the firewood from the old man." They assured her that she would be rewarded. "If the mine is started there will be named after you."

She had no choice but to surrender the nugget to the "authorities" after which—not surprisingly—she heard nothing.

"Yes, I was foolish," she admitted, "but maybe my ancestors just didn't want me to have it. Not then."

Still, she said "if my ancestors put another piece of gold in my path, I'll guard it and not tell a soul. It'll be my secret till the day I die."

True story? Folding my shirt, she lapsed into silence.

Mar. '83

*Despite her sharp intelligence, Angela's fatalism could be maddening—as the following episode may suggest:*

Throughout her routines this afternoon, Angela was unusually morose.

As she prepared to leave, I set down my '*Oxford Companion to English Literature*' on the floor beside my armchair and asked her what was bothering her.

"O, nothing."

"Nothing at all?"

She hesitated.

"O, just this Indian shopkeeper in Macheke," she said, "But it's my own fault, really."

"What's your own fault?"

Sighing, she went on to tell me about agreeing to buy a mattress on instalments from an Indian shop in the Masvingo township, before she realized that the amount she had agreed to was equivalent to nearly 6 months of her salary.

"I knew there was something funny," she said. "I knew I paid for more than the price that was on the tag, but you know you can never argue with a man for nothing, it's not right."

"Bullshit," I said, "The bastard is cheating you. You can't let him get away with it."

"He made me sign a paper," she said, "I'm hooked."

"No, no—if you paid more than the price on the tag—that's not legal. You should go to the police and complain."

"I don't want to make trouble." Ruefully, she laughed, "When people keep having bad luck—there're deeper reasons for it that you think. That's what I have to be worried about."

Leaving that cryptic remark hanging, she stepped out the door.

Mar. '83

*I first wondered whether Angela was teasingly putting me on with some of her stories—but soon realized that the supernatural was as real to her as were facts of the mundane world:*

While washing up after lunch, Angela offered a tale of an innocent girl in Gweru (where so many of her stories are set), caught dozing at dawn before a freshly closed grave. Under questioning by her horrified mother who arrived at the scene accompanied by a policeman, the girl vehemently denied any memory of stealing away from her bed in the night. Yet with the threat of a knobkerrie beating, the frightened child admitted she fell under the spell of a pair of witches who were lurking underground awaiting the tapping of the girl's stick to signal a moment for them to emerge.

With that confession, the policeman demanded that the girl tap her stick on the ground—whereupon 2 unsuspecting witches emerged from the dirt, bickering over a fat joint of human thigh meat. Caught off guard, the witches were seized by the cop. Even as he bound them up, one witch bitterly complained to her sister:

"Why did you take off the sweetest parts and just leave me with these bony wrists?"

"Do you really believe that?" I asked smiling.

"I swear to God, it's true," said Angela, pinging her fingers on a water glass. "There could be witches right here on this mission."

"Would I recognize a witch if I saw one?"

"Not in the daytime, Mr. F., but some night they might come into your room at night just when you are sleeping. They can put you in a trance and ride you like a horse or donkey. You can wake up very sore and tired not knowing that the witches were riding you the whole night long around the graveyards."

"So I guess that wasn't just a hangover that make me feel so lousy all-day Sunday."

She shook her head in disbelief that one could be so flippant about matters so grave.

Apr. '83

*From the beginning, Angela had talked of her 8-year-old daughter Miri. When she said that that her stepmother (who usually cared for the little girl) would be away for a few weeks, I told her she could bring along her daughter along to work during that time.*

*The little girl was at first shy before the 'mrungu' [white man]. Soon enough, Miri was comfortable sitting on the mat in the living room colouring while Angela worked in the kitchen. Sometimes, I would read to her from the English storybook I found at the Mambo Press bookstore in town. Although she was well-behaved, there were times when the entertaining of a little chatterbox rather tired the bachelor 'mrungu.'*



Holding the hand of Angela's 8-year-old daughter, Miri, on the path back from the cattle dip, I circumvented the thorn bushes and cow flops. Back on my chair while Angela worked in the kitchen, I let the child climb into my lap even though she grabbed for the pen in my hand.

"1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9," she recited, straddling herself uncomfortably on my knee. Not sure how to calm her down so that I might read, I glanced nervously toward the kitchen where her mother hummed (what sounded vaguely like a hymn) as she ploddingly cleaned the cupboards.

"F!"

The child pulled the magazine from my hand and thrust her face close.

"Please let me read Miri," I said weakly.

"Please, please," the child mincingly mimicked my English.

"Don't be naughty now."

"Donkey, naughty, donkey naughty," she parroted and then "Nyore, Nyore!" ["draw! Draw!"]

Sighing, I grabbed the pencil and scrolled for the 12th time.

All cuteness aside: imagine this 12 hours every day, years on end?

Apr. '83

*Fascinated by Angela's claim that she was a 'spirit medium'—when she was in her talkative mood, I often asked her about her otherworldly experiences upon which she would eagerly provide detail:*

"Are you still having weird dreams?" I asked Angela at the ironing board this afternoon.

"Very strange," she said then she launched into her description and analysis of her images of a hostile stepmother bearing a skull to her door and then suckling a bearded infant ("I had to push away the whiskers before giving my breast," she said).

The strange child, according to Angela, was a portend of evil—perhaps a warning from her guardian ancestors that unless they were soon appeased in a '*bira*' [beer-brewing ceremony of propitiation] that they would not intervene should an evil agent choose to attack her. The evil agent in question, she believed, was her stepmother, whom her father had revealed having found out through a local '*nyanga*'.

"The '*nyanga*' is an old woman who talks in a gruff voice with her back to you while she flicks a whisk made of the tail of the zebra," Angela said.

She then told me that it was fear of the stepmother's jealousy that prompted her to bring little Miri along with her to work with her in the last few days:

"I wouldn't dare to leave Miri at home with her," she said.

After such revelations, Angela said she was determined to appease the ancestors who would surely reciprocate by affording her protection. She had no doubt that the person whose protection she needed most was the one who lay in an unmarked grave in Bundolfi Mission—the one she thought about unceasingly—her mother.

"No one has given my mother a proper *bira*," she said. "My sisters haven't got the money, their husbands aren't working, and my father didn't marry her or pay *lobola* so he can afford anything because doing that for my mother would make my stepmother even more jealous..."

She sobbed. "...I have to go back and talk to her soon—maybe this Sunday. I have to show her Miri and tell her: 'this is my daughter.' I'll try to talk with my auntie Ruth and ask Father Rudolf at the mission how much it would cost to put cement over her grave. I'll have to do that for her, at least. And I'll still try to get help from my father. If he doesn't want to offer a cow for her *bira*, then maybe I could offer a goat. I would say: 'Sorry mother I'm only a girl and this is all I can afford.' Maybe she would accept."

Angela sighed and jiggled in the socket the loose plug of the iron.

May '83

*Angela stopped bringing along Miri with her to work, possibly suspecting that the child was annoying me. While I had not expressed any displeasure with Miri's behaviour, the novelty of entertaining a demanding child (not one's own) when I needed to work had admittedly worn off. In the meantime, Angela spoke of her growing worries of leaving her daughter in the care of her mother-in law:*



Angela told me she feared that if she didn't remove her child from her father's place to her grandmother's family in Kwe-Kwe, the jealous stepmother would resort to evil.

"She will witch Miri. Already have you noticed that her eyes sometimes start rolling? What about the day she started crying over nothing? She did that to Miri. She's a witch—that old woman!"

"So when are you going?"

"I want to go tomorrow. I'm have to stay overnight so I'm miss work on Wednesday, if you don't mind."

"That's no problem," I said, "You can leave early today if you want."

I suddenly remembered that that I had a little toy I'd forgotten to give Miri. I'd got it along with the colouring books, crayons and balloons I'd bought in at the TM supermarket when the little girl was regularly accompanying her mother to work.

I went into the bedroom and dug in the corner for the plastic bag with the miniature plastic tea set.

"So can you give her this?"

Thank you, F."

"Just say it's a going away present from Mr. F."

An hour later, sitting alone in my empty house, I thought of little Miri crouching on the straw mat beside the fireplace rolling her eyes and winking as she wielded her plastic spoon over a plate of rice and stew. Then there was the time she sat at my feet scribbling

furiously over her notepad murmuring: "Zero, zero, *yai, yai...*" [egg, egg]. Then there was the day her mother caught her chewing a crayon. How disconsolately the fatherless child howled when her angry mother stood over her, kindling stick in hand.

I then caught an image of Angela jerking Miri by the arm onto the bus as the little girl clasped the plastic tea set. Finally, blinking into the glare of the overhead lamp, I saw little Miri squatting with those thimble size orange cups in the mud outside a corrugated shack in Kwe-Kwe under the ugly township light towers.

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**May '83**

*With Angela often telling me about her most unusual dreams, over lunch today I reciprocated by telling her of my recent nightmare:*

“I won’t go into detail,” I said, dipping a dollop of *sadza* into gravy, “But I accidentally stepped on a python—a giant python. It tried to trap me in a coil, but I jumped away... I hid behind a rock and watched as it grew bigger and bigger, like it was being pumped up with air. It began to change into a rocket ship and blasted off with green fire coming from its tail and scorching all the trees under it.”

Fingering her *sadza* into a ball, she matter-of-factly observed: “In our custom, a dream of the python is always a dream about the *Vadzimu* [ancestors]. If you’re beating it or harming it—that’s a terrible crime. It’s a very terrible crime to go against the *Vadzimu*—displeasing them... Poison coming up from the snake is their wrath—the trouble they will put in your path for disobeying them.”

She looked at me gravely. “I really think it’s a good idea for you to visit Canada. You will be more peaceful when you come back. You won’t be so disturbed by these dreams. One can never find peace if their family far away continues thinking and worrying about them.”

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## June '83

*The following episode was not the first time I had incurred Angela's anger, but it is one for which I had to fully acknowledge blame. The incident, sadly, was a turning point in which the erstwhile cheerful informality was riven by distrust:*

The trouble today started last week when I asked Angela's if she could help me procure a load of firewood for the coming cold nights. I told her that I would pay the going rate of \$10 for a full cord. When I came home from school yesterday afternoon, I found a heap of firewood at my doorstep. I was instantly struck that it was little more than half the size of the neighbour's pile of wood for which he claimed to have paid \$10. When I hailed Makojo on the way back from school and asked if I'd paid a fair price, he shook his head and chuckled.

“\$10 for that?”

So it was that at lunch today, I unwisely complained to Angela:

“Makojo agrees with me that 10 bucks is a lot for such a small amount,” I said casually tearing off a piece of *chapati*. “Anyway, I hope you don't mind waiting for a day or 2. I have to get some cash out of the bank in Masvingo.”

Broom in hand, Angela stopped up in the kitchen doorway:

“Mokojo said that?”

“Really Angela, \$10 is—”

“Why did you ask someone to bring it?” she snapped. “Don't you know that's very rude changing your mind after someone went to all the trouble?” Does Makojo know what it is to cut down big logs like those and bring them in a scotch cart all the way from the river? Her nostrils flared. “I'll smash him!”

“Angela, don't get so worked up. Is there anything wrong with just saying that something might be overpriced? You know how some of the local people think. I think that all the teachers, especially the whites, are super rich.”

Her eyes dilated. “Watch yourself. It's my own father who brought that wood.”

My jaw fell. “Angela, why didn't you tell me? I had no idea you would ask your father.”

“You *won't* have the wood!” She clenched the broom as if readying to swing. Her forearms pulsed as the choler surged through her. “I'll pay my father the \$10— you won't have his wood. I won't see the name of my own father, the only person who cares for me, slandered.”

"Shhhhuh. Com 'on Angela—don't get so bloody worked up! No one's slandering anyone. You should've told me you're going to ask your father to bring the firewood."

"What is this 'Shussh'? Are you a snake? I've learned a lesson here. Never *ever* ask me to bring anything for you again. You are so rude you—"

"Angela, control yourself. Stop acting silly."

"Silly, me? You're the crazy one. Don't know how to behave, always rude to others."

"Look, this is going too far, Jesus. I should never have mentioned it."

Suddenly she stormed to the kitchen, cluttered dishes and then, in the sound of gritting teeth, flew out the door.

"Angela, what the hell?"

The next instant she was rapping loudly upon the Makojo's door.

*"Pinde! [enter]"* The door the neighbouring duplex was heard creaking open, followed by a barrage of shrill Shona invective. Majoko's voice was heard, mounting in anger.

I took a deep breath and padded out in bare feet. Angela was hunched forward chattering shrilly in Makojo's face. Her knuckles slapped her free hand as to give emphasis to her points. I heard my name repeated by both.

Makojo's lip curled as he saw me. He broke stumblingly into English.

"You played me for information, why?"

"Mr. Makojo, I'm terribly sorry. This is such a silly misunderstanding. Angela—"

"I feel used. This has very much strained the relationship."

Angela stood aside panting. There was almost a waft of ozone from her barely subsiding rage.

I headed back to my chair; forehead hot with embarrassment.

*Two days later:*

In coming to work today, Angela, in a strangely jovial mood, tried to laugh off last Friday's sordid episode ("So you saw the real African she-devil, ha?")

To further ease the situation, along with the \$10 bill I placed along with a note 'for the firewood' on the bookshelf, I left a \$1 tip.

Still, fences need to be mended with Makojo. On the weekend, I will invite him over for a drink—and offer another abject apology.

Jun. '83

*In one of our earlier chats Angela mentioned that she had dropped out of school after 'Standard Seven'. ("I was a good student," she said, "but too mischievous!") With adult upgrading night classes available at the secondary school, I asked her if she had considered enrolling. When she said she wouldn't afford the registration fee—still a little sheepish about the firewood incident—I offered to pay it. A little reluctantly, she took the \$15 and said she would show me her receipt. Sadly, the outcome suggested a misreading of signals—possibly once again on both sides:*

When I asked this afternoon how her night classes were going—Angela, in the midst of sweeping the bedroom and in a sullen mood, flatly said that she would be dropping out. She said she hated to walk home to Topola (about 1 ½ kilometers) after dark any longer because she was "scared of the witches lurking."

At first, I bit my tongue and made some suggestions:

"Is there anyone else from Topola taking classes you could walk home with?"

"There's nobody."

"What about staying over with your friend who works at the mission clinic?"

"Her boyfriend's there."

"Why not use a torch?"

"I have no money for batteries."

"I can get you batteries."

"Don't bother."

"Look," I said exasperated, "Why to hell didn't you just tell me you weren't interested? I wouldn't have wasted the goddam money."

She stared, her very pupils pinpointing in cold rage. "You people—you people care about nothing but money! You talk about money like it was a human being walking and talking. Can money even stand up like a dog and bark?"

In the odour of brimstone, I should well have backed off, yet I persisted. "Why shouldn't I be disappointed to hear that you're quitting after the first week? Maybe if you'd paid yourself—you would at least have gone back and got your refund."

"Don't tempt me!" she shot back, "Don't start with me unless you want to see the dirt that can come out of this mouth. You think I care about your dirty money? I could go out right now and find a man and bring back your dirty money and throw it in your face."

“Why in hell would you ever think of doing that? You have a job here.”

She clenched a fist, nostrils flaring. “You call this a job? This is the worst job I ever had. Washing other people's dirt. I wish I could leave here tomorrow.” She threw the broom clattering to the cement floor. “I hate working for you and I hate working for Ferg. You give me your nonsense talk and he asks me to wash his dirty sheets from sleeping with his whores.”

As if suddenly remembering the immediate focus of her anger, she punched her fist into her cupped hand. “Waste money, waste money...” In a semi-slurred voice, she mocked my accent: “’Get a refund, waste money.’ You white people – you know nothing of love – money— that’s all you care about. You’re mad!”

With that she suddenly lurched forward, grabbed my collar and jerked. The top button popped off and rolled across the floor.

I stepped back, aghast.

“Are you crazy?”

“*Iwe Satani!*” [you Satan!] she screamed.

“I think you’d better go home now,” I said, voice shaking.

Sniffling, she spun away and rushed out the door.

Heart pounding, I held the torn shirt, staring at the shut door.

*(Two days later)*

Wondering whether she would ever show up for work again—I was surprised when she hobbled in the door with a bandaged foot.

“What happened?”

“It was very dark last night coming home from classes. There was no moon at all. I tripped and fell into a cattle dip. I just came from the clinic.”

“That’s terrible.”

“No problem,” she looked up eyes blinking.

“So you went back to classes after all,” I said, “I’m glad to hear that.”

“Mr. F., I’m sorry about your shirt,” she dropped her head. “I can sew your button on—if you still want me to work for you.”

“Don’t worry about the button,” I said, “but please just try to control your temper.”

With head still lowered, she kicked off her flip-flops and padded to the kitchen. Up from chair, I dug in the bedroom drawer for spare batteries for her torch.

At the same time, I vowed that I would not put up with even one more crazy outburst.

fwt

## July '83

*Fortunately, the shirt tearing incident passed and for a few weeks, the casual chatting and storytelling resumed. On one chilly July afternoon, we had this most memorable conversation by the fireplace. (The pile of wood bought from her father, incidentally, was to last through the cold season).*

In the grey of a *guti* [mist blowing north from the Drakenburgs] afternoon, Angela joined me at after lunch for a half-hour in front of the cozy fireplace. Before sitting on the mat, she joked:

“Do you know that we tell little boys never to urinate into a fire... If they do, they could go mad, Ha! Their children could even be monsters...”

She poked the broom straw meditatively into the fire, sniffling. After a minute of silence, I asked.

“So what are you thinking about, Angela. What do those monsters look like?”

“No, no, I was just thinking— just thinking that when I go I want to be *burned*.”

With that she set upon monologue, remembered as follows:

“What's the word? Cremated? Yes, I want my body to go up in smoke. I hate to think of it being left around to be eaten by witches. They always on the lookout for fat corpses, you know. Ha ha!

...Some people, you know, have no respect for human bodies. A friend told me during the war that their dog dragged home a human arm with a Timex watch attached to its wrist. Would you take such a watch? My friend said her uncle did...

...I heard a priest who knew that an old man asked to be buried with a bag of his money. The priest himself sneaked back to the graveyard at night before the gravediggers could do their work. He pushed his hand inside the lid of the coffin and began feeling around for the bag. The lid snapped shut on his arm trapping him there. They found in the next morning kneeling there by the grave with his arm stuck in the coffin. At first, he thought he was praying. This is true—I swear! It happened in Kwe-Kwe!"

Rather than challenge the credibility as usual, I stared in silence for a few minutes at the crackling fire. Then I asked:

“So what do you think happens to a person when they die, Angela? Do you really think there is a soul that lives on in some form?”

After pausing to puff out the burning end of the straw, she resumed: "Of course the body dies. It's finished—eaten by worms, by the witches or whatever." She grimaced. "But the spirit lives on..."

”In what form do you think?”

“Of course, it doesn't have eyes or ears – it can't see or hear as we do. But it has an understanding. It knows something like the way we sometimes feel or know something deep in our hearts.” With a sigh she continued. “But then if the spirit really *needs* to see exactly what is going on in this world— it can see or hear through the eyes and ears of the descendent—through a grandchild or favourite nephew or um—what is the word for the girl?”

“Niece?”

“Through a niece or whatever. Even if a person is possessed by an ancestor's spirit—she still has her own mind— she can still feel and remember what happened afterward... But when you're possessed by the spirit, you'll feel the power and the person of your ancestor coming through you. Really, it's a strange feeling hearing the voice of your grandmother speak through your own mouth – acting and feeling like her while she speaks.”

“So, you've experienced that, Angela?”

She chuckled. “I know you don't think it's real, but it is...” She glanced towards the bookshelf at the end the room. It's something that's not explained in—what's this called in English— is it ‘psychology’?”

I nodded in a shiver of irony that Angela had yet to complete her Form One upgrading.

**July '83**

*On another chilly afternoon while taking her break after lunch before the fireplace, Angela told me she had been dreaming a lot recently about her late mother:*



Knitting a wool hat in front of the fireplace, Angela delivered a drowsy monologue as I listened from the armchair:

"I was in the hut opposite, the night my mother died. She asked for water, but my aunt said she really didn't want it. She was like that—she wasn't talking to anybody for weeks and then asking for something only to refuse it. So my aunt knew better than I. It was her house, and she was nursing my mother. I wanted to give her water, but I couldn't argue..."

...My *Amai* [mother] was sleeping on the bed on the other side of the hut. When I heard her voice again asking for water—I felt something was really wrong. I told my auntie again to get her water but again my auntie said my mother was just going to refuse it. I couldn't argue but I had a funny feeling. I was afraid...

...It must've been about 3:00 AM. My auntie hadn't heard anything from my mother's side of the hut. She hadn't stirred for so long. My auntie called to her in the dark but there was no sound of movement at all. Then I heard my auntie moving over and touching me saying: "*Mwari*, [God] she's gone!"

...I just panicked. I couldn't stop myself screaming: a terrible scream coming up from deep in my throat. My auntie tried to calm me saying it wasn't the right way to show respect for the dead. She said I should get a grip and go outside to help build a fire in front of our hut. That was the proper way to let people know there was a death inside...

...She still comes to me in dreams. Once she told me where money was hidden inside her old hut. I don't think that hut is even standing now. It was near the co-op across from Mashavili's shop. In the dream she said: "*go up to the doorway and feel in the crack on the left side above the door and inside you'll find my money.*" I've never bothered to go and check...

...When I went with Miri to Bandolfi Mission, we alighted the bus about 6:00 PM. It was getting dark, but I wanted to go to see my mother's grave before going to my aunt's house. I said: "Let's go see your grandmother first," but Miri was afraid.

...We went the following day. The grave is cemented over. The man I paid finally did the job. I stood in front of the grave for a minute and prayed what came into my mind. Miri didn't understand. On the bus back she said: "Where's that grandmother you wanted to show me?"

"I said: 'She was there in the ground under that cement.' She didn't understand..."  
Angela sobbed.

"...What can I do? That girl we share the hut with—she is about 12 years old and she is already getting feelings. She disappeared with Miri last week. I called and they came out of the toilet together. I asked Miri what they were doing in there and Miri said the girl had told her to lie on the floor. My child, lying on that dirty floor! I gave her a proper hiding. I told her 'if you ever do that again you'll get the hiding of your life!' but what really can I do? I can't watch her always! I'll have to send her to my grandmother's in Kwe-Kwe."

Sniffling, she lapsed into silence.

Aug. '83

*Just a few days before the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> school term when I was preparing to travel back to Canada on vacation, the following episode occurred:*



When I came in the door from the staffroom on Friday afternoon with a pile of exercise books under arm, Angela was ironing. She looked up, her eyes red and wet.

""What's the matter, Angela?"

Silence.

“Angela?”

She stroked her iron back and forth silently across my sheets for long seconds before speaking:

"Something happened to me," she sniffled. "I don't know: something very strange before you got back here. It just happened so suddenly; I can't explain."

"Just sit down and tell me."

She sat down, blowing out a shallow breath.

"It happened just after I was reading the magazine of yours," she walked over to the coffee table and picked up the copy of '*Africa Parade*', a picture magazine I had temporarily 'confiscated' from a student caught reading in class. Wetting a finger, she flipped through it. "I saw that article about the white woman." She began reading:

*“‘Dumakude’: spirit medium of the Prophet, Chaminuka. Story of the only initiated white N’yanga.’ After reading that, I went into your room and suddenly felt so weak I could hardly stand up. I saw so much, you wouldn’t understand.”*

"What did you see?" Dumping the pile of exercise books, I sat at the table.

She went back to the ironing board and twisted the sleeve of a shirt. "I can't explain. Terrible things that might happen; you would never understand. And this is not the place to talk about it."

"Angela," I said, "you know you can't just stop there."

After an interval of silence, her iron began stropping again across the shirtsleeves.

In the creepiness of the moment, I continued urging. "Angela, com'on, if you think you saw some dangers coming for yourself or anyone else— you should reveal what you saw. Maybe the danger could be avoided." I gulped, suddenly thinking of my long flights just a week away.

Back and forth she stropped the iron— then without warning—she clomped it down.

"Do you know I was crying when you came in? I smelled gunpowder."

"Gunpowder?"

"You know that village near Chivu? I saw that same kind of— what you call it— some kind of metal?"

"A cartridge shell?"

"Right, a shell packed with gunpowder. There will be war again— I saw it."

Hearing that her 'premonition' did not involve a plane crash; I was oddly relieved. "Is that all you saw? Was there anything else Angela?"

"There was so much you would never understand."

"Just try, OK?"

Beginning in a trickle, her bizarre details spilled forth:

She described a woman playing with snakes in her belly ("I saw 3 of them") then described a vision in which the cryptic words "*your cheetah*" was written in dust on a windowpane in her house in Kwe-Kwe. She then described a vision of a cheetah or leopard clawing at the corrugated tin ceiling as she lay sleeping with her former boyfriend, the father of Miri.

"After that dream", she said, "I know I have to get to a leopard cheetah skin. Also, I need a cloth with a black and white pattern."

Her fingers shaped as she folded the shirts. "I just don't think it's fair. Why me? Why not bother someone who can afford to do these things?"

As she began sobbing, I hopped up from my chair. "Come on Angela. Don't get upset. Look, when I'm in Harare, I'll try to find out how much one of those leopard skins costs."

"It's at least \$200. I could never afford that. It's my father's fault, really. I told him so many times and gave him so many warnings, but he still ignores."

"You mean you asked him to buy you a cheetah skin?"

"No, not that. But my grandmother's spirit has asked for other things, though. Like the python skin. He got me that."

"You have it still?"

I have. It's in my hut, at my father's house. Do you remember your dream about the python? I didn't want to tell you then. I thought you would think you were witched."

Angela continued with a strange interpretation of that dream sequence ("in your python dream you were trying to propose to a woman who would never have you but would still cheat you..."). Then more jarringly, she declared:

"If you buy me the cheetah skin, I can make it so can walk onto the plane next week without paying. Then you'll save a lot."

"That's impossible, Angela," I nervously laughed, "You've never been in an airport, but I can tell you that nobody gets on a plane without a boarding pass."

"I can make you invisible at the airport," she said matter-of-factly.

"Angela, that's ridiculous. It's not like a bus. All the seats are assigned before—"

I stopped, flustered. It was beyond common sense or reason— so why bother?

"It's up to you, Mr. F. I gave you the chance."

Disappointed, Angela moved into the kitchen.

The spell abruptly broken—I tried to turn attention to the teetering pile of exercise books.

"So you really are convinced that you can tell the future, Angela?" I asked her from my armchair an hour later as she readied by the door to take leave.

"It's my guardian spirit who speaks through me," she said, smoothing the arms of her sweater before pulling it on. "When I was young, I was very sick. My father first took me to the clinic. I saw 3 doctors and none of them could help me. Finally, we went to the '*n'yanga*'. He said it was my grandmother trying to find her way through me. They brewed beer, had the '*bira*', and named me after my grandmother. Then all was well."

"One more thing," she said before turning the doorknob. "When I come back on Monday don't forget to tell me about your dreams that you have this weekend."

For a claustrophobic instant, the breath of unreason blew again on the back of my neck.

Sept. '83

*When I got back from a 2-week trip to Canada, Angela excitedly asked me for details. She was pleased with the little trinkets I'd brought her, especially the digital watch. In an unusually buoyant mood, she related a ribald story that seemed clearly derived from Shona oral tradition:*

Whistling, Angela prepared *sadza* (the first meal in my new duplex) on the hot plate propped up on the chair amid the sprawl of furniture and dumped paper. Then as she stirred the saucepan, she offered up a colourful story:

"I remember hearing this from an older girl, Kudzai, when I was about 7 or 8. She used to think all the time about sex, that girl! It makes me laugh to think about it, ha!

...There was this man called '*Pasirose*', that's a translation of '*earth*' from Shona – and he had such a very long member – it was like a snake. Really, he could hide and move the thing of his in any direction he wished. He used to hide behind a tree in the riverbank where the young girls were basking after a swim. He would direct his member (Hee! Hee!) right under the sand to come up under the place where the girls were lying...

...This girl was lying there—suspecting nothing – when this thing came up under her thighs. She became very *comfortable*. Ha, ha! Afterwards she went to the river to tell her sisters. She said: '*It's very comfortable at that spot. Do you want to try it?*'

So one by one, the girls came from their swims and all tried the same delicious spot. Ha, ha! Later, they went home and told the story to their elder sisters. Then they were warned: 'O you must be careful. That's just '*Pasirose*' ['*earth*']! You must be very careful about that silly fellow or you may be impregnated and give birth to a monster.'"

Oct. '83

*Angela continued in an upbeat mood after she applied to the police force and reported that her first interview had gone well. Still, she was troubled by her dreams:*

Even as I fretted over the deadline for marking tests, Angela, leaned by my armchair picking at the straws of the broom and told me of her latest dream:

“It was very disgusting really! I was in town with my friend, Immaculata, and I had to use the toilet. I just couldn’t wait but there was nowhere to go.

‘Look over there,’ Immaculata said. ‘Why not use that?’ What do you call those holes on the street covered with the metal bars? Storm drain? Okay so I did it there. I just couldn’t wait. Then just as I finished, a policeman came along. ‘What are you doing there?’ he said. I told him I had only urinated. ‘Let me see, I have to know!’ he said.

I was very embarrassed. I did, you know—the other thing—and I was trying to cover the excreta with my foot.

‘I want to see,’ the policeman kept saying while I kept trying to hide it and push it away. It was so disgusting. Then he asked me why I wanted to join the police force.

‘It’s really very dangerous,’ the policeman said. ‘Many enemies of your family are there in the force.’”

*Ad. Note:*

After she related this revolting dream sequence, I countered by telling her of my recent dream of a rabid Pekingese dog yelping and nipping at my heel in a hotel lobby in Harare.

“That’s interesting you dreamt of the dog,” she said, “you know my father’s favourite dog died yesterday. It was poisoned by eating a piece of poisoned meat from the farm of a white man, a certain Mr. Norman, who hates people to go hunting on his farm. He even hates them collecting firewood there, so he lays out poisoned meat along his paddocks to keep people away. He would poison human beings, that one! My father was so sad he almost cried.”

Oct. '83

*Towards the end of the year Angela was no longer working for fellow Canadian, Ferg, who had found an alternative means of doing his laundry. She seemed unfazed by the loss of income—partly due her hopes at that moment of joining the Zimbabwe police force—for which her toughness was certainly matched.*

*As for her previous plans of moving to Kwe-kwe, she said she was wondering whether the 'Vadzimu' [ancestors] had different plans in store for her:*

When I asked her about job prospects in Kwe-Kwe, Angela talked about the factories and mines that have drawn so many Africans to that Midlands town. The mines, she claimed, were haunted by the ghosts of dead miners:

“One mine is haunted by an old white man who died there long, long ago. He appears during the night shifts and talks to the African miners in *chilapalapa* [the servant pidgin the Rhodesians called “kitchen kaffir”]. He calls out ‘*Hey, boy!*’ and orders the black miners to turn around. Then with a soft lump of coal, he writes messages on their backs.”

“What does he write?” I asked.

“I knew one miner,” she said matter-of-factly, “who was told to quit his job, take all his money and buy a car.”

“What for?”

“I don’t know,” she shrugged he broad shoulders, “but when ghosts give orders you just have to obey.”

Nov. '83

*Sadly, Angela's application to join the ZRP (Zimbabwe police force) was thwarted by the results of her medical tests:*

At 2:00 PM Angela came in the door, breathless.

"Remember I told you I had to go to the hospital today to get my medical exam for the police force?"

"I remember."

"Well, I have bad news. Look at this card." She flipped a pink file card on the table and clumped into the kitchen for a glass of water. "What does that 'VD' mean? They say I have to go into the hospital in Macheke every day for injections. 10 days!"

I squinted at the scrawl.

"10 days! I don't know how I can afford the transport."

"Christ, Angela, you've been diagnosed with syphilis!"

"What?"

"Jesus, look here."

I hunched at my bookshelf and pulled out '*Where there is no Doctor.*' Flipping over to 'Sexually Transmitted Diseases', I read aloud as she looked over my shoulder.

"Look, Angela you just have to go back every day. You can't miss a single injection. If you don't cure it there can be terrible long-term effects. Once you're cured you just have to make sure when you have sex that your boyfriends use condoms."

"*Boyfriends?*" She scowled. "What, do you think I have a lot of boyfriends? That I bitch around?"

"No, no, I'm just giving you practical advice. Here, read for yourself. Take the book home. You can bring it back in a few days."

With a 'tsk', she took the book. In a shiver of horror, I looked over her shoulder at the diagram of the unchecked syphilis bacterium, corkscrewing through liver, heart and eventually the brain...

So much for Angela's hopes of becoming a policewoman!

Nov. '83

*Unfortunately, the hope that Angela was learning to better control her temper was short lived. With the inevitable downturn on her bipolar swing, an even more disturbing episode occurred:*

I opened the door to find sitting on the steps, Angela, scowling.

“How long have you been sitting there?”

“Long enough.”

“Why didn’t you knock?”

“I tried knocking but there was no answer. I was bored to knock more.”

“Sorry, I must have been in the bathroom.”

As she shuffled past her foul mood slapped like a blast of winter air.

“Surely you heard that the radio was on in here, so I had to be home. Just how long were you prepared to sit there in the hot sun?”

“Listen Mr. F., I came here to work. I have no time to talk nonsense.”

Alas, I failed to take the obvious precaution to slide on my kid gloves and sit back meekly marking my exercise books. Instead I counter-punched:

“No one’s talking nonsense, Angela. If you’re going to come here in a shitty mood, then I have to know if I need to be walking around landmines for the rest of the afternoon.”

Eyes narrowed, she stepped towards my chair, thrusting out her chin. “Listen, don’t play with me.”

Unwisely, I jabbed again.

“Angela, please. I’ve also got work to do. I’m also not in the mood today for putting up with bullshit.”

She spun round wagging a finger. “*Bullshit*”? Listen, Mr. man, here are heavy things in this room.” She lifted her chin to the opposite corner. “If you don’t watch your tongue, I’ll smash that bicycle over your bald head!”

As she took a half step towards me, I jolted up from my chair glancing towards the door.

“Stop right there. Control your temper, damn it.”

She shook her finger into my face. “You’d better know, Mr. F., that I’m not scared to die... If you want to fight me – be prepared to lose an eye.”

"Fight? Who's talking about fighting? Just control yourself."

Breathing hard, she half growled, half whined: "You might have something to live for, mister—I don't. Life is no more sweet for me. I don't care what happens. I'm warning you: if I'm pushed, I will *murder*."

All but ready to spring for the door, I counted breathes as gradually the thunderhead rolled past. Then clenching teeth, I sat back in my chair and pretended to calmly resume marking.

With a sob, she retreated to the kitchen. After several minutes of dish cluttering, she suddenly appeared at the doorway. She was dabbing her eyes:

"You must be careful, Mr. F.," she sobbed, "I know I have a temper – but please—I can't control myself when I'm angry like that. Please don't start me." Blowing her nose, she went back into the kitchen.

Remaining silent, I jerked my red pen over the student compositions. Just then, there came the flicker of a dark shadow over the left shoulder. Just how close *did* that come to murder? In the next outburst, might the serpentine carving have come smashing down on my temple? Unimaginable that Ester, in Tanzania, would have behaved like this! What kind of an idiot am I—allowing myself to be captive to the moods of a *psychotic*?

Resolved, I walked into the kitchen where she was leaning over the sink.

Blowing out a held breath, I said: "This time, it's just gone too far."

In profile, head slightly lowered, she nodded.

"This is not good for you or for me. You're going to have to get another job and I'm going to have to find someone else."

Wiping a plate, she softly sobbed.

"So didn't you say you were planning to go to Kwe-Kwe in January, anyway?" I asked, voice nearly cracking. "Well, you can work here for another month if you need to—up to the beginning of December. I'm going on a holiday on Dec. 10<sup>th</sup>, so I won't need any help after then."

"Thank you Mr. F.," she said.

Later, in the sound of her broom I sat with exercise books on lap, gritting teeth unable to mark.

Nov. '83

*The days after Angela was given notice were predictably tense. There were no longer droll stories or reports of bizarre dreams: she would perform her duties humming to herself or in silence while I would sit silently in my armchair reading or marking. Meanwhile, the first time I was ever to run into her outside of Gokomere Mission was in a particularly seamy setting:*

Down at Mashavili's bottle store for a drink after Friday's classes with fellow Canadian, Ferg, and a few Zimbabwean teachers—a shock it was to see standing at the counter in tight blue jeans with a beer in hand none other than—

"Angela!" I yelled through the din, "what are you doing here?"

She cupped her ear.

I stepped up closer. "So what are you up to?"

"I'm just having a couple of beer. No harm in that." She belched.

"Have one on me," I said, in the guilty realization that every beer was a considerable chunk out of her meagre half-time salary.

"What are you doing", she gave a sneering grin, "trying to test me?"

"No, I'm just offering you a beer."

She looked back towards the table where a grinning Ferg, her former half-time employer, flicked beer caps toward us.

"Did Ferg put you up to this?"

In that instant, I saw the Jack-in-the-Box homunculus head that popped in and out interrogating in a shrill whine: very probably, her image of me...

"Forget it, Angela, go about your own business," I said coldly, turning away.

Dec. '83

*I had hoped that I could somehow keep up the pretence that Angela was leaving to pursue better prospects in Kwe-Kwe—that she had not been sacked... Of course, it really didn't matter since neighbours certainly would not have failed to hear the caterwauling that periodically burst forth from my walls. Still, the mood of the final workday was more of sadness than of bitterness:*

In this last day, Angela arrived with her hair plated in Medusa spikes. She took the Christmas card propped up against the sink (with \$10 tucked inside) with only a sigh...

She did not join me in the *sadza* for lunch, so I ate alone awkwardly while she gathered the washing from the line at the back of the house. I sat back down in the armchair to mark papers, while she folded laundry. When I turned on the radio, there was a ZBC report about the decline in marriage and childbirth rates in Japan and Europe...

“Too many lesbians there,” Angela muttered before suddenly bursting out in an odd diatribe:

“It's sick. These women must be mad – truly mad, I'd rather eat my own excrement than to have sex with another woman. I *hate* women – I hate them for their pride. Especially the ones that think of themselves as goddesses... Men are so foolish, really! They can't even sew on a button for themselves but they chase women like a bee from one flower to another until they spend all their money... It's not fair that the girls who will make good wives and mothers are so neglected. Really, you men are so foolish chasing after the bad ones!”

She paused an instant giving a towel a whiplash snap.

Without making comment, I sat in my armchair flipping through a novel as the radio played softly in the background—as though this day were like any other...

Toward the end of the afternoon, she moved into the kitchen to wash up. As it neared the time for her usual departure, I came to the kitchen doorway. For a moment, I watched her leaning morosely over the sink. Her broad shoulders heaved as she clanked soapy pans.

She did not turn around when I spoke:

“When you come back from Kwe-Kwe to visit your father,” I said, tapping the doorway, “remember that you and Miri are welcome to visit here, too.”

Applying the soap with a squeak to each plate, she sniffed and nodded. It was only then that I noticed on her wrist the ebony bracelet: one of the little souvenirs I'd brought back from my first vacation in Malawi and given her before my trip back to Canada. It was probably the first and last time she will ever wear it.

Dec. '83

*I was pleasantly surprised when Angela took me up on her offer to drop by with little Miri during the Christmas week, after my return from a trip to Malawi. By that time, I had already engaged the services of another domestic helper, one Mary, who was to begin in January. The happiness of little Miri in seeing the friendly 'mrungu' again, was bittersweet:*

Angela, showed up after church this morning along with little Miri:

She said she and Miri were staying at her father's sister's place in Kwe-Kwe. She was still looking for work but still hadn't given up her hope to become a Zimbabwe police officer. She claimed that she was still happily single.

"I don't want to marry or even have a serious boyfriend yet," said *Amai* Miri says over tea and cookies, "I just want to freak around for a while. "I don't think I could bear living with the same man."

Afterwards, strolling down towards the corner store for a treat, little Miri took my hand.

"*Tenga* [buy] sweetz!" she shouted, jerking at my hand. "*Tenga* meat pie! *Tenga* Fanta lemon!"

Strolling back, little Miri hugged the bottle of Fanta orange as she pointed to a monitor lizard doing push-ups against the tree: "*Ona, Fraza, ona!*" [Look, look!]

After treats, Miri settled down for a nap on the straw mat on the bedroom floor while Angela poked through my bookshelf and perused one of my novels in the African Writers' series. Meanwhile, I leafed through my new '*Oxford Guide to English Literature*', a generous Christmas gift from my dear friend, WS, in Montreal.

Later when it is time to go, I walked Angela and Miri to the mission gate. Suspecting that she was only putting on a brave face in her nonchalance about still being out of work—I weakly offered:

"If you decide to come back from Kwe-Kwe— if you still need work— you can come here once a week, say on Saturdays. Mary will only be working half-time so I think I can afford one extra day a week. What do you think?"

"No thank you, Mr. F." She gave a scornful little laugh.

While we walked silently together down to the main highway, I was oddly touched by the image of fire: the Heraclitean fire by which the present was continuously consumed and left inexorably behind in the ashes of the past... Just as I had often tried in vain to capture the present instant while staring into the fireplace—I watched Angela and Miri as they disappeared, probably never to be seen again.

In the last glimpse, Angela was pushing into the bus, tugging Miri who still hugged her half-bottle of Fanta orange...

Jan. '84

*I missed Angela's conversation when she was in her better moods but certainly did not miss negotiating the minefields when she was not. Although the limited English (and my woefully limited Shona) of my new helper, Mary, was initially awkward, the unambiguous transactional relationship was a relief:*

"Look, come and see," chirped Mary, whose broom had suddenly halted on the bedroom floor. "It's a scorpion. A very big one!"

She smiled as I knelt down cautiously.

"Look – he ran in the corner."

Cautiously I peered. The black insect squeezed against the wall was the size of a small mouse.

"You kill it, OK?" said Mary, handing me the broom. She was younger, smaller in stature, and much shyer than Angela...

Reminded of Kafka's '*Metamorphosis*', I poked the broom handle onto the poor creature with a sickening crunch. Futilely, its lethal tail arched up quivering. With a shudder I recalled the scratching sounds under the bed that had woken me up in the middle of the last two nights.

"Very big!" said Mary, as I handed her back the broom...

Leaning down, she swept it into the cone of scrap paper, and then balled it up for the garbage.

"Too big," she chuckled, "Very dangerous."

Nodding with a smile, before turning back to my armchair, I imagined the conversation that might well have ensued with Angela. There would have been talk of witchery salted with an anecdote involving some hapless victim from Kwe-Kwe...

No, barring any resort to '*chilapalapa*' pidgin commands— there will be no trouble at all in communication with Mary...

Feb. '84

*Two months after Angela's departure, an encounter with an old woman in the 'bundu' [bush] on the edge of the mission unexpectedly connected some of the dots in the outline of Angela's mysterious home life:*

On Sunday afternoon I was wheeling my bike through the boggy streambed along the cattle trail behind the mission, when out of the copse across, 2 figures emerged. It was a woman with a girl, collecting firewood.

"*Maskati!*" I called.

"*Maskati!*" The woman, who looked elderly, called back and waved up a blue handkerchief. As I wheeled closer, she gave a wizened grin while the barefooted girl whose waist the old woman held for support, looked down shyly. In her other hand the old woman held a plastic bag and a knobkerrie.

"*Maskati, amai.*"

"*Maskati, baba.*" She crinkled the plastic bag.

"What's that?" Seeing something darkly wiggling at the bottom, I grinned at the bag.

She cackled.

Leaning on my bicycle, I wiped my sleeve across forehead and asked again. "Something good to eat?"

"I'm collecting caterpillars," she said in clear English.

She held the bag open and offered me a peek at the grayish squirming mass within.

"How do you prepare them?" I further tried her English.

"We fry them with salt and pepper." She gave a yellow fanged grin while the girl stared down bashfully at her feet. "They taste better than sausage!"

As I slowly wheeled back toward the mission, the old woman and the girl walked beside. The old woman introduced herself as Emma, born in 1936 in the Malova tribal trust area that abuts the mission. As a former student of Gokomere primary decades ago, she seemed to maintain a sharp ear on the gossip of the mission involving both the missionaries and the teachers.

"I think I know you, brother," she said, using the old honorific that assumed that all white men associate with the mission were clergy.

"Really?"

"Angela used to work for you, isn't it?" She smiled.

"Do you know her?" I said, taken aback.

"Know her?" The old woman cackled, "she's the child of my sister, that one!"

"Well, that's interesting!" I said, offering my hand. "My name's F."

Handing over the bag and the staff to the little girl, she extended calloused hands, Shona style, to shake mine.

As we walked along together towards the mission gate, old Emma— garrulous as Angela herself— talked about her niece:

"Hum, yes, Angela is very clever. She's *not* just a house girl, that one. I heard she almost got that job as a policewoman (it would've been a good one too) but they found some sickness in her blood. It's in the family, you know. I'm her own mother's sister! Oh, her mother died young, a long time ago. She went mad and used to follow everyone— even men— around to the toilet. Sad!"

After a cough the old woman continued: "Hum, yes, Angela's was living with her father and stepmother. You know, she has her grandmother's spirit in her – her father's mother. Angela's father calls her '*Amai*' [mother]. It's his own mother living with him... Yes, it's really sad, Angela could have done well at school— really, *really* well— if she didn't get sick with the spirit possession."

Suddenly we stopped up in the buzz of flies and a sudden stench. Before us on the edge of the path was a crinkled heap of black leather— the carcass of a cow.

Emma poked it with her knobkerrie. "The snake must've got her – shame! She was such a fat thing, too. You better tell Father Charles about this. Looks like she's been dead about two weeks— all dried up. Shame!"

Again, old Emma knocked her stick on the hollow side of the carcass. "Yes, it sounds like a drum. We could play her in the church—sure. Ha!"

She then asked me where my house is located on the Mission compound. When I mentioned that I lived across from Ms. M., a single woman who taught Form One English, Emma cackled.

"Ah, that woman! Yes, I know that one well, too! She has a baby boy, isn't it? Oh yes, that one spends too much time running up and down— up and down. Oh, yes. Ha!" She gave a husky laugh. "Yes, you see your mother can tell you: "*Look, there's a snake there.*" As Emma pointed her knobkerrie, I momentarily startled.

"No no— ha! Not a real snake— I was just talking. I mean, if your mother tells you: '*Look, that snake is dangerous*', at first you will be frightened, and you will obey. But if you taste that condensed milk and see that it is sweet— then you can't go without it. Ha, ha! That M. girl she has tasted that sweet stuff, and she's not afraid. Now she can't do

without the condensed milk... Yes, so many girls are like that now—unsteady. Angela, too..."

As she left the last comment hanging— we lapsed into silence.

As we started forward again, she spoke of her present woes.

"Ah, I'm old. Born in 1936 – I'm old and tired. This little thing—" she pointed her knobkerrie to the girl, "—is my last born at home. All she needs is some work. Anything – she can sweep, wash clothes."

Realizing she was angling, however half-heartedly, to see whether I might still require a domestic helper, I faltered. "Well, after Angela left, I hired another girl—I mean another *woman*— called Mary."

"Ha! Don't worry," she stopped to spit into her handkerchief. After coughing, she continued. "I won't be around to see my children taking care of me. What's to live for? I'm so tired. My teeth are rotting. I don't mind to die. You know, I get terrible headaches. I sometimes feel my whole head is coming off. What is the cause of that? Is it my brains are rotten?"

"You should go to a doctor, Emma."

"She wiped her nose, "No, no— too much wrong with me, brother. I need more than medicine."

Near the fork of the path to the hamlet of Matova, we stopped.

"Take care of yourself, Emma," I said loosely shaking her gnarled hand.

"*Tatenda, baba*," she said.

As I wheeled my bike through the cattle gate back to the mission, I looked back to see her steadying herself with arm around her little girl's shoulder.

1983- '84, *Masvingo Province, Zimbabwe*.  
(From hard cover black notebook, transcribed, 2018)

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**Postscript:**

*Over the years, I have kept sporadically in touch with a few of my old Canadian colleagues with whom I worked in Zimbabwe. A few years ago, Ferg, with whom I shared the employment of Angela, emailed that that he had received an out-of-the-blue Linked In message from Angela's son. The young man wrote that his mother had spoken fondly of a Canadian she had once worked for. She had even remembered his surname. Years later, the boy had made the effort to track Ferg down just to say hello.*

*Angela's son, born after his mother had worked for Ferg and I, was about my eldest daughter's age. According to Ferg's email, Angela's son had won a scholarship to study in the U.S.A. and thus escaped the hellhole into which Zimbabwe has spiralled. He was then living in North Carolina where he had completed training as an engineer.*

*Ferg reported that Angela's son also bore the sad news that his mother had died some years before. Although he gave no information about the cause of her death, it was hard not to surmise that Angela has been a victim of the scourge that has taken so many of her generation in Zimbabwe: AIDS. In the sadness of that news, my first thoughts went to her daughter, Miri. What might have become of her? She would now be in her late 30s.*

*When Ferg passed on the Linked In address of Angela's son, I sent him an 'invitation to connect'. In introducing myself as 'another Canadian your mom once worked for', I expressed condolences for his mother and asked after his older sister. It was hardly a surprise that there was no reply...*

*I could not help speculating about what Angela's son might have heard about the "other Canadian" his mother had worked for back in 1983. The firewood incident came especially to mind. Perhaps that ranked me in her memory with the priest whose arm was stuck grasping at the bag of money in the coffin—or the Rhodesian who poisoned her father's dogs... Of course, she would have had far more important stories to pass on to her children.*

*As for my memories of Angela—most enduring is that of the chilly July afternoon sitting beside her at the fireplace. That was the time she spoke of her thoughts on mortality and the 'soul'... As her aunt Emma later remarked: Angela was definitely not "just a house girl." 3 ½ decades later, I wonder exactly what she was thinking on the verge of entering the spirit world. Did her faith hold up to the end?*

*If I had a single message for her children, it would be this: 'No spirit among the 'Vadzimu' [ancestors] could possibly be a more zealous guardian of her descendants—than is your Amai, Angela. Be well assured of that...'*