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# Salt & Honey

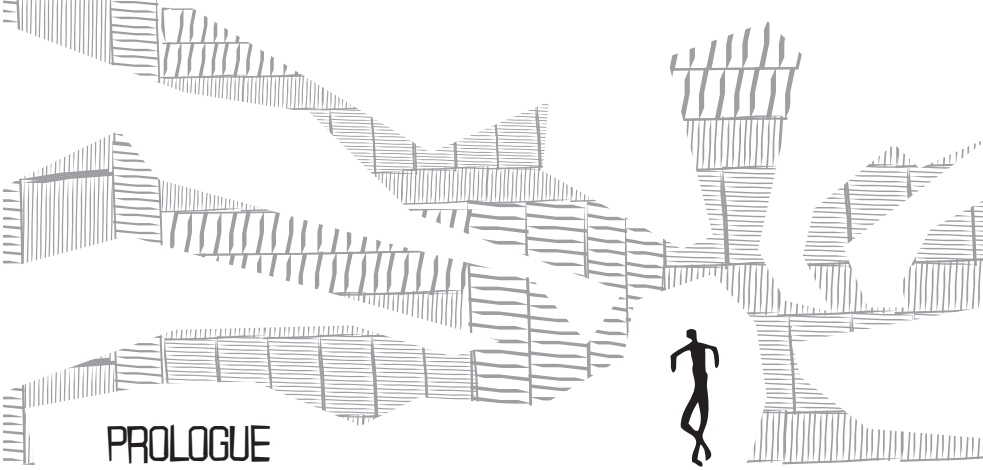
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## Published by Legend Press

Extract

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# PROLOGUE

South-West Africa, 1958

The guard dogs began to bark, so insistently that Marta got out of bed and hurried to the window.

Unremitting blackness, not even the Southern Cross visible on the horizon. Must be cloudy, she thought. With a bit of luck, tomorrow will be cooler. She'd forgotten how hot it could be here in December. Bad for her feet, already swollen by pregnancy.

She heard frenzy in the doberman's barking now; even the ridgeback's usually token accompaniment sounded urgent. Not one of the ubiquitous jackals then, patrolling the farmyard fence in the hope of finding a way into the hen house. And it wouldn't be one of the servants. They wouldn't dare enter the yard until the dogs had been chained up for the day by their master, Etienne Marais.

But Etienne and all the other men were away for the night – out in the veld somewhere, hunting. Marta looked at the shotgun propped up next to the window. Etienne, her brother-in-law, had insisted she take charge of it in the men's absence.

"Lettie's likely to pepper one of her Parisian pink toenails if I leave it with her," he'd said, winking in the direction of his wife.

"I want nothing to do with guns," Marta had told him.

She left the room now without it, feeling her way down the dark passage towards the growing cacophony. As she struggled with the screen door she heard the doberman yelp. Then a familiar voice, cursing it, "Shut up, you blerry brak."

"Etienne? André? Is that you-lot out there?" Surer now, she hastened down the verandah steps, aware of shapes – animal and human. Impossible to distinguish anyone in the moonless night.

"Deon," she called out to her husband as a man, limping worse than usual, came into view. He held a torch and in its shaky umbra she saw a horse with two small figures astride it. Behind plodded an ox, something massive and inert lying across its broad back. The dogs capered around it, the ridgeback whining.

"Voetsek, jou focken brakke," she heard her nephew, André, swear.

Marta whistled for the dogs and grabbed each one by its collar, making them sit.

"Why are you back so soon?" she asked Deon.

"Beenah accident," he mumbled, drunkenly. Marta's hands flew to the open neck of her nightdress, clutching it closed. The dogs bounded away.

"Mannie?" she whispered.

"Boy's awright." Deon waved the torch vaguely in the direction of the horse.

Marta snatched it from him and stumbled over to her son. Her hand roved across the child's body, trying to discover what the weak beam could not.

"Are you alright, my boy?" He seemed it – cool, no fever, no wounds, no obviously broken bones. Thank God. She trained the beam on his fright-stricken face.

"For pity's sake, what's the matter?"

"Ma, Ma." He was gulping back sobs. "It's not me, Ma. Check Uncle Etienne. Save him, Ma, please, Ma, 'cos it's my fault," he choked. Baffled, she turned from her son.

Suddenly there was lamplight from the house, candlelight coming from the servants' compound, and above, on the verandah, the shrill tones of her sister-in-law, "Liewe Magies, what's going on?"

Marta trained the beam on the ox and gasped. Etienne lay completely still, a maroon stain spread across his chest.

What the…? She should feel for a pulse. She couldn't move.

"Ma, please! You must do something quick. I think…"

She spun back to her son, spotlighting him. In the wider arc of light she now saw he was propping up a small body – slim yellow limbs, wide oriental eyes. A Khoisan child. But not from around here, that she could see from the child's traditional dress – a pubic apron and a cloak made of animal skin. It must be from a Kalahari desert tribe. What on earth was it doing so far from home? And alone? "Someone, help me get these children down," she shouted, dropping the torch and running back to the horse.

As she reached up for the Khoisan child, it recoiled in terror and raised bound hands to fend her off. Marta stopped, horror-struck. "Why is this child tied up?"

As soon as André had secured the dogs, servants began to pour into the yard in various stages of dress. Housemaids, never before seen bareheaded this side of the fence, looked unfamiliar and naked despite having blankets or shawls draped modestly around them. Some carried bleary-eyed children while their men milled about bare-chested with knobkieries or lengths of metal pipe held at the ready. As the elders tried to establish who should be in charge now that the whites and Twi, the boss boy, were preoccupied, two youths

with initiation cuts still healing on their chests set off to patrol the perimeter fence, burning logs held aloft. The dogs strained at their chains, barking rabidly.

The anxious human susurrus built until Marta could feel it down the back of her neck, like the rasping breath of a leopard.

"Give me a lamp, get a torch," she shouted into the throng. "And for God's sake, someone go start the generator." She heard footsteps fly to do her bidding, then Lettie shrieking at the sight of Etienne, followed by André's voice as he tried to soothe his mother. Marta kept her attention on Deon. "Where did you find this child?"

"Out there; Mother Hills way." His bloodshot eyes flicked towards a pair of hills whose stone summits had been eroded into nipples by the lascivious desert wind. Veiled by the night, they still held an allure. When the morning sun reached the cleavage of the hills, it would fall on the jewel nestled there, a dazzling aquamarine pool set in red-gold rock, surface evidence of the abundant artesian wealth beneath the soil.

South-West African farmers had learnt how to plunder this hidden horde. None better than Etienne Marais. He, of the banknote green cornfields that stretched around the farmhouse as far as the eye could see. Big, blonde, broad Etienne Marais, an Afrikaner success story, master of all in the area and parliamentary representative of those whose skin colour entitled them to vote.

Now he lay dying as Marta struggled with the knots tying the child to the pommel.

She was aware of André pushing past, carrying his father with the help of three black servants. Lettie skittered alongside in kitten-heeled slippers, whimpering. She was wringing the lifeless hand that fell over the side of the makeshift stretcher.

"Marta, Marta, for pity's sake, come help, man. Make some muti or something. My Etienne's bad. Liewe Magies, leave the damn child. It's only a kaffir."

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Kalahari Desert, 1950

Meat. Piles of it. Strips skewered on thorny branches drying in the doorways of grass-domed huts, slabs sizzling on every cooking fire. People laughed, called across the camp, teased one another. Excitement flared like fat in a flame as the hunters hacked at the giraffe carcass, slipping and sliding in a slush of sand and blood.

Zuma sat straight-legged on sand pinkened by the evening sun. In a gourd, she mixed giraffe fat with ground bark. It made a thick paste, satisfyingly red. Grinning, she began working it into her skin, determined she should look her best for the dance that would follow the feast. After all, she would be on show. She was the owner of the first arrow to hit the old bull.

*Mmm, the first cut of Tall Elegant Person's meat is mine. Tami's arrow-arm is strong – a good son-in-law. But my arrow, yau, a fine food-bringer, a meat-maker. People will remember I am a rain season child. I must shine tonight. My skin must glow like the coat of a red buck.*

Zuma sensed a wind tapping at her shoulder and knew immediately what it was. She determined to ignore it. Being a medium was a nuisance. The spirits always chose inconvenient times to speak. Couldn't they wait until she took part in a trance dance? She shook her head to clear her ears of their whisperings. Her ornaments jiggled. She touched her cropped hair. Was the grey showing in her regrowth yet? Maybe she should ask N#aisa to shave her head again.

The spirit wind eddied around her, insistently. She ignored it, massaging away the goosebumps that had formed on her arms. The wind spiralled around her, collecting a cargo of sand. Too late Zuma closed her eyes against the dust devil.

Coughing, eyes an angry red, she capitulated, cocking her head to one side and listening to the message.

So, there were /Ton at their tree-water. She would tell Kh//an, her husband and a more experienced shaman, but he was old now for such a long journey. And what match were his arrows for /Ton thundersticks? There'd been enough fighting between her people and others. She shrugged. Perhaps it was her duty to add this episode to the Ju/'hoansi story. Make sure the children knew.

She rose, smoothed the hide apron that covered her groin and strolled over to the nearby fires. She chatted to a couple of women, flirted with a man in passing, all the while assessing receptiveness. Tonight the young ones wanted meat. They could smell it – everywhere. Who could begrudge them, after months of roots and berries, Zuma thought? But the meat wasn't ready yet. A story might distract them.

She fixed two feathers to the back of her head and with arms bent backwards like folded wings she began her kori bustard impression, pacing ponderously about the camp.

A big-bellied tot pointed at her, tugged at his mother's kaross, eyebrows quizzical.

"Kori woman has an egg she wants to lay," his mother laughed.

His older sister scooped him up. "Come, we'll follow her. She'll have a story to crack open."

Other children joined them, trotting after Zuma as she high-stepped to a bower under a baobab tree.

"Wum, wum, wum, wummmmm," she cried.

Hearing, older children abandoned games and ran to join

the group. Zuma n!a'an was a fine storyteller.

Zuma let them settle, then, drawing her three-year old granddaughter, Koba, onto her lap, she said casually, "There's a new story, but you probably don't want to hear it."

Her granddaughter cocked her head to one side, inclining a tiny cowrie shell of an ear to the wind. "I *can* hear," she whispered, big-eyed. Her small voice was drowned out by the chorus of the other children clamouring for Zuma to tell them her tale.

"Well, it's new but it begins long-back, after the time of the Early Race but before our time, when groups of Harmless People lived all over this land, towards sun's-rising-place where the mountains have teeth." Zuma bared her own, ground down by years of softening hide. "Towards sun's-resting-place where the sand shines with diamonds."

"Where's that?" a little girl with shining eyes breathed. Zuma pointed west and patiently explained the route between the camp and the Skeleton Coast, mentioning as many dunes, watering holes and other landmarks as she could remember. No child listened more intently than the long-eyed one on Zuma's lap. Koba was mesmerised by this hint of a world beyond the camp.

Zuma's tone became mysterious. "Then, into this land came strangers. They drove herds of tame animals before them and suffer-suffered when they found no water or grazing.

"Our people showed them where the water was and took their herds deep into the valleys to find grass. When the Ju/'hoansi returned with the herds full fattened, they were given tobacco and were glad. 'Come and be our herdsmen,' these Herero and Tswana tribesmen said to our people, 'and we will give you plenty of milk'. But the Ju/'hoansi did not want to. They preferred to follow the meat animals they loved."

While the group nodded, Zuma felt for the beaded pouch at her waist and withdrew a pipe. She pushed tobacco into the bowl and dispatched a boy to fetch a light from the nearest fire. The children waited politely. All except Koba.

"More, more," she pleaded, chubby fingers reaching to remove the pipe that stopped the story.

"Yau," Zuma laughed, holding it out of reach. "This granddaughter of mine is dry. She thirsts for stories like a root for water."

The older children distracted Koba – pulling faces, tickling her, passing her from lap to lap. Once Zuma had a good draw going on the pipe, she continued. "After the herdsmen came, the Ju/'hoansi moved away. Game gone, you see. The farmers' herds were eating all the grass."

She closed her eyes as she began the beloved litany, "Eland, gemsbok, kudu, wildebeest, hartebeest, tsessebe, roan..." The children chanted along, many with their eyes closed, almost tasting the great meat animals. Zuma puffed contentedly. "Now all these, eland-gemsbok-kudu-wildebeest-hartebeest-tsessebe-roan, had to move off to find new food." Zuma shook her head so the feathers wafted sadly. "Ju/'hoansi and farmers became enemies."

"How did they become enemies?"

The old woman removed the pipe from her mouth and sighed. "They fought each other for things – for grass, for tree-water, for the tame meat animals. The strangers had many things our people wanted. The Ju/'hoansi took them with their arrows, but were chased off when the /Ton arrived," Zuma paused, rolled her eyes, "with their thundersticks."

Fear snaked through the older children in the group. Younger ones sensed the mood change. Koba demanded an explanation.

A boy jumped up, extended his arm at shoulder height and

pulled an invisible trigger. The fire-fetcher joined him. Soon they were 'shooting' at each other, competing to reproduce the perfect rifle report.

Koba began to cry. Zuma gathered her granddaughter and pressed the bobbled head to her red chest. "Hush-hush. No thundersticks will find you here."

"Dere, dere," Koba insisted, pointing towards the distant hills.

Zuma's face clouded as she recalled the whispering of the wind. But Koba was too young to have The Ear. Time to abandon the story. The new part might only confirm what frightened them both.

"Yau," she exclaimed, clapping her hand over her nose, "my what's-up-front, something's in it. Koba, Koba, can you see?" She thrust her wiggling nose close to the child's astonished face. "It's pulling me, calling me." She leaned away from the bemused group. "A smell has got me by the nose. I must follow. Come Koba."

The older children caught on. Getting up they sniffed the air. The smell of grilled meat was irresistible. "It's ready," they shouted as they dashed to their family fires.

Zuma came more slowly, cradling Koba and blowing softly into her ears to disperse any sounds there.