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Opening Extract from...

The Boy Next Door

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Part One

1980s

1.

Two days after I turned fourteen the son of our neighbor set his stepmother alight.

A week later the police came. I was reading *Sue Barton, Senior Nurse* on the veranda, and I was at the part when Dr. Bill Barry proposes to Sue Barton. Daddy was busy tinkering with the Cortina under the jacaranda tree. Mummy was in the bedroom trying on her new Manyano outfit for the graduation ceremony that was going to take place at church, which would turn fifteen young women into fully fledged members of the congregation. Rosanna was helping her.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Bishop," I heard. "Sorry to disturb. We have come about next door."

The chief constable wiped his forehead with a tissue. "This heat is destroying us," he said, and from the veranda, I could see a wet dark patch on his shirt, which made it cling to his back.

It was midday and there wasn't a single cloud in the sky. Even though it was the end of January not one drop of rain had fallen in Bulawayo.

"This problem of no transport. Only walking these days for us. Ten kilometers and I am not so young anymore, not like these calves." He pointed at the other two policemen who were standing near the Cortina at attention.

Daddy said something about bulls, which made the chief constable laugh while the calves remained very rigid and serious.

Most of the brand-new police cars donated by Britain were in scrap yards; the police force had been statistically shown to have the most dangerous drivers in Zimbabwe. In fact, the chief constable, who had only recently been promoted after his white superior had tendered his resignation, had been responsible for a recent smashup against an electricity pole; Daddy hinted that he was most likely driving without a valid license.

"Are you finding petrol?" the chief constable asked, eyeing the two policemen who sprung forwards. It looked like he had jerked them into motion with string.

"A little only," Daddy replied as he gently put down the bonnet. "Enough to go to the office and back."

I knew that he was exaggerating; he didn't want the chief constable to feel free to ask him for transport.

The chief constable took out his tissue again and patted his forehead. "The South Africans are making it very difficult, Mr. Bishop."

The day's headline in *The Chronicle* was about the RENAMO rebels in Mozambique who were funded by South Africa. They had sabotaged a big section of the pipeline, which brought oil to Zimbabwe. South Africa was trying to destabilize our newly independent country.

"Let's hope we can secure the Beira pipeline from further attacks," Daddy said while wiping his hands on his orange overalls.

Daddy and the chief constable looked at the Cortina as if they were expecting some response from it. The Cortina was gleaming proudly in the heat.

The chief constable coughed and cleared his throat. "Well, Mr. Bishop. This is a very sad business we have come about. We . . ."

Roxy, our Jack Russell terrier who had been sleeping in his kennel, came running out at full speed. He leapt and landed

on a police foot and began vigorously licking the boot. The policeman hopped and skipped and wagged his foot, but he couldn't shake Roxy off. Daddy finally managed to pull him away while trying hard not to laugh.

"We are looking for evidence," the chief constable started again, once Roxy was safely in Daddy's arms. "We have thoroughly investigated the McKenzie property, and now we are checking all the neighboring land. We would like to take a look by the perimeters."

Daddy took them to the back of the house where the two juniors cupped their hands under the tap at the end of the vegetable patch and drank as though they had not seen water for a very long time. The chief constable looked at them and shook his head. He drank slowly from the glass that I had brought out to him. Then they all walked along the fence that separated our limestone pink Spanish Colonial from the McKenzie's whitewashed Cape Dutch.

Their black boots kept getting sucked in and stuck in the mud as they trudged about looking for the evidence, because Maphosa had just watered the vegetables even though Daddy was constantly telling him that watering at the hottest time of the day was a treacherous waste of a precious natural resource and that even the borehole could run out of water.

After one walk through, the evidence was still missing. The chief constable said, that was quite all right; they had obtained a confession.

He took out his notepad, like Columbo, and he asked Daddy if he had heard or seen anything strange at the neighbors on that night or before. Daddy quickly said no, not at all. And then he invited the chief constable, who was one of his best customers, for some tea.

Daddy worked for the Telecommunications branch of the post office, making sure that the phone system worked

throughout Bulawayo and the rest of Matabeleland. Sometimes he got calls in the middle of the night, and he had to take off to the exchange to fix something. But he was also good with other things like radios and TVs. He had passed the City and Guilds of London Institute exam in electrical repairs. He did up the boy's kaya with electricity so that Rosanna, who lives in that small room, is much better off than the real maids and gardeners who have to stay in them: they have to use candlesticks and paraffin stoves and sometimes, they don't even have proper toilet facilities.

Last year, with the help of some apostolics, he built his own workshop between the boy's kaya and the chicken pen using asbestos roof sheeting and bricks that were made by the apostolics in their yard.

The chief constable dismissed his juniors with instructions that they should type out a report, ready for him when he got back to the station.

He stood with Daddy by the fence. "Our white people are losing direction, left, right, and center, Mr. Bishop. Independence has confused them."

Mummy, Daddy, Rosanna, and I had watched the independence ceremony on TV over two years ago now. Prince Charles looked rather sad when they gave him the British flag; his mouth was set very firmly as if to make sure that he would not cry and disgrace the queen. All the previous week *The Herald* had had a list of white Zimbabwean beauties who would make a perfect bride for him.

Mr. Robert Gabriel Mugabe took his oath, his hand firmly on the Bible . . . *and so help me God* . . . and Zimbabwe was born.

Daddy and the chief constable washed their hands under the tap.

"He was smelling heavily of smoke, Mr. Bishop, shaking nonstop, you could think he was suffering from heavy-duty

malaria. We have never had any problems from that place before. It seems the boy has only just come from South Africa for his father's funeral."

They went to sit under the gum tree. I started making the tea in the kitchen, leaving the window wide open. They were sitting only a couple of meters away and the chief constable had a loud voice.

"It was very bad, very bad over there," he went on, settling into his chair with a very loud "humph." "The youngster, only seventeen, came to the station, gave himself up. And you are quite sure you have never seen this boy before?"

I bit my lip and held tightly to my breath, but I didn't hear Daddy's reply because the kettle started whistling.

I brought the tray outside, and the chief constable closed his notebook and put it on the table beside the tray.

They were quiet until I was back inside.

"We found the remains at the back of the house by the boy's kaya. Eighty or so percent of the body burnt, just bone left in some parts."

I saw Daddy turn, and I quickly bent my head by the kitchen sink and pretended to be busy washing the dishes.

"But, madoda, this is a strange case. There is another woman also; the young man brought her first to the hospital before he came to us."

He started scratching his arm and then reached out for a slice of bread that I had spread with butter and strawberry jam.

"It is not at all sure she will survive," the chief constable went on, shaking his head while he chewed with his mouth open. "And we do not know the precise identity of this woman. We are not sure of her age, if she is even local. We have contacted Beitbridge Border Police for the entry documents to see if we can learn anything; the car he was driving has South African number plates."

He was eyeing the second slice, and Daddy told him to please help himself. "He will not talk about her, nothing. Tsh, he will have enough time to think about all this in the stocks."

The chief constable scratched his head and drank some more tea. Some spilled on the saucer, and he poured this back in the cup.

I stood there in the kitchen the chief constable's words creeping inside me.

"Lindiwe . . ."

The glass dropped from my hands.

"Rosanna, you gave me a fright," I scolded, bending down to pick up the pieces.

She was standing by the door, holding an empty perfume bottle. She must have been in the main bedroom all this time.

"Daydreamers will miss the Lord's Banquet," she sang roughly to the tune of The Lord Is My Shepherd, with her eyes closed. She put the bottle on the table and took the broom from the corner.

I couldn't even smile at her impersonation of Mummy. The chief constable's words had suddenly made what had happened next door real. Until now I had been reading about the events in *The Chronicle* like everyone else in Bulawayo, trying to pretend that I didn't know more. I could feel Mrs. McKenzie here, her eyes following me, watching. I was sure her presence would soon bring in the chief constable, who would open his notebook and demand my statement.

"It's good that she has gone to her meeting with Mrs. Ncube. What's wrong, Sisi? Your hand is shaking; you will cut yourself. Leave this, I'll finish."

I liked the way Rosanna called me Sisi; it irritated Mummy. When we were living in Thorngrove, one of Mummy's brothers brought her from Kamativi and said that she was the daughter of so-and-so in the village who had just died.

Could Mummy please look after her? Mummy had no choice but to help.

"What would have possessed that boy to do such a thing?" Mummy asked when we were having supper in the lounge.

"South Africa," said Daddy. "Pure and simple. They pick up fast ways over there. Drugs. Mandrax and even worse."

"But," said Mummy, "to do something like that . . . ?"

I was looking at where Daddy was sitting, thinking that not too long ago that boy had sat in the exact same place, cradling a car radio on his lap, like a cat, waiting for Daddy to take a look at it.

Daddy caught me staring at him and said, "In life, anything can happen."