

Gem Squash Tokoloshe

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Extract

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The Soul Stealer



Something wake him, stir a hunger in his guts, call. He lick the breeze, taste a morsel of fear on the icy air. His glands drip, drip, his cheeks, taut drawn, long to stretch, distort with moans and screams. There's a pain out there.

He pull away from the winter-dead tree, unfurl from its grey knots. Two gnarled roots shake off clump-hard ground, step out. Come spring the tree remain winter-naked, no rain revive a tree house where he choose to sit, to sleep. His walk is long loping, his step wide. Shadow to shadow, no eyes see, no minds believe. Dead Rex is forgotten, long gone from man's memory in this place. No one remember the soul stealer, no one appease him, no one protect himself, no more.

He lick, lick the pain, taste for screams. There's begging about, a pleading. The old souls stir in his gut, they eat at him as he ate them, hungry. He speed along, faster now, a light guide him, a single candle burning flame.

He come to a paint-scabbed door, pick a peeling flake. His fingers slide over splinters and into a crack, he twist and turn and flatten and through, drop silently into the room. Slip into the shadows.

He lick the smells. Paraffin. Fear sweat. Sick smell like dog-dead. Headless chicken spurting blood smells. Hot wet goat smells.

His eyes follow the shadows that leap over man, the light that flick over woman. He seen that man on other days, he been before to this place. Pretending he kind. Dead Rex seen into his dark place, he been expecting him, fresh rot.

Dead Rex lie his head down next to the woman, he know her too, but there be nothing there for him, until now. Now her eyes be fear-wide, all pupil black, and he see a trouble to be making in their reflection. He see more than one feast tonight.

He draw near to her lips, he long to kiss her pain. He pucker and probe and suck her mouth, draw out her screams. His cheeks distend, bulge, fill up with all her noise. The old souls clamour for fresh living, upward surge from his gut. He swallow hard.

Back under the door he slip, into the night. There trouble to be making and he ache to be hurrying up with making it. Into the house and down the passage. He peek in on the mad one, she be sound asleep. No risk her seeing him tonight. He slide up to mosetsana's door, it be open, an invitation, come in, come in. He enters.

Mosetsana sleep. Easy he slip under the covers and into her bed. He stroke her hair, run knuckle-twig fingers through fine tangles, he like mosetsana, she be still pure, blank canvas, torment not yet painted on her soul.

Mouth to ear he spread his lips. A small moan slither out, a little tease into her sweet dream. She whimper, he spill a little more, 'No, baas, no!' She stir, but still not wake. He reach impatience, feel around with wasted tongue to find a scream and flick it to the front. His mouth open full, a cavern of zigzag teeth, he scream. Like a banshee it fly out into mosetsana's ear. She sit, bolt upright. One more moan wriggle out from his lips and she recognize the voice.

She whisper a name, rub eyes, get out of the bed. From shadow to shadow he follow her until they back at the paint-scabbed door.

She listen, he listen with her. A voice plead high, it rise, it wail, the woman-lady voice, mosetsana know this voice, love this voice. She press her ear to the wood, rub her fingers against the peeling paint, she still her breath, listen hard. Someone's crying-moaning, someone's groaning-grunting. Someone speak, a hush speak, a strained speak, like a speak through gritted teeth. A deep voice man-speak.

'Open the door,' Dead Rex whisper in mosetsana's ear, 'open.' She be shaking now, her heart double beating, she feel a wrong thing here. Her small hand push against the worn wood, it don't budge.

'Push harder.' Her feet push against the cold ground, hands press the door. The door snag, and drag, and open a slice. The smells rush out, the paraffin vapours, the dog-dead, the blood smell, the fear stink.

Mosetsana gag, her eyes cry. Ball fists squeeze salt-wet eyes.

'Push, push,' he hiss. She lean her whole self into the door. The slice grow bigger, big enough for mosetsana to look in.

Now she see, the candle flame burning show her.

The fat pig-bristle buttocks, hard pumping, the trouser shackle round his ankles. The dark juice stain on his legs as he mash into woman. Woman bent over bed, dark demon shadows lick her like black dogs. Fat-fingered butcher hand push down her head, fat-fingered butcher hand squeeze her delicate woman wrists, bend her arms back behind her, like broken sticks they look. He groan-grunts, a pig-beast, hard-boiled-egg eyes bulging.

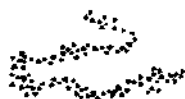
Dead Rex feel mosetsana panic, feel mosetsana pain, feel fear, feel confusion. Her soul scream what her body hold frozen. She want to run away.

'He be hurting her,' Dead Rex whisper. 'Hurt him back.'

PART ONE — 1985



Chapter One



MY MOTHER BELIEVED in magic. She told me stories of the fairies who lived on our farm as she rocked me to sleep at night. On hot summer nights, Mother left the window open, letting in the cool night breeze which carried the smell of citrus to my nostrils. That smell, mixed with the perfume of Mother's lilac-scented soap, brings Dead Rex and Tit Tit Tay into my mind, and makes me look over my shoulder to make sure they're not behind me. I'd lived on the farm from the day I was born, and as long as I could remember, I'd been surrounded by fairies. They lived on the peripheries of my vision, well hidden from my curious eyes, but I knew they were there. Mother was forever warning me about the dangers of bad fairies: 'Don't go into the orchard alone, Tit Tit Tay will steal you and turn you into a monkey child.'

I did not want to be a monkey child, and whenever I was tempted to wander off into the orchard, I only got as far as wiggling the rusted bolt on the low gate before the hairs on my neck prickled in warning, making me run off yelling, 'Shaya' and 'Suka wena' to ward off any fairies that might follow.

The orchard had been abandoned for over a year, ever since Papa had taken a job as a salesman and Moses, our farmhand, had disappeared. It hadn't rained for a long time. I couldn't remember it ever having rained, and Papa said that it was either give up the farm entirely or go on the road. 'It's only until the rains come,' he promised.

Water was the most precious thing on the farm. Mother valued water more than anything else, including her jewellery and our dog Boesman, and sometimes, I thought, even more than me.

'Water is our life,' she said whenever I suggested she turn the hosepipe on me, 'we don't waste it.' I'd watch as all the precious water got sucked up by her vegetables, sticking my bottom lip out as far as I could to demonstrate my dissatisfaction.

When Mother was not tending her vegetables and herbs for the farmers' co-op market behind the town hall, she painted pictures. Sometimes of me, making me sit still, staring ahead unblinking until my eyes burned; sometimes of Boesman, though he wasn't a very good model; but mostly of the fairies. Some days a strangeness would take hold of her, and she would disappear into the orchard for hours, leaving me alone on the farm with only Boesman for company. I didn't mind. Boesman was good company. Papa got Boesman from a man who bred Ridgebacks. He'd given Boesman to Papa free because he wasn't a pure dog; his father was a stray and the litter wouldn't sell. This didn't bother Papa. He said mongrels were stronger because their genes were mixed. Boesman and me celebrated our birthdays together. Mother said that Boesman had come the same day as me, though Papa said it was a few days after. Papa wanted a dog to keep

him company after I arrived. Mother had a baby, so he got himself a dog. Boesman turned out to be more my dog than Papa's. We did everything together, he even slept in my room.

One day, when Mother was in one of her strange moods, I followed her to the orchard gate, hoping she would take me with her to meet the fairies, but she didn't seem to notice that I was there. She just closed the gate behind her and, without looking back, disappeared into the trees. I hung around the gate for a while, talking to Boesman. I told him about Dead Rex. 'Never look him in the eyes,' I said, holding Boesman's head firmly in my hands as I stared into his liquid eyes. 'He'll lock you away inside your head and you'll be able to see everyone else, but no one will be able to see you.' Boesman didn't seem afraid so I continued: 'And you won't be able to move, no matter how hard you try, not your arms or your legs, you won't even be able to turn your head.'

Boesman just looked at me. He wasn't afraid of anything and I felt safe with him.

Just then a high-pitched laugh came from the direction of the orchard, making me jump with fright. Boesman threw himself at the gate, and began to bark frantically. On his hind legs he was almost as tall as a man, but still no match for fairies. The cackle came again, this time closer, and I grabbed Boesman by the collar, pulling him away as hard as I could. 'Run, Boesman, run,' I yelled, but he pulled back, stronger than me.

'Boesman!' I screamed and ran away as fast as I could. I ran back to the house, shouting out all the magic words I could think of, scrambling over the stoep and through the front door, slamming it shut behind me.

The front room was cool and dark, getting no sun in the late afternoon. Dead Rex stared down at me from above the fireplace, his skin dark brown, slick with an oily blue sheen, eyes the same colour as the slimy algae in the water tank. I kept my eyes warily on him to make sure he wasn't moving. I knew the fairies could hide inside Mother's paintings, pretending they were just pictures until I wasn't looking. Then they would slowly move towards me, wanting to steal me away to whatever horror they felt up to that day. I edged towards the door that led into the passage, watching him all the time. Some fairies did terrible things: Dead Rex was the worst of them. He'd once stolen the bricks that raised Moses' bed off the floor, making it low enough for the Tokoloshe to get him. That's what Mother had told me when Moses disappeared last year, after Papa went on the road. .

Tit Tit Tay was just as dangerous, but not because she was mean. There was a painting of Tit Tit Tay in the passage, she looked sad and lonely and she reached out with mud-brown arms towards me. Mother said Tit Tit Tay had once had lots of children, but she had lost them all, hiding them in secret places for safekeeping and forgetting where they were. Her memory was so bad that she couldn't even remember what they looked like, so any child that crossed her path she thought was hers. I ducked quickly under her, feeling her fingers brush my back as I passed out of reach. I breathed a sigh of relief. The rest of the fairies in the passage weren't so bad, and I didn't have to watch them or avoid them as I passed on my way to the kitchen. Even if they did come out of the paintings, the worst they could do was tie my shoelaces together or pull my hair, and I only wore shoes on Sunday, so I wasn't worried.

I sat down on the step outside the back door. Long ago, when we had people who worked for us, before the drought, the back step and the front stoep were polished to a red waxy shine. Now they were dull and faded, more brown than red. I wondered when Mother and Boesman would come home. Mother was the only person who ever saw the fairies. They were her friends and even Dead Rex left her alone, but I was worried about Boesman. Even though he was a big dog, he might not have understood what I'd told him at the orchard gate.

My thoughts were interrupted by a sharp gust of wind. Dust flew into my eyes, blinding me. I rubbed the grit away with fisted hands and noticed great purple clouds moving in from the south. They came quickly and my skin prickled with gooseflesh as the temperature dropped. A blue electric streak ripped across the sky, making the hair on my neck stand up, and I jumped at the loud thunderclap that followed. I'd never seen anything like it in my short life, it seemed to me as though the world was ending. Tears stung the back of my eyes, and then the sky began to cry. A bulbous teardrop hit the ground, throwing up a miniature dust fountain. Then another and another. Soon they were pelting down, loud and furious, drumming the tin roof. A vivid vein of electricity cut across the horizon, illuminating the farm in a queer neon glow and leaching the colour from things so that the world was momentarily monochrome. The sky rumbled like God's hungry stomach. Water gushed out of gutters, evicting rotting leaves and their tenants of spiders and beetles. The sky was angry, constipated by drought. Three years we had suffered under its stifled threats and rumbles, its teasing gatherings of clouds that hung pregnant in the sky and

dispersed without expressing a drop. This storm had momentum built of frustration.

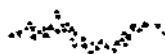
I cowered on the step, terrified, my arms around my head to protect me from the sting of the drops, the cracks of lightning. This was the end and I prayed to God to save me. I said the only prayer I knew, the one I got down on my knees every night with Mother to recite, always the same.

'God, please look over us with kindness, make our vegetables grow, protect us from bad fairies, bring Papa home safe and bring the rain.'

Our prayer had finally been answered, here was the long-absent rain, this was not the end but the beginning.

I stood up and faced the new wet world and stepped tentatively into the full force of the driving rain. Turning my face skywards I let the rain wash away the dust that coated my skin. My T-shirt was soaked in seconds, my hair plastered to my scalp. Rivulets of water ran off my shorts, down my skinny legs and pooled around my narrow feet, having nowhere to go but into the hard-baked ground that couldn't drink fast enough.

Now that I was completely soaked, I wasn't afraid. I ran down towards the orchard gate, wanting to share my baptism. Halfway there I met Mother and Boesman, coming towards the house. She was laughing, the wet fabric of her clothes clinging to her like a second skin, arms outstretched, holding her rolled-up painting up in one hand, gesturing towards the sky.



GEM SQUASH TOKOLOSHE

LATER WE SAT together, Mother, Boesman and I, towelling ourselves off in the kitchen, drinking hot, sweet coffee. The storm had dissipated; now it was just rain, gentle and repetitive. Mother spoke softly of the change rain would bring, of the new leaves that would sprout on the trees, of the oranges we would pick. She said she hoped to have time to plant some roses now, like Grandma English. She said that Papa would come home.