

**LYING PERFECTLY STILL**

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*To all children living with HIV and AIDS.*

*With love and gratitude to Michael, and those of you who helped with writing this book – whether known or unknown, your generosity is woven through the storyline and imprinted on these pages.*

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*“If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.”*

- Indigenous Australian woman cited in “The Manilla Declaration on People’s Participation and Sustainable Development” 1985

## PART ONE



## PROLOGUE

She slides the glass door open and steps onto the bathmat. She was born two months and twenty-two years ago. According to her horoscope, her quests for freedom and adventure are typical for her age. She grabs a towel, pats goosepimples dry. Black curls rest stole-like around her shoulders. The wiry mane gathered into one bunch; she turns. The mirror captures her plump cheeks; the broad nose she dislikes.

A line of gold glints around her neck. She toys with the fine chain bequeathed by her mother. Everything at the cottage soured when the cancer spread and took her mother's life. At sixteen, Koliwe's heart had shattered into icy shards. Then she went straight from washing up at the pub each night to Andrew's bed at the neighbouring farm and found refuge wrapped within his quietly spoken white limbs.

The nightdress beneath her feet is damp from the shower's spray. She forgot to bring clean clothes from her bedroom. Naked, she tiptoes along the landing. Moses' door opens. He wears his blue velvet dressing gown and is blowing his nose into his fingers. Father and daughter are face to face. Disgusted, Koliwe shrinks from him. Her right arm shoots across her breasts, her left hand cradles the triangle of hair beneath her belly.

Confronted by a naked daughter – what to feel? Where to look? Parts of her pear-shaped body he has not seen since she was about ten. She knows that scowl – the crow's feet splaying towards his temples; lines scoured either side of his lips; each tuck and pucker the texture and colour of a wrinkled prune. Moses glares at his daughter. She stumbles backwards until her buttocks brush the banister spindles. Moses shuffles backwards too. His breath reeks of last night's whiskey. His eyes divert to the tears of water dripping to the carpet from her hair.

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She streaks to her bedroom faster than a hare to a burrow. Slams her door shut, slings on underwear, T-shirt; jiggles into jeans.

The springs squeak when she clammers onto the bed. Cupping her chin in both hands, she traces the blanket's detailed pattern spun by single threads. Threads entwine, brown blending with red as a tapestry spreads in folds and furrows, lying like the hills and hollows of the countryside woven into her life. She cannot bring Andrew back to the cottage. Because of her father. Wiping the wetness streaking her cheeks, she swallows the desire to flee. Her aim to help feed the world is naïve at best. Leaving England means breaking with Andrew. Yet the dream to escape, to find a new life, churns and grows, and cannot be suppressed.

She rummages through drawers. Searching for what? Love is not stored here. Her mother's two-tone Chanel dress is wound around photographs taken at her parents' London wedding.

The first Christmas without her mother had all the wrappings with nothing inside.

“Why do you hate me?” her father had asked.

“I don't hate you.”

Koliwe's feelings for him were frozen. *I feel iciness*, she had replied to herself.

She has waited for years for the thaw. Their jealously guarded grief is kept separate from each other. She disentangles the dress, crushes its softness against her cheek. Takes comfort in the black and white print; the lingering odour of sixties glamour. As a small girl, she had marvelled at her mother's body. The fluidity and peculiar curves held an innocence – the pale gleam of magnolia petals in spring. Beside the banister post she pauses. Each year as the months wore on, her pink mother bronzed. They used to sit on the riverbank fanning their faces languidly with one hand, cool as the English countryside in the height of summer.

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The kitchen flagstones are cold. Last night's fire is dead. After that unspeakable encounter, she cannot eat breakfast with her father. Her flesh still tingles from shock. She switches on the radio. Opens windows to let in the morning chorus. The chill rush of dawn air is sweet with a meadow-flower scent; the sky is lightening to coral-pink.

Out she slips onto a path flanked by cow parsley and waist-high nettles. By the time Moses has stomped downstairs, switched off the radio, slammed the windows shut, she is scampering from the cottage like a crab from a breaking wave.

She presses her fingertips to her temples. Worry kept her awake all night. She is cloaked in wretchedness. She should have worn a coat. Everything is clenched.

She fast walks the circular route down the valley and up the hill, her ears deaf to the bull calf bellowing for his mother. Twenty minutes later she is panting up the garden path.

Bursting through the kitchen door, she yells, "Dad!"

Tobacco smoke wreathes its way through the low-ceilinged cottage. The study door is ajar. Her father is in a foul mood, collapsed in his armchair, reading the bible aloud with religious fervour. Her heart sinks. She creeps upstairs, flops onto her bed. Does she belong with this bitter, chaotic man? How her mother loved him goes beyond understanding.

When the grandfather clock strikes eleven, she grabs the car keys from their saucer and drives into town. The blue sky is painted with puffy clouds by the time she strolls to the farm to drop off the weekly groceries.

"I've got your shopping," Koliwe sings from the doorway.

Nutshells splinter under her sandals as she ducks beneath a basket of pansies dangling from a chain above the doorstep.

Len stands with his back to her; flies circle his balding head. The kitchen buzzes with blue-bottles; bunches of herbs and cornflowers hang drying from the ceiling.

"You alright?" Koliwe asks.

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Len turns from packing his pipe. "Hello, little dove. I suppose so, yes."

She gives him her quizzical look. Frequently she finds herself captivated by what, as a child, seemed unexceptional, like the creases in Len's weathered cheeks, the weariness in his liquid brown eyes. An odd surge of affection for him surfaces.

"Joyce," Len calls, "Koliwe's here."

The farmer's wife, a reedy, straight-speaking woman emerging from the cool darkness of the pantry, is graced with little tenderness. She nods, then cocks her head of silvered grey hair at the crushed hazelnut shells. "Squirrels 'ave been busy," she says.

Involuntarily, Koliwe jolts from a movement within.

"What's the matter, your father's health?" Joyce takes up the grocery bag slumped in the doorway.

Koliwe stiffens with pride. "No, it's nothing." Saying goodbye, she shakes her head, but her throat thickens and aches.

Her slight shape turns, disappearing in a flash through the gates. It is the end of summer. Swallows dive-bomb from the farmhouse eaves, warning her, then swoop across the cobbled yard and out over rows of newly cut hay.

Koliwe takes the bridle path where bindweed flowers beside the river. If she squeezes the base of the white buds, drawn in for the close of day, they pop up and out. *Granny-pop-out-of-bed*, her mother used to say. She reaches a leafy hollow. Here, the river's sheen flickers muddy-bronze and mercury, marbling tree trunks with shimmering light. Koliwe's thoughts are leaves prancing on the breeze. Farm labour pays Andrew's rent. Can she be content with his condescending scent of over-ripe apples and matured sweat; brown hair flopping over his forehead? Can she love this man who gives her reassurance when she clasps her body to his, then lets go, her finger-marks dissolving like snow on warm skin? How to construct a different self? She scrambles up the bank. Leave home? When reaching the deep tractor ruts

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leading to the cottage, shrill tones pierce the air. She dashes through the kitchen to the study. The phone stops ringing. The grandfather clock is struck dumb and wants winding.

Where is her father? His drinking seeps into everything.

Sunlight streaks the faded cloth of her father's armchair, a chest of drawers, six scarlet and turquoise Russian dolls, a jewellery box filled with childhood pleasures she once loved to idle through. Beneath the box is his sketchbook. His paintings adorn the walls – a warrior in leopard skins melting into blue-green flora; a woman's dark and delicate face wrapped in tortoiseshell cloth, the aunt she longs to meet – conjure a dream-like quality. Etchings on a copper plate bring to life the relentless flow of the river. The feeling of turbulence. The rush and transparency. What seems important pales to insignificance in the chase of the river – the sparkle of black and white – the craft of the etcher, letting the light through. There is comfort in the familiarity, yet something is wrong. Her sight wanders to his sketch of a little girl peeping from beneath a floppy sunhat. Crosshatching creates shadow on the daisy-patterned frock. The veil of time lifts. He has caught the aloof expression she had as a child. By the mirror she pauses, peers into her restless eyes. Torn between opposing forces – her dark-skinned father. Her mother, white. Belonging to two worlds and yet to none.

“Dad?” she shouts. She climbs the rickety stairs, searches rooms silent and empty. How his swarthy face, lined and toughened with time, grimaces at even the briefest mention of Swaziland – the country he renounces as godforsaken and dangerous.

But she is curious about her ancestry. One day she had asked, “Could you take me?”

“You want too much,” he had snapped, wrinkling his brow.

Hating the father she loves comes as a shock. Neither understands the other. The daily clashes are agony. Both are imprisoned in separate cages of pain. Deaf to what the other

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says. Paralysed by emotional wounds. Blind to new ways of behaving.

She scuffles downstairs, wreathed in the fusty smell of whisky and oils on canvas. Tell-tale signs clutter the circular rosewood table: another empty bottle, an ashtray overflowing with cigarette ends. She stumbles across the bible left open on the carpet. Leviticus 18:6-19: *None of you shall approach any blood relative of his to uncover nakedness; I am the LORD.* The sun's sharp perfection creeps across the contours of her anxious face. Where is her father this time?

Outside, on the overgrown path, she shivers with fury and love. Uncertainty hangs in the air, mingling with a sense of loss. She trips over tractor ruts. Startled sheep scatter. Rain freckles her forehead as she sprints towards the bridle path far below, hemming the river – a rumpled, reflective sheet, flowing beneath the bridge's arches. Halfway down the hillside, the view across the valley opens out. Deep in the English countryside, the changes that come with time have stopped. The scene has the faded look of a Constable painting, still and misted. There are the tall chimneystacks of the grey slate farmhouse, the tumble-down barn, furrows where the manor once stood, hedgerows enfolding twists of road. She runs past the creamy-white cow, swishing its tail around a sucking calf, along the wooded path and towards the thick, green river.

She stares in disbelief at the figure balanced on the high wall of the road bridge. His arms raised to shoulder height; hands outstretched. Given the amount he usually drinks, how has he achieved such a feat, climbed that high? He edges across mossy stones. He cannot swim. Her heart is a clasped fist. Does he realise what he is doing? The pendulum of time stops swinging. Moses' body, a T shape, shifts to the highest arch above the river. His drunken legs buckle. The bridge is a heartbeat away.

She screams and like a stone dropped from a wall Moses falls all the way down, to the river.

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She is bounding between trees in short bursts of explosive speed. Down the grassy slope, between tall bulrushes dappled with sunlight, dashed with shade. Down the bank through thick and silent air. She reaches the pebbly strip of beach, scans the murky depths where the bridge's middle arch slices the water's flowing skin. Here the river is broader, deeper. Where is the splashing, the gasping, the thrashing? Where *is* he?

She slips sandals from her feet, wades into the icy flow. Ducks dart skyward in a quacking whirl of wings. The mottled riverbed glistens crimson and mustard-yellow through disturbed silt. Her stomach tightens; red waves of emotion build. Time is passing. She wades until waist deep, thrusts forwards from the bank with as much force as she can, launching into an extended glide then panicked breaststroke. Swirling water buffets her chin. Foam circles twirl across the river's thick green face, coagulating in the middle, swelling downriver into a turbulent white gush. There is an ominous absence of light where Moses' body bobs beneath the bridge's shadow. Koliwe's arms are sculling. Her feet flutter to tread water, stirring memories of his final painting. The artist submerged in the river, professing his own death. The most troubled face she has ever seen.

Screened by spear-like reeds, his forehead surfaces, the skin varnished with water. She swims against the current. Chin angled upwards, his body rises, eyes drained of life. She reaches out; her fingers brush his chest. The chain of his silver crucifix hooks around her wrist and snaps. She reaches out again. The whale-like mass is too heavy. Already the current's force drags her deeper, will pull her to the depths. There is the thump-thud-thud of her pulse in her ears, the gurgling, gulping river, a giddy sickness of guilt and grief.

She scours the river's course to the curve downstream, one fist clutching her father's broken silver chain. Close by, his striped shirt balloons, then deflates and recedes from sight. As his face rises one last time, she reaches for his collar, grabs at

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his nose. Her heart flutters with determination. But the sodden mass sinks. As swiftly as he appeared, water washes back over. Unbearably, he vanishes. He is gone.

## CHAPTER ONE

Mbabane's pavements swarm with fast-moving hawkers. Stalls sell watermelons, dusky-pink guava; the air is close, hot and scented bittersweet with marula fruit. Amongst street beggars gathered in the plaza is a girl, aged no more than thirteen, in high heels and a ragged indigo dress. She has a wide forehead, a delicate jawline, a neat pear-shaped nose. Car brakes screech as she totters across the road, a child's doll wedged beneath one arm, a six-pack of beer balanced on her head. Koliwe feels unstable. There is something disconcerting about an adolescent girl in an older woman's clothes.

Koliwe remembers at a similar age she was the contradiction: the one drop of colour on a white canvas. She knew of Swaziland only from the few traditional tales she heard when settled upon her father's knee. "Don't ever go to Swaziland," he once told her. "They'll eat you alive." He cut himself from his country. He had been so proud. But he was damaged by the loss.

Here, amidst mansions, iron shacks and match-box houses, his loss has become her burden. Crossing tarmac dusty and red, she is an invisible other. Then the market's cheerful energy smacks her in the face – a pot of cultures, racy colours, the bustle of bargain-hunters; the reek of rubbish, stale urine, decomposing dreams.

Since leaving Oxfordshire she's seen nothing of the culture she expected. Who created this confusion and mess? The men are not dressed like the warriors in her father's paintings, with animal pelts over red loincloths; neither do they carry ox-hide shields, sturdy knobkerries, or feathers in their hair. Cars taxi along the main road. Boys smoke on every street corner, disillusionment in their eyes. Unlike images on the TV news, here their stares cannot be switched off.

She is now in the back of a taxi on the driveway to Colonel Johnston's house, sweeping away from central Mbabane between

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colourful flower beds and sleek green lawns. Electric gates stand sentinel before the gatehouse. A line of taxis waits at a rank. The gates swing open effortlessly, revealing more lavish gardens and another set of gates. The Johnstons' impressive three-storey house with wooden shuttered windows stands on the far side. Roses climb the white-washed walls. The drive meanders round the croquet lawn and a shimmering turquoise swimming pool.

Stout, crimson-faced, Colonel Johnston, in a black dinner jacket with polished brass buttons, is stationed between two bay trees; wispy strands of whitish hair stripe his shiny pate. Like the earthenware pots either side of the doorway, he looks too heavy to move.

He raises a glass of sherry. "You must be... er, the new girl Cameron Cuthbert said was joining the fold."

"Yes, I'm Koliwe." She glances at the invitation card's italicised font. She is just a blur mounting the steps of the wide verandah to his home.

"Come, meet my wife." His hand furtively strokes the smooth olive skin on her shoulder.

Human contact has been scarce in the six months since her father drowned, and the shock of the old man's touch sucks away her breath. The colonel guides her to a roomy kitchen. The floor is tiled black and white in the stark contrast of a chessboard.

"Darling, meet... er..."

"Koliwe." She tilts up her chin defiantly.

The colonel's wife is quite the opposite of him. In an orange and brown floral-print chiffon dress, she darts around freestanding units and worktops cluttered with sharp knives and electrical appliances. She has brought out as much of England as she could carry; so much, in fact, the Swazi staff, in their lace-up shoes, beige tunics and mop caps, look like foreigners in their own country.

"You're African?" Mrs Johnston glances at Koliwe, slicing carrots urgently.

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“English, actually.”

“African,” announces the colonel abruptly, “so am I.” Yet he, too, speaks with a British accent.

Venetian blinds screen the glass door to the back yard. Koliwe squints between the slats to fluttering duets of butterflies before a corrugated iron shack. A maid washes clothes in a metal bowl. Her dress is threadbare; strings of glass beads hang into the grey water. Palm tree fronds bow and beckon, casting afternoon shadows over her back.

A rash of liver spots pattern Mrs Johnston’s wrinkled face, her thinning, lavender-blue hair is piled high in a nest on top of her head. She examines the canapés. “We don’t see God’s creatures in terms of black and white. We simply see God’s creatures,” she says primly, garnishing prawns with lemon and parsley. “Blackie!” she shrieks. “Get out!”

Koliwe jumps, as a Labrador slinks around the kitchen door. Blackie is undeniably black. A nervous friction moves in the air.

“Where in the world has my new blender gone?” Mrs Johnston wheels round, her sequin-blue eyes searching the sideboards. Mountains of crockery are stacked on the drainer. The dishwasher wants emptying. She digs out the liquidiser, then presses lemons into it, squinting in the direction of the pantry while the mechanism moans at full speed.

Another maid emerges from the pantry and places a jar of pickled gherkins amidst a pile of potato peelings. Koliwe presses back against the wall, out of the way.

“I just hope the guests don’t arrive all together.” Mrs Johnston flusters around the maid, mixing olive oil with balsamic vinegar.

Blackie is back again.

“Don’t pester me for food bits, I’m trying to cook,” Mrs Johnston says, looking sternly into the dog’s beseeching eyes.

The colonel trips whimsically around the kitchen. “Anything I can do to help?”

“Do let the poor girl know who else will be coming,” whispers Mrs Johnston. Her hips barrel from side to side and her bosom – two flamingo-pink blancmanges – wobbles in her low-cut dress, as she bends to kiss Blackie’s wet nose.

Following his wife’s instructions, the colonel turns to Koliwe, “There’s... er, an expat couple, they’re from England, or Africa, or wherever.” He glances at his gold wristwatch. “They really should be here.”

His wife yells at Koliwe over the dishwasher’s roar, “You’ll probably know them, my dear.”

The doorbell rings. The guests *have* arrived altogether. First are two Americans and a British-German couple. Mrs Johnston’s expression is animated when she performs the introductions, while the colonel tops up his own glass and downs it in one. Despondency knots in Koliwe’s stomach as more women flock in, all talking theatrically in paisley frocks and shimmering, gossiping waves of satin.

“You’re here with your husband?” asks a wide-girthed woman with jade-green eyes and a chestnut-brown bob.

“No,” Koliwe replies, “I’m with U.K Aid.”

“Koliwe’s new, aren’t you, my dear?” Mrs Johnston swivels Koliwe round to a solid square figure with a ready smile. “Koliwe, meet Jeanette.”

“Yaar.” Jeanette’s rouged and powdered cheeks give her face the crusty appearance of parched, cracked mud.

“Jeanette has recently taken up horse riding,” Mrs Johnston chats on.

“The dressage horse died of a heart attack,” Jeanette says. “It was attacked by a swarm of bees.” Jeanette observes Koliwe as though she is a tropical fish in a display case. “Why did you come to Mbabane? You’re running from a man?”

Quietly Koliwe replies, “I just wanted a fresh start.”

A man in a jazzy red shirt slides into their conversation.

“Jeanette’s husband, Martin,” Mrs Johnston announces.

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Pressing her lips together, Koliwe half-smiles at him.

Martin's eyes swim with a lively enthusiasm; his hair is mousy-brown; skin a raw beef colour. Koliwe tries to think of something clever to say.

"We adore dinghy sailing," Martin tells her. Armed with good looks, he snatches glasses of wine from a silver tray, offers them around. He rocks back and forth like a metronome as he talks on, "Last summer we raced in the Cowes regatta. We capsized a few times but that wasn't a big problem and we soon set sail again, hey." He slips his arm around Jeanette. She steps aside. Both drink at a rate of knots.

Mrs Johnston introduces Koliwe. "Meet John and Clotilda. Clotilda was born in Zimbabwe and is the country's leading dermatologist. John went to Zimbabwe to study malaria, met Clotilda, and stayed. He's now an authority on diseases. As it happens, there's a plague of malarial mosquitoes sweeping through eastern Zimbabwe at the moment, so there will be a lot to talk about!" Mrs Johnston stops in full flow and rushes to the kitchen.

Beyond Clotilda and John is a view of Blackie at the far end of the house on his hind legs, front paws resting on the sideboard, wolfing down carefully prepared canapés. Mrs Johnston flies at her dog, whooping.

A maid emerges from the back doorway. Koliwe swipes a glass of spumante from the silver tray. The skin around the maid's nose wrinkles from squinting, her eyes dissect Koliwe. Koliwe can tell the maid cannot quite place her. The colonel ushers Koliwe into the study.

The study, smelling of sour cigar smoke, is broodingly dark and musty.

"You'll adore our collection of paintings," the colonel declares.

The past – a shadowy, spectral presence – is both visible and invisible in the leather chaise longue with scuffed edges, the

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cushions moulded into the sagging brocade backs of armchairs. Ornate gold lettering gilds the stolid spines of the books lining walls from floor to ceiling.

Generations of the Johnston family's eyes follow her intently, as she passes gold-framed portraits of rectangular faces, narrow noses.

"Dinner will be a feast. Prawns from Mozambique, fillet steaks and halibut with a hollandaise sauce." The colonel uncorks bottles, raising his greying bushy eyebrows, pursing his lips. "The vegetables were grown in the gardens. The wine's a nineteen-seventy-four vintage. I've given the best years of my life to these people; I expect something in return." The colonel glances at Koliwe and cocks an eyebrow suggestively. His hand wanders once more to her shoulder. "You coloured girls are so damnably pretty."

She goes cold, livid, blue, backs into a Chesterfield sofa, then retreats towards a cabinet with shelves displaying Swazi artefacts – stone and wood carvings, exquisite beaded necklaces, decorative amulets.

The colonel lights a cigar. Smoke curls a grey serpent around his freckled forehead. Koliwe's wintry disgust is keen. But it is only six o'clock, too early to leave.

Outside, the sun, a scarlet fury, is setting the sky on fire. Koliwe stares stonily at a collection of prints on the dowdy wallpaper: an elephant herd charging through orange dust plumes; portraits of a Mediterranean-looking girl and boy with sentimental expressions and dewy eyes. Great glassy tears roll down their rosy cheeks.

The last slits of amber light sinking below the horizon fill with memories. The views over the misted valley. The oaks in the copse running down the hillside. Leaves cloaked in autumnal rust. The farmhouse chimneys silhouetted against a hazy sky upon which smoke curls. The rhododendron garden sloping to the river. Her glowing excitement at frost-covered hills. Falling

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snow could not be heard, just the hush when flakes had settled; the creak of branches under their blanket; the flurry of flakes at the windowpane muted by wind on a blustery day, rising above the river's constancy. She found peace when immersed in countryside. But the memories blur when she thinks of her father. Anger and pain were rocks he carried.

Her palms are sweating; a blister throbs behind her sandal straps. The elaborate card announcing the Johnstons' annual dinner party had come as a pleasant surprise, though how or why it arrived is mysterious. Does she bring fresh blood to the expat community? Had the Johnstons connections with U.K Aid?

The colonel's head pokes around the doorway. "Sherry?"

"Still here?" asks Jeanette, who sails in after him.

"When did British aid workers first come to Swaziland?" Koliwe enquires, curious.

Jeanette's smile drops from her face; probing was unexpected. "Who?"

"The missionaries," the colonel bluntly states. "Used to come for God, now they come for money. Couldn't get a job in the United Kingdom – or even in the Kingdom of God – if they wanted to. Standard of life's better in the Kingdom of Swaziland, too."

Mrs Johnston bears a salver of canapés. "Are you getting out enough, dear?" she asks, as though Koliwe is an elderly aunt of whom she has charge. "You know there's a cinema, then there's the theatre."

"Hardly call it that," grunts the colonel. "Did you hear about their last production? Terribly funny. Aileen was on the book. Jenny leapt on stage, leotard back to front, exposed her boobs for all to see. Then—"

"We've heard the productions are surprisingly good," his wife interrupts, with her genteel intonation. The final rays of sunset spread a pomegranate pink blush across her face.

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The study is now smoky and charged with chatter. Wandering from one clump of guests to the next, Koliwe is poised on the edge of a cliff top, with the crowd behind wanting to push her into the wrathful waves below.

“Koliwe Dlamini,” says a tall man, who has stepped in front of her.

They have not met since her interview at U.K Aid’s London office, and a flush rises to her cheeks.

“Koh-lee-way. That’s how you pronounce your name,” Cameron says, more as a statement than a question. He possesses a suave manner; the burr of his Scottish accent, the trilling of the *r*, makes his diction distinctive, as though words are trapped in the back of his mouth. The blue-grey eyes peer at her through the wavy brown and silver-streaked fringe.

Koliwe is relieved by his courtesy and firm handshake. “Am I glad to see you again.”

“And I’m glad you received this evening’s invite,” he says. “I made sure you were on the list. Welcome to Swaziland’s expat colony.” He gestures around the room, his athletic build shielding her from the party. He stands his ground as squarely as a hyena – powerful jaw, thick neck, broad sloping shoulders. “You’re looking forward to starting on Monday?”

“Yes. I arrived a couple of days early, to settle in.”

The maid flits past with more canapés. Sipping sparkling wine, slightly queasy, Koliwe regrets taking two crab canapés. Whenever she takes a mouthful, she feels flecks of meat stick to her cheek.

Cameron’s hand brushes stray ringlets from the side of her face.

“Can I help?” He has pulled a tissue from his pocket and is holding it out for her. With his sad blue-grey eyes and assured demeanour he is, in a way, attractive. “Whatever you do, don’t go out walking in the countryside alone,” he says. “Things might look harmless, but you never know what’s lurking round the

corner.”

She is back on the plane, sliding the *Swazi Times* from the string pocket attached to the seat back, hovering over murder stories on the front page. Shootings, rapes of women and children. Violence crept like an inky stain from each page.

As if on cue, thunder rumbles dramatically and lightning flashes on and off above the mountain ranges. Cameron shrinks against a wall. Never has she seen terror so quickly change a man’s face.

“I’ve a deathly fear of lightning,” he says. “You’ve found me out.” He frisks his jacket for a cigarette. His fingers tremble as he lights the tip; the backs of his hands are streaked with veins. “There are more lightning-related fatalities here than anywhere else. The first time I saw someone struck, it made an impression. I was only twelve.” He reaches for his drink, and steps towards her as the thunder abates. “We’ll have to get together,” he says, tossing back the liquid in his glass, giving a hardened grin. “I’m used to this place. Locals know me. I speak siSwati, of course. With a name like Koliwe Dlamini, I take it you do too.”

“Actually, I don’t.” Koliwe hopes he hasn’t detected embarrassment in her voice. “Do you live in town?” she asks quickly.

“My home’s Mbabane, but I also have a hunting lodge in the mountains.”

She says they must talk again and excuses herself for the ladies’ room.

Dust shimmers on the looking glass; a young woman stares out. Half her face shiny with makeup, the other half distant and dark. The girl she strived to be has vanished. She tucks curls behind her ears, straightens the Chanel dress. The reflection twists, turns. Neat, sophisticated – the perfect impression. She liked the way Cameron was interested in her. She accentuates the lines of her eyes, brushes eyelashes with mascara, paints lips crimson. Vignettes from their first meeting filter into her

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thoughts like the slits of afternoon sun that had strobed him as he moved.

The whine of a barrel organ drifted through the traffic, up the steps and into the entrance hall of the shabby London Edwardian townhouse with its winding staircase, flaking paint. She found it hard not to reflect upon previous job interviews that had fallen through, even harder to hope. Suspended in a mirror on the third-floor landing, an aspect of herself she had not seen before hovered between confidence and fear. Calm one moment. Anxious the next. Naïve pouty mouth; brown eyes framed by ringlets, haunted by a past she wants to forget.

The receptionist, an ambitious graduate no older than herself, with hair scraped from her sharp face into a ponytail, glanced up from the desk. “Mr Cuthbert is waiting for you,” she said in honeyed tones. “U.K Aid’s on the top floor.”

Koliwe continued upstairs as though stepping on thin ice.

Cameron’s office was rustic, minimalist: a woven mat, wood flooring, executive desk, designer chair. He had a thin face of simplicity and strength, thick grey-brown hair. He stood up, adjusted his black tie; a red HIV ribbon was pinned to the lapel of his seal-grey suit.

“Koliwe Dlamini? *Miss* Dlamini?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Call me Cameron.” He gestured for her to take a chair. Clearing his desk of files, setting aside the nameplate that read: *Cameron Cuthbert, Project Coordinator*, he assumed a thoughtful expression and sat down, rearranging papers. A busy man on his way up the ladder. His tone was formal and low, “I must apologise on Mr Callow’s behalf. Mr Callow’s head of our Southern Africa branch. He can’t be here today. He is meeting new recruits upon their arrival in Swaziland.”

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His arched eyebrows raised in anxious expectation, his sight flitted across her interview clothes – an apricot-coloured linen jacket, matching pencil skirt and a flame-coloured scarf looped loosely around her neck – eyes, darker than her chestnut-brown skin. She slid her wiry limbs onto the chair, hitching down the close-fitting skirt, trying to hide her knees.

Strips of light, soft as burnt sienna, the slant of the sun through the blinds, caught his cheek with a tinge of amber and livened the glow to his skin. “You’re just twenty-three?” he asked. “Tell me about yourself.”

Nervousness crept up her spine and out through her words. “I know there’ll be challenges.” She shunted her chair closer to his desk. “I don’t want to be kept in a protective bubble...”

Cameron nodded encouragement. “You’re flexible? Determined?”

Her face stiffened and grew suspiciously solemn. “Oh, I’m good at teamwork, and I was popular at university and in school.” This was not entirely true.

“The contract is for one year.” He uncovered a map on his desk and pointed out southern Africa. Sliding his finger around it in a full circle, he homed in on Swaziland.

Koliwe’s one wish was to go there. The Kingdom of Swaziland, surrounded on three sides by South Africa and to the east by Mozambique. Spindly markings on the map stretched before her like nerves, and then southern Africa came to life. Vein-like rivers crossed a skeleton of boundaries, shading shaped the contours of mountains, a web of etchings and broken lines revealed roadways intersecting towns.

Cameron said authoritatively, “Swaziland has the last absolute monarchy in Africa.” He sat erect, head poised forward as he questioned her knowledge of the region, her reasons for wanting to go.

She expressed sympathy for the poor, justice for the persecuted, the necessity for a socio-economic approach when

implementing change.

“You have experience of working overseas?”

Six months’ voluntary work at the U.K Aid charity shop hadn’t exactly qualified her for the position of Programme Development Officer, and she had failed to mention she was half-Swazi in her covering letter. She should have managed things differently. But she was hooked by the quest to find family. He lolled back – a fisherman reeling in a catch. He cupped a large hand to his lips, subtly cleared his throat. Why travel so far? Give up the life she knows?

She talked impulsively of the southern African people’s oppression, the need for democracy. “Half the Swazi nation follows the traditional way of life,” she explained, “the other half is working to eliminate King Mswati.”

“You’ve heard of Swaziland’s freedom-fighter?”

“Sipho Matsebula.”

“Sipho’s a notorious troublemaker,” Cameron snapped. Then he slipped with ease to the next subject and the mood in the room mellowed to induction mode. “U.K Aid, as you’ll know, puts women and children first. Our mission as an NGO is to protect human rights. Our main focus areas are gender empowerment. Education. Health.” He talked about the Development Officer’s day-to-day tasks – monitoring projects, evaluating impact, the importance of research, writing thorough reports, the agency’s hands-on approach, how most training took place in the field. His voice trailed away under the urgent ring of his telephone. He grasped the receiver. “Hello, Sindy? Yes.”

His office overlooked the north edge of Lambeth Park. A Ferris wheel glittered in the late afternoon light, dominating the scene. Trees screened the rest of the fair with their leafy mosaic of ambers, pimentos, greenish-browns. Soon the clocks would go back and the days grow even shorter.

Cameron replaced the receiver and their eyes locked for a second. “Why do you want the job?” he asked.

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“I want to help African people.” That sounded crass.

The aromas of tobacco, wood polish and eau-de-Cologne spiced the office air.

His voice became tuned harmoniously with her emotions. “You’re one of those people who believes Africa – an entire continent – is helpless without the West’s support?”

“I didn’t say that. Development can go wrong...” Rumpled and disarranged, she stuttered, “A-a-aid should be given without strings attached.”

“Do you have any questions?” he said hurriedly.

She remained cowed. “Um, no.” Tension and regret built. She should have done more research, come up with hard facts.

His eyes narrowed. “Why Swaziland in particular?”

“My father died... He was from there. I’ve always wanted to go – sorry.” Her throat contracted. Why say that? Out of her depth she gulped, and swallowed only air. Applying for this job would have been out of the question when her father was alive. By mentioning him, she had removed emotional clothes. The damage was done. She would never hear back.

“Some applicants’ qualifications are purely academic,” a note of sympathy lifted Cameron’s tone.

Koliwe tried to look calm, although, like a fragile ornament, she felt she would shatter if dropped. “I fear I’ll become like Dad, detached, always living here in England.”

“How long is it since you lost your dad?”

“Two months.” Twisting her hands in the ends of her scarf, she focused upon her lap. “Of course, I only realised his importance...”

“...after he was gone,” Cameron interrupted warmly. “That’s often the way. You’ll need to be gentle with yourself. Sometimes you’ll wonder who you are, where you belong.” His eyes went deep into hers, softly this time. “You really want this job, don’t you?”

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This man got what she was reaching for – a journey that would turn her inside out. “People think I can’t put up with hardships, because I’m well-spoken and went to boarding school.” She concentrated on the map, longing to dissolve into the mountains, to travel to the time and place of her father’s parents. But the past was too solid. She was trembling at the edges. To steady herself she focused on the posters of malnourished children, their distended stomachs, protruding ribs, bloated heads, pleading eyes. “All I think about is *them*. Is their suffering our fault?”

Cameron’s expression did not give a clue. He smiled charitably. Then looked up and away, as if the answers were written in pink mackerel clouds across the sky.

Her thigh muscles tensed. Emotions were shocks coursing her body. Although she grew up on English soil, a Swazi life she hadn’t experienced ran through her veins. She clung to the chair. Alone in her home country. Alone in the world. She had tracked down Rachel – the aunt her father rarely mentioned. The aunt she had a right to know – from contact details held by the lawyer handling Moses’ will. There was no telephone number, only a Johannesburg PO box address.

Shifting in the chair, she prepared to stand. “When will I hear?”

“About the job? Tomorrow.” Cameron reached out a hand to shake. “That colour you’re wearing suits you.” Their hands clasped together. “Sindy,” he called to the receptionist, “show Miss Dlamini out.” He looked Koliwe in the eye as if they shared a secret. “See you very soon,” he said with finality.

A flurry of news sheets bearing Princess Diana’s worn face somersaulted over the pavement’s large square slabs. *Death of a Princess* fluttered against the railings at the bottom of the stone steps. Crossing the road, Koliwe threaded between cars slow-moving as cattle, and the scent of deep-fried doughnuts and hot dogs with onions floated in the air.

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“Dinner is served,” calls Mrs Johnston from the dining room.

“Well announced!” cries the colonel.

The light fades fast, her sobriety with it. Outside, points of light sparkle from the darkness of mountains. The room reflected back is dense with guests and smoke. Cameron’s greyish curls are higher than other guests’ heads. From this hilltop, Mbabane is a jewel box. She feels tawdry close up, and as elusive as air. Yet she experiences a sudden sense of elation. Swaziland, at last.

The dinner table is a bleary haze of rich food and expensive wines. Mrs. Johnston has arranged silver candelabras across the white linen tablecloth. Candles lit, Clotilda’s eyes sparkle. A diamond necklace and earrings spray her alabaster skin with glittering crystalline drops.

Jeanette’s breasts threaten to burst from her dress as she picks up her wine glass. “We often have big family dos with my sisters and their children,” Jeanette says, nudging Clotilda. “We have a nice bungalow in one of the former white suburbs with a garden and an open bar.”

“Often we have family parties of fifty or more, with my sisters, brothers, their wives and children,” Clotilda cuts in, with a mincing tone. “On Monday, I was so full from the last night’s braai, I couldn’t take breakfast. After our dogs had sniffed at the boerewors and bacon, I had to throw them out to Mimi, the maid.”

Howls of laughter make naked candle flames billow and shudder. Mrs Johnston seats herself beside Koliwe. Everything Mrs Johnston says seems to be double-edged. Koliwe tries to ask where it is safe to go, whether she should drive alone, but her hostess is absorbed in conversation with Martin, and Cameron has migrated to the far end of the table. Koliwe turns to Clotilda, who basks in glimmering candlelight on her other side.

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“For what we are about to receive,” Mrs Johnston gracefully bows her head, “may the Lord make us truly grateful.”

Amens ripple around the dining room.

Unfolding his napkin, the colonel makes a broad gesture with his hand across the tabletop, indicating the food. “Do start everybody. Bon appétit.”

Heads bow with intent and there are satisfied munching sounds. Koliwe notices with muted horror the other guests’ slanting looks. She tries a polite smile. A maid brings four wine bottles from a cooler and sloshes wine into glasses.

“Swaziland’s problem is AIDS,” John says to Koliwe. “One man has three, maybe four girlfriends and each of his girlfriends has three or four boyfriends. If that first man is HIV positive, he passes the virus to all his girlfriends, who pass it on to their boyfriends. That’s how HIV spreads. A tap’s been left on, U.K Aid’s programmes can only mop up the mess.”

“How insensitive can you be, John darling,” Clotilda says, “when we’ve just had the worst flood in our house? All your talk of mopping up messes...” She leans towards Koliwe conspiratorially. “Last year, when the rains came, acres of our gardens were utterly destroyed. Roses, all in flower, ruined. Worst day ever.”

“Haven’t your roses grown back?” Koliwe asks.

“Books can be claimed through insurance. Furnishings can be dried. *You can’t dry roses!*”

“I have experience of many countries and cultures of Africa,” Martin proffers – he must be on his second bottle of red. “On my travels, I’ve developed a keen interest in African fiction and poetry, making it my vocation to learn about, read and meet as many African writers as I can.”

The colonel looks over his shoulder anxiously, snorting, “Where’s the maid?” She is nowhere to be seen. He grabs an antique silver platter from the warmer to replenish guests’ plates with vegetables, bestowing carrots and green beans

generously, finishing the round with his wife. As if she has a long-standing fear of being poisoned, she avoids the food he serves by positioning it neatly in a pile at the plate's edge.

"You've heard what Siphon Matsebula said about the love test?" Clotilda directs her question at Martin.

When Koliwe repeats, "Siphon Matsebula?" all heads turn to her.

"He isn't helping anyone except himself," Martin adds, with beaming face. "Let them have their king, his wives, the unfairness, his hypocrisy. Let them have their mud huts and spears. All the kaffirs want is a bloodbath." His face glows ruddy; his red-rimmed eyes fill with malice, and he chuckles uneasily. "Hei, only joking of course."

Clotilda applauds, her jewellery twinkling in the shrunken candles' light.

The colonel blurts out, "Tribalism's all wrong."

"African leaders are corrupt and inept," his wife cuts across.

"Hei, first things first," Martin exclaims, "and the first step is for the king to remove that ring from his nose!"

Discomfort drips through Koliwe's veins. More wine flows. The Swaziland she glimpsed in her father's stories – children with polished mealie-fattened faces, their hair plaited painfully neat – simply isn't here. To have thought she would be at home in his birth place was a naïve dream.

Dessert is another guilt trip – a marshmallowy tart coated in dark chocolate with a sweet Moscato d'Asti to drink.

Guests migrate from the dining room to a stately drawing room, fanning out across a silk Kashmir rug. A maid glides around with a cheeseboard bearing a soft and hard selection, crackers and fruits. Cameron emerges from a cluster sipping liqueur at the opposite end of the room.

Koliwe has been chatting drunkenly to a woman in a silky, strapless, navy-blue dress that flows to the floor like a waterfall. Did the woman say her name was Maureen? Glossy

locks frame her pretty shoulders; marble eyes set in a porcelain face. Maureen's accent is intriguing. Koliwe cannot distinguish where it is from; snatches break into odd words, hint, and waver through sentences intermittently. The drawing room swirls; Koliwe's balance is off.

Cameron's eyes hover over her face and away, with the blue-green flash of a dragonfly. He is an oasis of calm. With the trace of a smile, he cocks his head closer to hers, and says intuitively, "These people can drag one down."

Silently, she nods, and combs knotted strands of hair that want taming. Heading for the doorway, she catches Colonel Johnston's sleeve. "Thank you for a lovely evening."

The colonel grins, strutting like a cockerel across the verandah.

"Yes, it was," his wife repeats, "lovely."

The turquoise-blue swimming pool is illuminated by underwater lights. The Johnstons call the guard to escort Koliwe to a taxi, but the guard has gone to feed the dogs. Koliwe goes out alone.

The majestic wall of mountains stands stoic in the pearly darkness of moonlight. Lightning still crackles above the ridges; instead of breaking, the storm is moving further away. There is an extraordinary beauty to this vast landscape, even at night. Her father had talked of the land as *inkomo*, the beast of the nation, and the hills take on the shapes of animals as though they are alive – to her they certainly seem to be, with their high-ridged backs and curved shapes stretching to eternity.

The distance to the taxi rank is barely decreasing. The ground is strangely alien beneath her feet; a spinning sensation replaces gravity – she is orbiting earth from space. She glances back to the house lit up by lanterns stuck in the neatly mown lawn. Something jolts within her. The expat life will not include her. No invitations to the Country Club will ever arrive. The realisation comes almost as a relief, and yet leaves her feeling

fragile. The distant mass of mountainous rock is magnified, mocks her with its power and dignity. It has taken on a character she is reacting to and resisting against; even as she is drawn in, she finds herself wanting to fight back. The moon above, an eye, follows her every move.

Engine purring, a rusted red Land Rover rattles towards the gateway and draws up alongside her.

“Koliwe,” Cameron calls, “want a lift?”

She has trouble judging where her feet should go as she clammers into the passenger seat.

“You’re staying at Pine View Flats?”

“That’s right,” she replies drowsily.

Cameron’s shadow looms across her; as Project Coordinator, he wields enormous power. Timidly, Koliwe smiles; now they are alone together.

The guard, shrinking from the intense glare of the Land Rover’s beam, punches numbers into a pin pad to activate the electric gates. Koliwe glances over her shoulder and across Mbabane, hoping her dream of a new life in Swaziland will not appear like the city lights, which appear somehow changed. Menacing.

An Alsations’ eyes wink red in the guard’s torchlight. The headlights pour two silvery streams through the darkness as the vehicle moves steadily onto the road.

“Most of the land here is owned by blacks,” Cameron says, firmly gripping the steering wheel. He has put on a tan leather bomber jacket. “Land disputes are commonplace. You’ll know all about that, of course.”

“My dad never talked about these things.” Ashamed of her ignorance, she swallows the knot tightening her throat.

Cameron seems to know everything about Swaziland; everything she wants to understand.

Her father had said he was from the Dlamini clan. A question drifts to the front of her mind. “What’s the difference between

a clan and a tribe?”

“A clan is a related group of people. A tribe shares the same cultural values, yet may not be related at all.”

“My surname, Dlamini, I’ve noticed, is common here. Is the king always a Dlamini?”

“The king comes from the largest clan, Dlamini,” Cameron continues to explain. “You’ll see,” he forewarns, “there’s antagonism towards the monarchy.”

Gazing at the dark city streets she wonders whether her family are related to the monarchy.

“And your name is Xolile Dlamini...” he says.

Hearing her name pronounced with the authentic Xhosa click, she experiences a weird sensation of drifting through the past. She navigates her tongue around different sounds – *Kohleeway Koliwe Xolile* – mouthing her own name. Then she is swamped by a real sense of failure. “Dad came from Swaziland. He was only eighteen when he left. I was born in England. To me, as a child, this country was barely more than a name.”

She catches her reflection in the window, imposed upon the shapes of office blocks, shacks, trees. Her bushy hair blown about like a thicket of tumbleweed.

“Have you family here?” Cameron inquires.

“An aunt. Rachel. I’m trying to find her, though I don’t have an address.” She curls a strand of hair behind an ear, then sits on her fingers, pressing them tightly down.

All around is darkness now the moon is hidden by cloud.

“You went to boarding school.” Cameron’s gaze remains fixed on the road. His gold watch winks in the dashboard’s glow as he rotates his wrist. “Expensive. Very.”

They cruise through a side street of closed kiosks and old wooden houses on stilts.

She opens the window wider. Warm air blasts across her forehead and messes with her hair. When she looks up, the mountain walls are vaguely visible, jagged against a moonless

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sky, then the topmost ridges give way to darkness. The loneliness stirring within her mixes with fear and want. She fears the shape of things to come. Fears strange beasts will skulk out from thickets. Fears the weight of the unknown, where the pitch black within her is blacker than the night.

After saying goodbye, she ascends the silent staircase, unlocks the bedsit door. Feeling flattened like a portrait or a photograph, she gazes at the street below. Boys, swanking along, dissolve into darkness. Her fingers touch her mother's precious necklace. If she could reach with her hand back through the past six years, clutch one of those sleepy summery days at the cottage near Oxford with her mother and transport her encapsulated in that time to here, Koliwe would do so, for the lights which guide her are dim.

The faint hope of finding her aunt, Rachel, glimmers.

Then she is running through the silver-grey mist of rain. Is she saving her father's life? Or causing him to fall?