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DOMINEE DONGES, with a new book under his arm, sneaked off to his study and shut the door firmly behind him, hoping to keep the Koeksisters at bay. Being a man of the cloth didn't necessarily make one more patient with fellow human beings, no matter how good their intentions or how vulnerable their hearts. And, after all, he was an ordinary mortal, not a saint. It was a pity to be inside on a spring day in Limpopo, but a new book was such a delicious pleasure and solitude such a rare commodity in the parsonage.

Donges examined the cloth binding with faded gilt lettering on the spine and then sniffed the rough yellow pages. This was a rare first edition of *Tales of the Waterberg* by Eugène Marais, which promised stories of a time when the dominee's world was younger and wilder.

The dominee had been born in the Waterberg on a farm near the town of Nylsdorp. Images of that landscape still stayed with him – the morning light on the cliffs, the sharp-toed steenbok in the watermelon fields, the purple haze on the mountains in the evening – as if he'd just closed the farm gate and driven to town to buy cattle dip and maize meal.

The youngest son of a deeply religious father, Donges had dutifully left the family farm to study theology in Pretoria and had then returned to take charge of a large, prosperous congregation in Nylsdorp. But

the young dominee, dismayed by racist acts perpetrated by his own God-fearing congregation, began to do missionary work in Padimeng township as a form of reconciliation. When he received rude letters from the synod about his activities, he understood that he and the church no longer saw eye to eye. Donges gradually lost support of the more conservative congregation members.

Many years later, when the Truth and Reconciliation Commission had done its work and his flock sought his assurance that they were still, at heart, good people, Donges encouraged them to prove this by helping to rebuild their community. In response to his well-intentioned initiatives, most of his remaining congregation fled to the brown-brick solidity of the Unified Church in a nearby town, where the pastor assured them that they were not personally to blame for apartheid, that God was still firmly on their side, and that they had no need to do anything that made them feel uncomfortable.

With his wife Hetta, Donges continued to christen, marry and bury his depleted congregation. But the townspeople no longer brought gifts to the parsonage to make it rain nor did they elect him to prominent committees. For his part, the elderly dominee happily accepted this quiet life, taking comfort in the small pleasures of playing chess and reading his treasured books.

Donges's greatest challenge nowadays was to avoid the female bustle of the parsonage. A sharp knock at his study door told him he'd been unsuccessful. It opened without invitation. The Koeksister-in-chief, Eliza Haasbroek, came in. She was one of the women who, since Hetta's operation, had volunteered to help her with the duties of a pastor's wife. But Eliza, an aspirant dominee, avoided as best she could all cake baking, flower arranging and tea making. Earnest, plump and bespectacled, with pink choir-boy cheeks, she looked as wholesome as a milk tart. But anger against the synod lurked just below her wholesome exterior. In protest against their refusing to allow female dominees into the NK, Eliza dressed in little black suits with white blouses which protruded at the neckline like a dog collar,

and she carried a fingered copy of the dominee's old theology notes around the parsonage in anticipation of bumping into him.

'Oh. Dominee is in here,' said Eliza accusingly, pushing her glasses up her little nose with a plump pink finger.

'I am working on my sermon for this Sunday,' he lied, setting his new book aside.

'Well, that's one of the things I wanted to talk to you about,' said Eliza, settling herself uninvited on the old chair opposite him.

Eliza, avid student of theology and church history, often had radical ideas for sermons. The dominee's, while they were interesting, were often scholarly and therefore over the heads of most of the congregation.

'I was thinking since last Sunday that we should make our sermons a bit more ... er ... relevant, Dominee,' she suggested, taking him by surprise.

'Relevant in what way?'

'Dominee mustn't take offence, but I hear rumblings among the congregation that after the bad things that happen to them in the week they want to feel comforted and uplifted, not made to feel guilty.'

'Indeed.' This was Donges's standard phrase when he was restraining himself from being impolite.

'I know you say that we must help to rebuild our community and address all the wrongs that were done in the past and all that stuff,' Eliza explained. 'But people are getting a bit restless with that point of view.'

'Should we ignore the past sufferings of our neighbours?' he asked rather stiffly.

His congregation, he felt, was under the misapprehension that the jagged edges of the past could be smoothed over with a good dose of forgetfulness.

'Not exactly, no.' She frowned, trying to marshal her thoughts.

'Because, in fact, I was considering inviting Pastor Sepoko from Padimeng to come and talk to the congregation, since his Afrikaans is very good. He can tell them how he was assaulted by young men

of this very church – still in their church clothes – for being involved in a minor accident. I feel that as a congregation we should offer him a belated apology, because that incident left him with some damage to his eyesight.’

‘Oh no, Dominee, I don’t think that’s a good idea,’ said Eliza. ‘The congregation is a bit tired of hearing all that stuff about apartheid. They want black people to, you know, get over it.’

‘Well then, by the same token we Afrikaners should get over the Boer War and all the resentments it fostered. What will they say when I tell them to forget the atrocities committed against their own families, when the cemetery in the town is a daily reminder of those years?’

Eliza crumpled a tissue in her hands and sniffed. It was, she seemed to imply, not at all the same thing.

‘Perhaps we are quicker to forget the wrongs we commit than those perpetrated against us,’ the pastor suggested, smarting a little at her criticism.

‘Yes, but it’s not fair, because young people like myself aren’t responsible for what happened in the past.’

Donges sighed. It was an uncomfortable inheritance for young people, like being born with a club foot or a facial blemish, because skin colour couldn’t be hidden or disguised.

‘Well I’ll give it some thought,’ he conceded.

‘Thanks, Dominee. The other thing I wanted to ask was whether you have had any reply to our letter to the synod about my acceptance as a dominee?’

‘No, I haven’t, my dear.’

‘Can’t Dominee phone them up and ask when they are going to make a decision?’

‘As you know, I’ve written a submission to them but they only sit for major issues in the second month of the new year, so it can only be discussed then. You could consider trying to start a petition in your support.’

‘Shouldn’t we put up banners and things, to lobby for equal rights

for female divinity students? Other churches have given in to that kind of pressure.'

'You should get as many people involved as you can to support you. Not only do I encourage you, but you can make unlimited use the church for your women's rights rallies.'

'Well, the problem is there aren't any women's rights supporters around here. I mean, I can't find any other women who want to be dominees. They all want to do the girlie things like nursery-school teaching and becoming beauticians. And everyone keeps telling me to imagine what it would be like to have a dominee in a maternity dress, as if, as if ...'

'As if pregnancy were something to be ashamed of? But that's partly what I'm talking about. It takes time to change people's ideas.'

Without a warning knock the study door burst open to reveal a wispy girl with round eyes, wearing a small tent.

'Dominee's coffee's ready in the kitchen,' she announced.

'Thank you, Santie,' he said – but his thanks were drowned by the girl yelling in a shrill mother's voice: 'Basjan, where are you?'

'Probably putting his finger in an electrical socket again,' muttered Eliza.

They trailed behind Santie through the shabby parsonage lounge, which the church had seen fit to decorate with portraits of previous incumbents. Donges thought them a sour-looking lot – though his own portrait, which would be added posthumously, wouldn't in any way improve the display.