

No one answers when he presses number 42. He decides to phone, but the number is only taking a message.

‘Hi, this is Johnson. My phone is not available now. Leave a message and I will get back to you. Love you. Bye.’ He presses the flat’s number again, long and hard, and hears a woman’s voice. She is still talking when Johnson appears like a prisoner in Oz from behind the security bars. The flat is sparsely decorated. The floors are tiled with nothing to soften them but three or four ethnic pots. A coffee table with a glass top, a wall unit and a gommagomma suite are the only pieces of furniture in the lounge. The walls are bare. Johnson introduces him to Batsi, a woman with a big ass in tight jeans and a friendly, sensitive smile. She is a civil servant and a Venda. Johnson is acting the terminally spoilt boy. He calls her Mama and gives her hugs so affectionate that you have to doubt if they are really lovers.

‘You make the food, Mama?’ Johnson asks. ‘What you make for us?’ It is fish with rice. ‘That’s good, Mama, you can bring it just now.’

Batsi sinks into a gommagomma chair, reading a book, *A Year in Provence*. It is not for her to take part in men’s talk.

He can’t just ignore her like a waitress. ‘So, I’ve been to Mapungubwe, Batsi.’

Her face lights up. ‘Oh, you’ve been to Mapungubwe?’ she asks, astonished. ‘Why?’

‘Well, because it is the precursor to Zimbabwe, the most ancient ruins in southern Africa.’

Batsi laughs approvingly. ‘Oh, you must know the Venda people, then,’ she says.

‘Well, that’s debatable.’ Apartheid ministers loved going to the hill of Mapungubwe. It used to be army territory, close to the special camp where the army administered electric shocks to gays and addicts to make them fit in, mend their ways.

The top brass held braais on the potshards and glass beads of Mapungubwe, drinking brandy and Coke in the sunset. He could just hear them.

‘Og, boys, just look a bit at how the sun is setting behind that big baobab tree now!’ Everyone would stare in obedience as the bush spread out around them towards night.

‘That is mos how a sunset must look like. Just look there! Look, look, look, there, there! Now ... *now* it’s gone! I tell you, men, this ... *this* is Africa for you!’

He and Batsi talk about Venda, the Land of Myth and Legend, and then she is quiet again, reading. Johnson has been listening without interest, waiting for the return of his toy.

‘You can bring the food, Mama, we are hungry,’ he says.

The dinner table is a larger version of the coffee table and Batsi serves them before disappearing into a bedroom.

‘So, how are you doing, Johnson?’

‘Fine, Thabo Mbeki, you onnarstan, for me it’s fine, maybe for you it’s not fine. You onnarstan, for everyone, it’s different, it’s ...’

‘Relative,’ he says.

‘Thabo Mbeki!’ Johnson exclaims with respect and scorn, teasing him.

He and Johnson have had their run-ins before, about money. He has worked it out. As soon as Johnson knows his company is appreciated, the meter starts running. An hour spent in a downtown bar where you buy him two beers will amount to an IOU of, say, twenty rand. Add to this the free entry Johnson arranged for him at The Curve sometimes.

One day they are driving around town when Johnson makes a call on his phone and instructs him to drive to the top of Prinsloo Street. It is where the Marais family and President Burgers had lived in the 1860s and Jeanne’s uncle and auntie with the Chihuahua a century later. There are high-rise apartment blocks there now and a building called Drie Lelies, a former college hostel. A skyscraping slum. He stops in front of it and Johnson gets out, speaking to a suspicious-looking character.

‘The accused were driving a suspicious vehicle.’ This was what the

police used to say when testifying in court about blacks driving a car. Or a Valiant. Johnson gets back in.

‘Give me two hundred rand, now, I need it now,’ he barks, as if this is the amount that will prevent him from being sold into slavery. Usually resistant to coercion, he places two blue ones in Johnson’s hand, who gets out again without gratitude or surprise.

Johnson disappears into Drie Lelies, leaving him to be regarded suspiciously by people parking in front of the budget gym across the road.

When Johnson re-emerges, he says he will give back the money, but he does not see Johnson for a long time after that. One day he is driving up Paul Kruger Street towards the station. A Fiat Uno cuts in from Minnaar Street, turning down Paul Kruger, perilously close to his car. It is Johnson, smiling and waving, as if they are having fun at the stock cars. The money must have been for a fake driver’s licence.

When he sees him again a while later he tells Johnson that it is wrong to use people, wrong to break the law. He is not a good friend. Johnson regards him compassionately and says only, ‘Thabo Mbeki.’ He, in Johnson’s eyes, is simply being obstreperous and short of oil. He has no reason to feel aggrieved. Johnson has been generous enough to allow him into the dreaded Nigerian psyche. It obviously comes at a price. He was infinitely more interesting than employment equity yuppies talking about hi-tech gadgets, golf and gambling. If there is one thing Johnson does not have, it is a chip on the shoulder. Not about size and not about race. The late afternoon sun darts in through a window of Batsi’s flat and is reflected off Johnson’s diamond earstuds and front teeth capped with gold.

‘You enjoy the food, Thabo Mbeki?’ he asks. ‘That’s nice.’ He is unpredictable. Like most Nigerians, he does not do coke himself. He wonders if Johnson would be run-of-the-mill in Nigeria and gives a guffaw. The thought reminds him of his cousin, a doctor and an ex-recce in the South African army, now practising in an Eastern Cape town, a fiercely competitive man. He stayed at his cousin’s cottage on the Transkei coast once, Mgazana, trying to steer the conversation away from any potential rivalry. He talked about his life in the city, how dull

it was. He knew that this would fit in with the general Cape view of upcountry living. Gotvol von die Trancevol.

‘No, ag, it’s OK there now,’ he says to his cousin, ‘much better than before. The people are still a bit duh, though. Sometimes I hang out with people who’ve come from Mozambique, Angola or the Congo. There are lots of them and they can be fun.’

His cousin looks at him askance. ‘Ja, I spent a lot of time with Angolans in the war,’ he says. ‘They are high-class kaffers, those.’

He scours the horizon in panic, but it is too late for retreat. His cousin is gaining momentum. ‘Do you know Africa?’ he asks, and his glance becomes penetrating.

He makes movements with his head that could mean both no and yes.

‘No, I mean do you really know it?’ his cousin asks.

‘Yes, yes,’ he says meekly. ‘No, I know it.’

‘Where have you been in Africa?’ He starts to tell him, then thinks, fuck no, he’s not going to count off African countries on his fingers like books from the New Testament for the benefit of some crazed inquisitor. He stops and mumbles something like, no, it’s OK, never mind, he supposes Africa means different things to different people.

But his cousin throws whatever he has on his lap, a fishing reel maybe, onto the floor and stands up. ‘OK, fok, I am only trying to warn you!’ he shouts and rushes off to oversee the maintenance of his property.

He can’t say why that question irks him so. It is the last straw. He gets in his car and drives off into the sunset.

‘Thabo Mbeki, Thabo Mbeki,’ Johnson is saying, trying to get his attention, ‘are you coming to the club tonight?’

He stares at him. He prefers the company of Johnson to that of a generous ...

‘No, Johnson,’ he says, ‘I bring messages from Cirkene. She’s told you about her picnic and wants you to come along. I am here to make sure you do.’

‘Yes, she’s crazy. What is there at this place, what are we going to do there?’ he asks, not lowering his voice to spare Batsi’s feelings in the next room.

‘A piece of star hit the earth there, Johnson, two hundred thousand years ago, and formed a crater you can walk into.’ He looks around, searching for inspiration. ‘Do you see that bowl over there?’ He points to one of Batsi’s pots narrowing down from the rim to the base. ‘Well, just like that.’

‘Oh, I onnarstan, Johnson says, ‘then you look at the star?’

‘No, Johnson, the star has disappeared. It is the explosion of the star we will look at.’

Johnson curls his lip into a sneer. ‘You’re crazy, you know that. I need to work and find money, I can’t go on a picnic to look at something that is not there.’

‘Johnson,’ he admonishes, ‘that is the reason why you are not happy, why this continent is not happy, we do not respect what is around us. We do not respect friendship, it is just using, using, using. Come, the crowd from The Curve will be there, your family.’ He knows the outing will not be nearly as funny without Johnson.

A while after seeing Johnson in the purple Uno in Minnaar Street, he finds himself at the club again, hanging at the bar with a few other renegades who have drifted there in quiet desperation. Johnson walks by chatting to two girls, patrolling. He says hello to Johnson who embraces him as a long-lost friend.

‘Where is the two hundred rand you took from me, thief?’ he wants to know, a little drunk. Next thing he finds his back arched over a yellow Beetle outside, Johnson’s massive hand on his throttle, eyes glaring. He stares back in disdain and feels the fingers tighten around his throat before letting go. It is almost a caress. He is no challenge to Johnson physically. He goes back inside to rejoin the motley crew, keeping his pose, but decides to leave after a while. As he drives off, Johnson, surrounded by the other bouncers, is still glaring and sneering. It looks like a scene from *West Side Story*. Later Johnson will tell him that he made him very upset that night, very annoyed.

‘Tell her I will come,’ he says, ‘but you will owe me.’

‘Ag, Johnson, grow up, I owe you fuck-all.’ He lowers his voice. ‘It is you who have made love talk with Cirkene and now she wants you to come. You make these women want you and then you say I owe you.’

‘No, Harry, still you don’t onnarstan. In Nigeria we do not divorce all the time like you people here in South Africa. If the relationship is not the happy one, the friends help them so that they can stay together. That is our tradition. Not like here. And that is what I am doing. I am helping Cirkene and her man. No, Thabo Mbeki, it is you, *you* who must grow up, you onnarstan?’

Oh, what am I letting myself in for? he thinks. He remembers what Johnson told him about his childhood. He grew up as an Obu in a small village in Nigeria. His father, the chief, had more than twenty children. Johnson’s mother died at his birth, making him the child with the lowest status in the clan. He could not remember his father ever speaking to him directly. He was a big man, his father, bigger even than Johnson, and vigorous. He might have preferred an orphanage.

He can relate to that. He finds the manner of most men in his culture to be harsh, petty and disparaging. They often resort to ridicule or mock aggression to thwart any originality. At least Johnson’s dad was passionate about reggae and the struggle against apartheid.

Once a year his family would drive for seven hours to visit his mother’s elder brother in the semi-desert of the Kalahari, his malume. His uncle is different, a farmer with long trousers who does not vote for the National or the Conservative Party. He likes taking you along on his drives to outlying cattle posts and putting you to the test. He will, for instance, spurt off in his bakkie from the gate you had just closed. It is a contest between you and a handful of Tswana boys to see who can run fastest. His beautiful cousin, Vanessa, smiles mysteriously from the back of the bakkie at his defeat. But there is no humiliation.

It is not the same as his phys-ed teacher who tries to hit him with the ball at the net when playing doubles against him. Just because he knows what the islands of Corsica, Elba and St Helena have in common and the teacher does not. His uncle would ridicule all of them in the same manner and make him and the tough boys of the veld regard each other with laughter and affection.

He has seven or eight Kalahari farms, ruling with relatively benevolent despotism over a kingdom of red dunes, thorn trees and cattle. On each of the farms he has stationed a headman. These are Tswanas, a Nama, a

Koranna and Das, a small and wise man of what can only be pure San blood. Sometimes they all came to Sonstraal, the farm his uncle and family live on, to dip cattle or remove the tails of sheep. He sits with them at the fire at night. Never again in his life does he feel so at home, so accepted, as around that fire. These men educated by the veld, ou Ratel, Oneboy, Mosiman, Petrus and Das, understand him better than anyone else. They know he is going to have to face challenges all of his own.

‘Thabo Mbeki, hey, what’s it with you, wena?’ Johnson says. He likes to use words from the indigenous languages for street cred. ‘Are you coming tonight, to the club? I will funa for you.’

‘No,’ he says, ‘I’m working tomorrow, but we’ll pick you up on Sunday at ten. You get home from the club, what, at six? Perfect, then you can sleep four hours.’

‘Yes, da’s fine. Batsi!’ he calls. ‘Mama? We are going.’ She comes out and he thanks her for the meal. ‘Are you coming to the club tonight?’ Johnson asks her.

‘No, I can’t come, I don’t have money.’

‘Don’t worry, she’ll come.’ He laughs with a broad grin and gives her a hug as they leave.

‘Tell Cirkene I will give her a call,’ he shouts as they part.

‘A missed call, you mean.’ He walks through the flatland of Sunnyside towards his car, a faint headache throbbing in his temples. This is the road he used to walk with his pa to the Volkskas Bank on a Saturday morning.

He remembers his dad telling him how Sunnyside had come to be. The old Scotsman who owned the farm in the 1860s had decided to take out a large bond on it when property prices started to rise. He went to Europe and lived the high life, London, Paris, Monte Carlo. Talk about cards and bingo. A trip of months became an odyssey of years. He neglected to pay interest on the bond and ignored cables and letters sent to Europe. The bond was cancelled and the farm Sunnyside cut up into erven, plots. When old Mr Mears returned, he found a city. But it was no longer his.

He walks along Mears Street towards his car.