

LOVE SPELLS FOOD

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KWAZULU is afraid of its children, with their unnerving stares, their shrugs and silences. And the big boys out of work with nothing to do — they frighten their own parents.

'But at the dam', Majozi told the meeting, 'they don't look dangerous'. Nobody can be dangerous going brrrmmm brrrmmm up a dam wall. The Executive gave a sigh of understanding. If dam-building could defuse dynamite, then the under-16's had better go on qualifying for famine relief. While the relief lasted.

That was the worry. How much longer would supplies of mealie meal be trundled in at our gate? Since July more than 153 tons of food had arrived at Mdukutshani — which sounds like a lot of food until you count the people. The first gift of four tons, piled up in our office, seemed enough to start a supermarket. Had we shared it out equally among the families on our shortlist, however, each food parcel would have contained something like this: 1 teabag, 2 spoons of jam, 3 biscuits, $\frac{1}{2}$ kilogram of mealie meal . . .

The short list, of course, stretched into a long list, and each name added became a signal for battle. Most of the skirmishes seemed to take place at the office door.

'If she qualifies, why not me?' Plaintiffs and petitioners brought routine to a standstill.

One well-dressed stranger arrived in a taxi to negotiate supplies for his area. 'My people are in a bad way', he told us. 'If you'll send the food, I'll see it goes where it's needed'. On his suit the man wore an Inkatha badge. He said he was regional director of the Zulu Cultural Liberation Movement. If he were, the region had yet to hear about it. 'That old bastard', snorted Mhlongo. 'He'll steal anything. I know him well. Give him food and he'll sell it as fast as he gets hold of it'. In fact before any food arrived, the man was selling places on his list at 25 cents a time. Were his customers refunded when no supplies materialised?

We grew steel around our hearts, trying to block out the whines and quavers, threats and insults. Even those who received parcels were dissatisfied. Phumaphi Njokwe went to Tugela Ferry to report us to the authorities. 'She complains she is getting a small supply', wrote the social worker.

Of course there were genuine cases. There were pathetic people who deserved help. There were children eating one meal a day, and old folk whose stomachs rattled with the water they swallowed to

feel full. However, we almost lost sight of them behind the rising dusts of squabbles.

'Food just means trouble', Oscar Myeni said when he asked to be released from further food distribution. Philemon Khoza threw in his resignation too. 'In my area the people now claim it is government food', he said. 'They tell me government food is for everyone. I have no right to discriminate'

It is one thing to act Father Christmas, another to play the role of God. God might cope with the human wrangle jangle. Our men couldn't. There had to be an end of gifts, they agreed. Instead of food-for-nothing it would be food-for-work. Philemon Khoza went home feeling the tension of the past weeks lifting at last.

On September 30 he and his wife were sharing an evening cup of tea when the door of their hut was smashed open and two shots were fired. Khoza was hit in the neck and abdomen. He died in hospital. Until the unknown gunman is found, the reason for the attack will be a mystery. However, the district is convinced Khoza was killed simply because he was in charge of handing out food.

Stunned by the death of their colleague, our directors did not push the work-for-food projects. Although the schemes got off to a slow start, by November dams and furrows were under construction in many different areas, and 1 194 people were working for food.

At Mseleni 450 men and women were clearing a canal to lead water 15 kilometres to their homes. At Umhlumba 43 hopefuls were preparing a garden in case it ever rained. There were 36 women busy at Mdukutshani's fishponds. Nhlalakahle had 96 starting a dam. At Mthatheni . . .

Mthatheni! The directors sat up straight. There was no problem about Mthatheni. Or rather there were so many problems about that place that they were all agreed. No more meal. Mthatheni was out.

Mthatheni is ruled by ladies. — And there are some who say openly that if the Mthatheni experience is anything to go by, it is just as well the world is ruled by men. 'Big shots', said Mhlongo. 'They think they're big shots! etting others to make their gardens for them — and still getting meal!' 'That Saraphina came to the office this week', put in Majozi, 'to complain that we had not been paying her R2 every time she came to ask for seed or meal'. A babble of indignation rose from the room.

Mthatheni ladies hotly deny it, but they are better off than other areas. For a start, they live along the road, which means that those who want work have a chance to climb onto the farmers' lorries which fetch labour daily. Next, Mthatheni is right on the Tugela River, where the government has laid out irrigated gardens. Not everyone has a plot, however. Some families have six. Many have no land at all. Saraphina is one of the lucky ones with four. Last year she sat in on the barefoot university classes. This year she asked for help. There was no help for individuals she was told, only groups. And so the Mthatheni ladies group came into being with the lofty purpose, of 'helping people who struggle to get food and those who are in need. Which means that those of you who have more than one garden must share with those who have none', Neil explained, 'and if you work together, helping each other, the land can be prepared without paying for a tractor'. Mthatheni would get places with community spirit.

'We understand', said the ladies, and set to work hoeing the garden of the wealthiest among them. Next they dug over the plots of the committee members. Mthatheni was seething with controversy when our commission of inquiry was appointed. The findings were no surprise to anyone. Mthatheni's leading ladies had kept every centimetre of their multi-plots to themselves. All they had shared with their poorer sisters was the digging.

That is why another investigating committee sneaked off before sunrise to catch KwaDimbi unawares. Something seemed to be wrong there too.

KwaDimbi people live at least two hours walk away from the nearest road, tucked into the corners of wooded valleys, perched on dizzy ridges. cManqomfini they call their high country. The land where the grass lark plays. Not many strangers come visiting — KwaDimbi is too far off the beaten track.

The first time we went to KwaDimbi we were specially invited, and induna Buthelezi was waiting to guide us over the flat rocks of the Dimbi stream up to a high waterfall. In its short plunge from the top of the mountain down, Dimbi's clear water makes many leaps, splashing through overhanging ferns, dropping past banks of puffball white haemanthus. Despite the vigour of its upper reaches, however, the stream has died long before it levels out on the valley floor.

'We have never seen our stream like this', Buthelezi gestured from a boulder at the edge of the waterfall. The echo of his words was tossed between the precipices, disturbing a flock of hade-dahs. The birds flapped into the air and circled, bugling their annoyance. The cliffs took up the echoes of their cries too.

The technical business was not complicated. KwaDimbi's men had already been to examine the Nomoya dam. They had decided that if a wall could be thrown across the top of the waterfall, water could be stored for piping to gardens in the dry valley lower down. All they wanted to know

was where to position the wall. And later, when we were drinking beer in the scant shade of a euphorbia on the hillside, Buthelezi broached the subject of mealie meal. It would be a long time before they could expect productive gardens. Was there any chance of providing them with mealie meal in between?

KwaDimbi was registered as a new work-for-food scheme with 18 workers. Another 18 bags of meal.

Not 18, corrected the office staff soon afterwards. 114. KwaDimbi claimed there were 114 people working at the waterfall. Well of course we knew they were cheating. There wasn't room for all those people standing together on that narrow lip of rock. There was certainly no room for that many working. We decided to take KwaDimbi by surprise, making an unplanned call, coming from an unexpected direction, over the top of the mountain.

And the dam workers were certainly surprised to see us. Surprised, but pleased. Two frail grandmothers waved from the bank, where they were lifting rocks onto the heads of six tiny girls. The dam wall had been completed according to plan, a stone-and-earth structure notched into the banks. However KwaDimbi's engineers had decided that support walls for the banks were also necessary, and a gang of boys were shifting rock for building.

'Is it all right? Have we done the right thing?' asked Mrs Nvelase, KwaDimbi's very own Mrs Thatcher, a powerful organiser, pusher and prodder. While we made the correct sounds of admiration we did a quick count of those present. Only 20. Ha!

'Let me take you down', offered our hostess, and unsuspecting we left the waterfall, and began a slip-slide journey along the mountainside, following a newly-dug pipeline. (But we had never talked of a pipeline. That was to be surveyed later)! About a kilometre further on we skidded to a stop in a shower of gravel as we rounded a corner — and bumped into a second workparty. This one took a bit longer to count. There were more than 80.

'What do you think?' beamed induna Buthelezi. 'You must look at the dam'. Dam? We had seen the dam. But we followed him as he led the way through the bush, past more people at work with axes, clearing a track. And when we emerged at the bottom of the hill — there was a dam being shaped out of flint with buckets and basins.

Sorry KwaDimbi. You have left us ashamed. Especially as there is no more mealie meal. White sympathy ran out ahead of the work.

'Well we always warned the people this might happen', said Majozi. 'We all know Whites are quickly bored'. And he set off to visit 1 194 people to announce that from now on it will be work-for-nothing.

Love is a four letter word spelt FOOD, said a headline in The Star which arrived this week. No, it had nothing to do with drought relief. Gourmet chef Robert Carrier was in Johannesburg to open a R450 000 Food and Drink Fair.