

There will be no songs this year

—A short story—

Mandla Langa

The sun was readying itself, like a beaten fighter, to go and rest in the West; this mean't then, that the sun — the summerheat — was at its hottest, but I could not move where I sat on those plastic woven hotel chairs. I looked at the edifice of the cinema, the people creating long shadows, hurrying, *hurrying* like their dwellings were on fire, no different from refugees fleeing a besieged city, a city, on fire. There was some buzzing in the air — which means there was a lot of noise that filled the Mall and the perimeter — but in all this confused hullabaloo there was an under-current of a great and uneasy silence.

Christmas had come and gone, it had claimed many lives, of course. While Mary's boy child, Jesus Christ was being born — presumably for the 1979th time — my twin-brother was being killed in a shoot-out with the police ominously enough in Betlehem, in the Orange Free State. He was twenty-nine (29) with a wife and two children, a boy and a girl. I have a wife and one child, a boy. Although there was a lot that could have made our two families to be close to each other, Zweli's family was as distant from mine as is the earth from the sun. Of course, we did have some cordial get-togethers — which were

to me a veritable pain in the neck — there was no conceivable way for Dudu, my wife, and Thoko, Zweli's wife, to hit it off, and this did not go unnoticed by both Zweli and I; this is no glib or coy praise of Dudu, but while she was a school-teacher in a High School, Thoko was working on the reception desk of one of the more well known travel agencies. She, then was exposed more to glamour and its attendant fringe benefits than my wife ever could have been. This was one of the things that caused Zweli to be a very quiet man, he also drank a lot. I glanced at my watch, it was 6.05 p.m. I had a 6.15 p.m. appointment with my brother's wife. I ordered another beer, looking at the door as young African girls — dressed in colours that were certainly meant to offend the eye — entered with proprietary grips on their expatriate companions, some old enough to be these hapless hunters' grandfathers.

I looked away, feeling the amber froth I was drinking threatening to hit the roof of my head. I didn't know what Thoko wanted to see me for, although I could come up with a shrewd guess. I had always treated her as my brother's wife, keeping her at a distance. The only time we really sat down and

had a long talk was when I was sent by the school — I'm also a teacher — to attend a conference in London; she had been very helpful, giving me tips on travelling. But, now, I sincerely didn't know what was expected of me; as far as I was concerned there was nothing that bound us together; if she needed money I would give her and not expect to be paid back: this would incense Dudu, obviously — *Whose husband are you?* — but the matter would rest there; she wouldn't know anything about my bank balance, which wasn't much, nor would she tamper with my mail.

Thoko came in, still in the travel agency uniform, looked around until she saw my raised hand. She came over to where I was sitting. I pulled out a chair for her, and she sat down.

If she needed money I would give her and not expect to be paid back: this would incense Dudu, obviously — *Whose husband are you?* — but the matter would rest there; she wouldn't know anything about my bank balance, which wasn't much, nor would she tamper with my mail.

» I hope,» she said, »I haven't kept you waiting long?»

»No,» I said, looking at my watch, »you made it on time.»

»You look haggard, Mkhonto,» she said, »aren't you working a little bit too much?»

»I guess it's a strain of all that has happened.» I paused.

»What will you drink?» I realised, then, that I knew absolutely nothing about Thoko.

»I see you're having a beer,» she said, »but that messes my bladder. I think



I'll have a double whisky and soda.»
 »I'm up to here with beer myself, I think I'll have the same.»
 I signalled for the waiter and placed our orders.

There was laughter on the adjoining tables where the prostitutes and the expatriates sat; it was loud and raucous, this laughter, and infinitely mocking. I wondered what happened to the minds of these girls in the loneliness of their bed, in the midnight hour, did they understand what drove all these sons of the masters to such havens; did they perceive that some people are born lonely and unhappy and with this great capacity for flight? Our orders came and Thoko took a sip from her drink; I gulped mine and told the waiter who was waiting to be paid to bring another round. Thoko looked at me.

»You must think,» she said, »that I'm a cruel and heartless bitch, don't you, Mkhonto?»

»Why,» I asked, almost choking on my liquor, »do you say that?»

I'm certain,» Thoko said, »that you sincerely think that I'm somehow responsible for Zweli's death. I'm not, for instance, attired in mourning apparel: I would be acting like a hypocrite if I did that. I loved Zweli, but he was too much of a dreamer. He carried on like the whole world owed him a living, playing his saxophone and writing that undecipherable poetry: the kids had to eat, and as far as I can remember children have never been supported by a note or stanza. I thought that if I left him he would take stock and grow up. I'm sorry he had to go to the lengths he did.» She paused. I wondered whether her drink still tasted like a drink. »I suppose Zweli couldn't take it anymore. In a sense what happened between him and the police was a form of suicide.»

I wondered what happened to the minds of these girls in the loneliness of their bed, in the midnight hour: they understand what drove all these sons of the masters to such havens; did they perceive that some people are born lonely and unhappy and with this great capacity for flight?

I nodded and looked again at the people around us. It was getting cooler, and the lights were on. I thought of Zweli; I remembered his postcards from all these exotic places. I remembered that Zweli sounded, increasingly, like

I loved Zweli, but he was too much of a dreamer. He carried on like the whole world owed him a living, playing his saxophone and writing that undecipherable poetry: the kids had to eat, and as far as I can remember children have never been supported by a note or stanza.

someone I certainly didn't know. *My brother I'm here with comrades. I respect what you're involved in, but have you ever thought about the South African revolution?* This one was from Algiers.

I told Thoko that I was not the one to judge people; if she regarded herself as Zweli's murderer that was her own personal albatross; I wasn't about to help her with that problem. My brother left home, the same as I did, and came out here and she, his wife, came here. He went back to South Africa, an assault rifle in hand, and shot two camouflaged policemen. The press dubbed him a terrorist and murderer. I called him brother. He singularly put our name on the annals; I am still, now, proud of him. All this I told Thoko. She finished her drink, stood up and left without saying goodbye.

I heard the scream of tortured tyres and rushed down the stairs, knocking one madman who frequents the Hotel, until I got to the road thinking, *My God, what have I done?* I saw the shoe of the injured lady; it wasn't Thoko.

»Don't worry about me, Mkhonto,» she said. »I'll be all right.»

»Let's go,» I said, taking her hand, »let's go.»