

THE LIVING AND DEAD

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LEBONA felt the letter burning in his pocket. Since he had picked it up along the railway line it had nagged at him no end.

He would open it during lunch, he thought. Meantime he must continue with his work, which was to pick up rubbish that people continuously threw on the platform and on the railway tracks. Lebona used a piece of wire with a ball of tar stuck on at the end. One didn't need to bend. One only pressed the ball of tar onto a piece of paper or any other rubbish, detached it and threw it into a bag hanging from the shoulder.

A number of things crossed Lebona's mind: the man who had died the previous afternoon. Died, just like that. How could a man just die like that—like a rat or a mere dog?

The workers' rush was over. Only a few women sat on the benches on the platform. One was following his movements with her eyes. She sat there, so fat, he observed, looking at him. Just like a woman. She just sat and looked at you for no reason; probably because of an idle mind; maybe she was thinking about everything. Still he knew if he were a fly she might look at him all day. But no, not the letter. She mustn't be thinking about it. The letter in his pocket. It wasn't hers—no, it couldn't be; he had picked it up lower down the line; she could say what she liked, but it wasn't her letter.

That man: who would have thought a man could die just as if death were in one's pocket or throat all the time?

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Stoffel Visser was angry; angry because he felt foolish. Everything had gone wrong. And right through his university career Stoffel Visser had been taught that things must go right, to the last detail.

"Calm yourself, Stoffel."

"Such mistakes shouldn't ever occur."

"It wouldn't do to let everybody else down, would it?"

"Don't preach, for God's sake!"

Doppie Fourie helped himself to more whisky.

"It's all Jackson's fault," Stoffel said. "He goes out yesterday and instead of being here in the evening to prepare supper he doesn't come. This morning he's still not here, and I can't get my bloody breakfast in time because I've to do it myself,

And you know I *must* have a good breakfast everyday. To make it worse my clock is out of order, bugged up, man, and the bloody Jackson's not here to wake me up. So I oversleep—that's what happens—after last night's braaivleis, you know. It's five o'clock on a Friday morning, and the bastard hasn't turned up yet. How could I be in time to give Rens the document before the Cape Town train left this morning."

"Now I think of it, Stoffel," said Fourie, "I can't help thinking how serious the whole thing is. Now the Minister can't have the report to think about it before the session begins. What do we do next?"

"There's still time enough to post it by express mail." Doppie Fourie looked grave.

"You don't have to look as if the sky was about to fall," he said, rather to himself than to his friend. "Have another whisky." Stoffel poured out for himself and his friend.

"What a good piece of work we did, Doppie!"

"Bloody good. Did you see this?" Fourie showed his pal a daily newspaper, pointing his trembling finger at a report. The item said that Africans had held a "roaring party" in a suburban house while the white family were out. There had been feasting and music and dancing.

"See, you see now," said Stoffel, unable to contain his emotions. "Just what I told these fellows in the commission. Some of them are so wooden-headed they won't understand simple things like kaffirs swarming over our suburbs, living there, gambling there, breeding there, drinking there and sleeping there with their girls. They won't understand, these stupid fools, until the kaffirs enter their houses and boss them about and sleep with white girls. What's to happen to white civilization?"

"Don't make another speech, Stoffel. We've talked about this so long in the commission I'm simply choking with it.

"Look here, Doppie Fourie, *ou kèrel*, you deceive yourself to think I want to hear myself talk."

"I didn't mean that, Stoffel. But of course you have always been very clever. I envy you for your brains. You always have a ready answer to a problem. Anyhow, I don't promise to be an obedient listener tonight. I just want to drink."

"C'mon *ou kèrel*, you know you want to listen. If I feel pressed to speak you must listen, like or not." Doppie looked up at Stoffel, this frail-looking man with an artist's face and an intellect that seldom rose to the surface. "None of our

rugby-playing type with their bravado," Doppie thought. Often he hated himself for feeling so inferior. And all through his friend's miniature oration Doppie's face showed a deep hurt. "Let me tell you this, *ou kèrel*," Stoffel said, "you know I'd rather be touring the whole world and meeting peoples and cultures and perhaps be learning some art myself—I know you don't believe a thing I'm saying—instead of rotting in this hole and tolerating the numskulls I'm compelled to work with on committees. Doppie, there must be hundreds of our people who'd rather be doing something else they love best. But we're all tied to some bucking bronco and we must like it while we're still there and work ourselves up into a national attitude. And we've to keep talking, man. We haven't much time to waste looking at both sides of the question like these stupid *rooinekke*. That's why it doesn't pay anymore to pretend we're being just and fair to the kaffir by controlling him. No use even trying to tell him he's going to like living in enclosures.

"Isn't it because we know what the kaffir wants that we must call a halt to his ambitious wants? The danger, as I see it, *ou kèrel*, isn't merely in the kaffir's increasing anger and desperation. It also lies in our tendency as whites to believe that what we tell him is the truth. And this might drive us to sleep one day—a fatal day, I tell you. It's necessary to keep talking, Doppie, so's to keep jolting the whites into a sharp awareness. It's dangerously easy for the public to forget and go to sleep."

Doppie clapped his hands in half-dazed, half-mocking, half-admiring applause. At such times he never knew what word could sum up Stoffel Visser. A genius?—yes, he must be. And then Stoffel would say things he had so often heard from others. Ag, I knew it—just like all of us—ordinarily stubborn behind those deep-set eyes. And thinking so gave Doppie a measure of comfort. He distrusted complex human beings because they evaded labels. Life would be so much nicer if one could just take a label out of the pocket and tack it on the lapel of a man's coat. Like the one a lady daintily pins on you to show that you've dropped a coin into her collecting box. As a badge of charity.

"We can't talk too much, *ou kèrel*. We haven't said the last word in that report on kaffir servants in the suburbs."

Day and night for three months Stoffel Visser had worked hard for the commission he was secretary of—the Social Affairs commission of his Christian Protestant Party. The report of

the commission was to have been handed to Tollen Rens, their representative in Parliament, who, in turn, had to discuss it with a member of the Cabinet. A rigorous remedy was necessary, it was suggested, for what Stoffel had continually impressed on the minds of his cronies as "an ugly situation".

He could have chopped his own head off for failing to keep his appointment with Tollen Rens. And all through Jackson's not coming to wake him up and give him the breakfast he was used to enjoying with an unflagging appetite.

"Right, Stoffel, see you tomorrow at the office." Doppie Fourie was leaving. Quite drunk. He turned on his heel a bit as he made for the door, a vacant smile playing on his lips.

Although the two men had been friends for a long time, Doppie Fourie could never stop himself from feeling humiliated after a serious talk with Stoffel. Visser always overwhelmed him, beat him down and trampled on him with his superior intellect. The more he drank in order to blunt the edge of the pain Stoffel unwittingly caused him, the deeper was the hurt Doppie felt whenever they had been talking shop. Still, if Fourie never had the strength of mind to wrench himself from Stoffel's grip, his friend did all he could to preserve their companionship, if only as an exhaust pipe for his mental energy.

Stoffel's mind slowly came back to his rooms—Jackson in particular. He liked Jackson, his cook, who had served him with the devotion of a trained animal and ministered to all his bachelor whims and eating habits for four years. As he lived in a flat, it was not necessary for Jackson to clean the house. This was the work of the cleaner hired by Stoffel's landlord.

Jackson had taken his usual Thursday off. He had gone to Shanty Town, where his mother-in-law lived with his two children, in order to fetch them and take them to the zoo. He had promised so many times to take them there. His wife worked in another suburb. She couldn't go with them to the zoo because, she said, she had the children's sewing to finish.

This was the second time that Jackson had not turned up when he was expected after taking a day off. But the first time he had come the following morning, all apologies. Where could the confounded kaffir be, Stoffel wondered. But he was too busy trying to adjust his mood to the new situation to think of the different things that might have happened to Jackson.

Stoffel's mind turned around in circles without ever coming to a fixed point. It was this, that, and then everything. His

head was ringing with the voices he had heard so many times at recent meetings. Angry voices of residents who were gradually being incensed by speakers like him; frantic voices that demanded that the number of servants in each household be brought down because it wouldn't do for blacks to run the suburbs from their quarters in European backyards.

But there were also angry voices from other meetings: if you take the servants away, how are they going to travel daily to be at work on time, before we leave for work ourselves? Other voices: who told you there are too many natives in our yards? Then others: we want to keep as many servants as we can afford.

And the voices became angrier and angrier, roaring like a sea in the distance and coming nearer and nearer to shatter his complacency. The voices spoke different languages, different arguments, often using different premises to assert the same principles. They spoke in soft, mild tones and in urgent and hysterical moods.

The mind turned around the basic arguments in a turmoil: you shall not, we will; we can, you can't; they shall not, they shall; why must they? why musn't they? 'Some of these kaffir-lovers, of course, hate the thought of having to forego the fat feudal comfort of having cheap labour within easy reach when we remove black servants to their own locations,' Stoffel mused.

And amid these voices he saw himself working and sweating to create a theory to defend ready-made attitudes, stock attitudes that various people had each in their own time planted in him: his mother, his father, his brothers, his friends, his schoolmasters, his university professors and all the others who claimed him as their own. He was fully conscious of the whole process in his mind. Things had to be done with conviction or not at all.

Then, even before he knew it, those voices became an echo of other voices coming down through the centuries: the echo of gunfire, cannon, wagon wheels as they ground away over stone and sand; the echo of hate and vengeance. All he felt was something in his blood which groped back through the corridors of history to pick up some of the broken threads that linked his life with a terrible past. He surrendered himself to it all, to this violent desire to remain part of a brutal historic past, lest he should be crushed by the brutal necessities of the present, lest he should be forced to lose his identity: Almighty God, no,

no! Unconsciously he was trying to pile on layers of crocodile hide over his flesh to protect himself against thoughts or feelings that might some day in the vague future threaten to hurt.

When he woke from a stupor, Stoffel Visser remembered Jackson's wife over at Greenside. He had not asked her if she knew where his servant was. He jumped up and dialled on his telephone. He called Virginia's employer and asked him. No, Virginia didn't know where her husband was. As far as she knew her husband had told her the previous Sunday that he was going to take the children to the zoo. What could have happened to her husband, she wanted to know. Why hadn't he telephoned the police? Why hadn't he phoned Virginia in the morning? Virginia's master asked him these and several other questions. He got annoyed because he couldn't answer them.

None of the suburban police stations or Marshall Square station had Jackson's name in their charge books. They would let him know "if anything turned up." A young voice from one police station said perhaps Stoffel's "kaffir" had gone to sleep with his "maid" elsewhere and had forgotten to turn up for work. Or, he suggested, Jackson might be under a hangover in the location. "You know what these kaffirs are." And he laughed with a thin sickly voice. Stoffel banged the receiver down. There was a light knock at the door of his flat. When he opened with anticipation he saw an African standing erect, hat in hand.

"Yes?"

"Yes, baas."

"What do you want?"

"I bring you this, baas," handing a letter to the white man, while he thought: *just like those white men who work for the railways.*

"Whose is this? It has Jackson's name on the envelope. Where did you find it?"

"I was clean the line, baas. Um pick up papers and rubbish on railway line at Park Stish. 'Um think of something as um work. Then I pick up this. I ask *my-self*, who could have dropped it? But . . ."

"All right, why didn't you take it to your boss?"

"They keep letters there many months, baas, and no-one comes for them." His tone suggested that Stoffel should surely know that.

The cheek he has, finding fault with the way the white man does things.

"You lie! You wanted to open it first to see what's inside. When you found no money you sealed it up and were afraid your boss would find out you had opened it. Not true?"—

"It's not true, baas, I was going to bring it here whatever happened."

He fixed his eyes on the letter in Stoffel's hand. "Truth's God, baas," Lebona said, happy to be able to lie to someone who had no way of divining the truth, thinking at the same time: *they're not even decent enough to suspect one's telling the truth!*

They always lie to you when you're white, Stoffel thought, Just for cheek.

The more Lebona thought he was performing a just duty the more annoyed the white man was becoming.

"Where do you live?"

"Kensington, baas. Um go there now. My wife she working there."

Yet another of them, eh? Going home in a white man's area—we'll put a stop to that yet—and look at the smugness on his mug!

"All right, go." All the time they were standing at the door, Stoffel thought how the black man smelled of sweat, even although he was standing outside.

Lebona made to go and then remembered something. Even before the white man asked him further he went on to relate it all, taking his time, but his emotion spilling over.

"I feel very sore in my heart, baas. This poor man, he comes out of train. There are only two lines of steps on platform, and I say to *my-self* how can people go up when others are coming down? You know, there are iron gates now, and only one go and come at a time. Now other side there's train to leave for Orlando."

What the hell have I to do with this? What does he think this is, a complaints office?

"Now, you see, it's like this: a big crowd go up and a big crowd want to rush for their train. Um look and whistle and says to *my-self* how can people move in different ways like that? Like a river going against another!"

One of these kaffirs who think they're smart, eh.

"This man, I've been watching him go up. Then I see him pushed down by those on top of steps. They rush down and

stamp on him and kick him. He rolls down until he drops back on platform. Blood comes out mouth and nose like rain and I says to *my-self*, oho he's dead, poor man!"

I wish he didn't keep me standing here listening to a story about a man I don't even care to know! . . .

"The poor man died, just like that, just as if I went down the stairs now and then you hear um dead."

I couldn't care less either. . . .

"As um come here by tram I think, perhaps this is his letter."

"All right now, I'll see about that." Lebona walked off with a steady and cautious but firm step. Stoffel was greatly relieved.

Immediately he rang the hospital and mortuary, but there was no trace of Jackson. Should he or should he not open it? It might give him a clue. But, no, he wasn't a kaffir!

Another knock at the door.

Jackson's wife, Virginia, stood just where Lebona had stood a few minutes before.

"He's not yet here, Master?"

"No." Impulsively he showed her to a chair in the kitchen.

"Where else could he have gone?"

"Don't know master." Then she started to cry, softly. "Sunday we were together master at my master's place. We talked about our children and you know one is seven the other four and few months and firstborn is just like his father with eyes and nose and they have always been told about the zoo by playmates so they wanted to go there, so Jackson promised them he would take them to see the animals." She paused, sobbing quietly, as if she meant that to be the only way she could punctuate her speech.

"And the smaller child loves his father so and he's Jackson's favourite. You know Nkati the elder one was saying to his father the other day the day their grandmother brought them to see us—he says I wish you die, just because his father wouldn't give him more sweets, Lord he's going to be the rebel of the family and he needs a strong man's hand to keep him straight. And now if Jackson is—is—oho Lord God above."

She sobbed freely now.

"All right. I'll try my best to find him, wherever he may be. You may go now, because I've to lock up."

"Thank you master." She left.

Stoffel stepped into the street and got into his car to drive five miles to the nearest police station. For the first time in

his life he left his flat to look for a black man because he meant much to him—at any rate as a servant.

Virginia's pathetic look; her roundabout unpunctuated manner of saying things; the artless and devoted Virginia; the railway worker and his I-don't-care-whether-you're-listening manner; the picture of two children who might very well be fatherless as he was driving through the suburb; the picture of a dead man rolling down station steps and of Lebona pouring out his heart over a man he didn't know. . . . These images turned round and round into a complex knot. He had got into the habit of thinking in terms of irreconcilables and contradictions and opposition and categories. Black was black, white was white—that was all that mattered.

So he couldn't at the moment answer the questions that kept bobbing up from somewhere in his soul; sharp little questions coming without ceremony; sharp little questions shooting up, sometimes like meteors, sometimes like darts, sometimes climbing up like a slow winter's sun. He was determined to resist them. He found it so much easier to think out categories and to place people.

His friend at the police station promised to help him.

The letter. Why didn't he give it to Jackson's wife? After all, she had just as much right to possess it as her husband?

Later he couldn't resist the temptation to open the envelope; after all, it might hold a clue. He carefully broke open the flap. There were charming photographs, one of a man and woman, the other of two children, evidently theirs. They were Jackson's all right.

The letter inside was written to Jackson himself. Stoffel read it. It was from somewhere in Vendaland; from Jackson's father. He was very ill and did not expect to live much longer. Would Jackson come soon, because the government people were telling him to get rid of some of his cattle to save the land from washing away, and will Jackson come soon so that he might attend to the matter because he, the old man, was powerless. He had only the strength to tell the government people that it was more land the people wanted and not fewer stock. He had heard that the white man used certain things to stop birth in human beings, and if the white man thought he was going to do the same with his cattle and donkeys—that would be the day a donkey would give birth to a cow. But, alas, he said, he had only enough strength to swear by the gods his stock wouldn't

be thinned down. Jackson must come soon. He was sending the photographs which he loved very much and would like them to be safe because he might die any moment. He was sending the letter through somebody who was travelling to the gold city.

The ending was: "May the gods bless you my son and my daughter-in-law and my lovely grandsons I shall die in peace because I have had the heavenly joy of holding my grandsons on my knee."

It was in a very ugly scrawl without any punctuation marks. With somewhat unsteady hands Stoffel put the things back in the envelope.

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Monday lunch-time Stoffel Visser motored to his flat, just to check up. He found Jackson in his room lying on his bed. His servant's face was all swollen up with clean bandages covering the whole head and cheeks. His eyes sparkled from the surrounding puffed flesh.

"Jackson!"

His servant looked up at him.

"What happened?"

"The police."

"Where?"

"Victoria Police Station."

"Why?"

"They call me monkey."

"Who?"

"White man in train."

"Tell me everything, Jackson." Stoffel felt his servant was resisting him. He read bitterness in the stoop of Jackson's shoulders and the whole profile as he sat up.

"You think I'm telling lie, master? Black man always tell lie, eh?"

"No, Jackson. I can only help if you tell me everything." Somehow the white man managed to keep his patience.

"I take children to zoo. Coming back I am reading my night school book. White man come into train and search everyone. One see me reading and say what's this monkey think he's doing with a book. He tell me stand up, he shouts like it's first time for him to talk to a human being. That's what baboons do when they see man. I am hot and boiling and I catch him by his collar and tie and shake him. Ever see a *marula* tree that's heavy with fruit? That's how I shake him. Other white men take me to

place in front, a small room. Everyone there hits me hard. At station they push me out on platform and I fall on one knee. They lift me up and take me to police station. Not in city but far away I don't know where but I see now it must have been Victoria station. There they charge me with drunken noise. Have you a pound? I say no and I ask them they must ring you, they say if I'm cheeky they will hell me up and then they hit and kick me again. They let me go and I walk many miles to hospital. I'm in pain." Jackson paused, bowing his head lower.

When he raised it again he said: "I lose letter from my father I found waiting for me at Shanty Town, with my beautiful pictures. I'm want to read it when I'm here."

Stoffel sensed agony in every syllable, in every gesture of the hand. He had read the same story so often in newspapers and never given it much thought.

He told Jackson to lie in bed, and for the first time in four years he called a doctor to examine and treat his servant. He had always sent him or taken him to hospital.

For four years he had lived with a servant and had never known more about him than that he had two children living with his mother-in-law and a wife. Even then they were such distant abstractions—just names representing some persons, not human flesh and blood and heart and mind.

And anger came up in him to muffle the cry of shame, to shut out the memory of recent events that was battering on the iron bars he had built up in himself as a means of protection. There were things he would rather not think about. And the heat of his anger crowded them out. What next? He didn't know. Time, time, time, that's what he needed to clear the whole muddle beneath the fog that rose thicker and thicker with the clash of currents from the past and the present. Time, time . . . And then Stoffel Visser realized he did not want to think, to feel. He wanted to do something. Sack Jackson? No. Better continue treating him as a name, not as another human being. Let him continue to be a machine to work for him. Meantime, he must do his duty—dispatch the commission's report. That was definite, if nothing else was. He was a white man, and he must be responsible. To be white and to be responsible were one and the same thing. . . .