

I

There is a fish in the mirror. The mirror is above the wash-basin in the corner of your hostel room. The tap, cold only in the rooms, is dripping. Still in bed, you roll onto your back and stare at the ceiling. Realizing your arm has gone to sleep, you move it back and forth with your working hand until pain bursts through in a blitz of pins and needles. It is the day of the interview. You should be up. You lift your head and fall back onto the pillow. Finally, though, you are at the sink.

There, the fish stares back at you out of purplish eye sockets, its mouth gaping, cheeks drooping as though under the weight of monstrous scales. You cannot look at yourself. The dripping tap annoys you, so you tighten it before you turn it on again. A perverse action. Your gut heaves with a dull satisfaction.

“Go-go-go!”

It is a woman knocking at your door.

“Tambudzai,” she says. “Are you coming?”

It is one of your hostelmates, Gertrude.

“Tambudzai,” she calls again. “Breakfast?”

Footsteps tap away. You imagine her sighing, feeling at least a little low, because you did not answer.

“Isabel,” the woman calls now, turning her attention to another hostel dweller.

“Yes, Gertrude,” Isabel answers.

A crash tells you you have not paid sufficient attention. Your elbow nudged the mirror as you brushed your teeth. Or did it? You are not sure. You did not feel it. More precisely, you cannot afford definite conclusions, for certainty convicts you. You strive to obey the hostel's rules, yet they just laugh at you. Mrs. May, the hostel matron, has reminded you frequently how you have broken the rule of age. Now the mirror has again slipped off the crooked nail in the wall and fallen into the basin below, resulting in a new crack. The next fall will shake all the pieces from the frame. You lift it out gently to keep the broken fragments in place, thinking up an excuse to tell the matron.

"Now then, what were you doing with it?" Mrs. May will demand. "You know you're not meant to meddle with the appointments."

The matron is fighting for you, she says. She tells you often how the board of trustees is complaining. Not about you as such, but about your age, she says. The city council will revoke the hostel's licence if they find out women of such antiquity reside there, women who are well beyond the years allowed in the Twiss Hostel's statutes.

You hate that board of bitches.

A triangle falls out of the looking glass, onto your foot, then slides to the floor, leaving a spot of dark red. The concrete floor is the grey-green of a dirty lake. You expect to see the rest of the fragments fall onto it, but they hold.

Outside in the hall, Gertrude and Isabel reassure each other that each has slept long and well. Several other hostel women join them and they begin their never-ending chatter.

The floor out in the hall is shiny, though it is made of

cement and not of cow dung. You wrote tourist brochures at the advertising agency you walked out of many months ago. The tourist brochures you composed said your country's village women rub their cow pat floors until they shine like the cement floor. The brochures lied. There is no shine in your memory. Your mother's floors never shone with anything. Nothing ever glittered or sparkled.

You pad away from the washbasin to pull your wardrobe door open. The fish bloats to the size of a hippopotamus in the oily white paint that covers the wardrobe's wooden panelling. You turn away, not wanting to see the lumbering shadow that is your reflection.

At the back of the cupboard, you find your interview skirt, the one you bought when you had cash to purchase an approximation of the fashion spreads you mulled over in magazines. You loved the pencil skirt with its matching top. Now squeezing into it is a major assault on the pachyderm. The zip bites at your skin with treacherous teeth. Matron May has organized this interview that you are dressing up for. It is with a white woman who lives up in Borrowdale. You are concerned there will be blood on your skirt. But it clots quickly, like the line of red on the top of your foot.

Gertrude and company clatter down the corridor. You wait until the babble of young women going to breakfast dies away before you step into the hall.

"You people! Yes, you," the cleaning woman mutters, just loud enough for you to hear. "Always coming down to make more mud before this floor's dry." She curves out of your way and her bucket clangs against the wall. Filthy froth slops out.

“Has my bucket done anything to you?” she hisses under her breath at your back.

“Good morning, Mrs. May,” you call.

Your matron, at the reception desk in the hall, is pink and powdered; she looks like a large fluffy cocoon.

“Good morning, Tahmboodzahee,” she answers, looking up from the crossword in the *Zimbabwe Clarion*, which lies in front of her on the desk.

She smiles as you respond, “How are you this morning, Matron? I hope you slept well. And thank you for everything.”

“Today’s the day, isn’t it?” she says, good humour deepening at the thought of a life without battling the board on your account. “Well, good luck! Remember to mention me to Mabel Riley,” she goes on. “I haven’t seen her properly since she left school and then we both went off and got married and got busy with our families. Do tell her I said hello. I spoke to her daughter and she was quite sure you’ll work something out about the cottage.”

You recoil from the matron’s enthusiasm. She leans in, mistaking the gleam in your eye for appreciation. You feel it, yet you are not sure yourself what this glow means, whether it is proper, or whether it is something that you are daring.

“I’m sure everything will go very well,” Matron May whispers. “Mabs Riley was a wonderful head-girl. I was just a little junior but she was absolutely lovely.”

Specks of powder flutter from her trembling cheeks.

“Thank you, Mrs. May,” you mumble.

The “yesterday, today, and tomorrow” bush in the hostel garden throbs purple, white, and lilac. Bees wade through

air to push proboscises into the splashes of light, lighter, lightest.

You stop by the shrub in midstride, to avoid squashing a daring lucky beetle. Beyond it the hibiscus hedge rages scarlet. Years ago, you don't want to remember how many, you blew the fat-bottomed beetles out of their sandy pits with laughter and careless puffs. When the insect was exposed, you dropped ants into the hole and watched the tiny gladiators fight and perish in the mandibles of their tormentor.

You turn onto Herbert Chitepo Avenue. The urchins mistake you for a madam and whine for donations.

"Tambu! Tambu!" a voice calls.

You know the voice. You wish you had crushed the beetle.

Gertrude wobbles up in her stilettos, Isabel in her wake.

"We are going the same way," says Gertrude, who calls herself Gertie. "So now we have a chance to say good morning and find out how you slept, after all. Isabel and I are going to Sam Levy's."

"Good morning," you mutter, keeping distance.

They settle beside you like police constables, one on either side. The spring in their step irritates you.

"Oh, I didn't know," Isabel rushes on, as though, for her, speech need not be preceded by thought. This affords you some amusement, so you smile. The young woman is encouraged.

"You're going to Sam Levy's, too. You love the sales, just like us. I didn't know old people like fashion."

The girls' breasts jut out as they pull their shoulders back to make the most of their chests.

"I am not going to Sam Levy's," you say. Their eyes look

past you, examining the cars on the road and the middle-aged men who drive them.

“My aunt lives there,” you declare. “I am going to her house in Borrowdale.”

The young women turn their attention back to you.

“Borrowdale,” says Gertrude. You are not sure whether her astonishment is due to your having an aunt or to the fact that a relative of yours might live in Borrowdale. Nevertheless, gratified for the first time that morning, you allow a smile to inch up as far as your eyes.

“So is there anything amazing in that?” Isabel shrugs. She adjusts a red bra strap that has slipped down her arm. “My babamunini, my father’s brother, had a house up there. But he lost it because he couldn’t pay for it. They said it was the rates or something. So he went to Mozambique, with diamonds, I think.” She wiggles her nose. “Now he’s in jail there. It’s only people like that who go to Borrowdale. Elderly!”

“So who is this relative, Tambudzai?” Gertrude asks.

“I don’t mean ones like you, Sisi Tambu,” Isabel interrupts. “I mean those really old ones.”

There is a crowd right up to the curb at the corner of Borrowdale Road and Seventh Street.

“Vabereki, vabereki,” a young man bellows from a combi’s dented door.

The vehicle swerves toward the curb. You all draw in arms, feet, and heads. You lurch back with the crowd. A moment later you surge forward with everyone else, using your elbows to nudge back sharply as many people as possible. But it is a false alarm.

“Parents, we aren’t taking you,” the youthful combi conductor shouts, with a smirk. “We’re full. Did you get that? Full.”

The driver is grinning. Crows zigzag out of the flamboyant trees up the road. They screech away from the cloud of soot that belches from the combi’s belly.

In a little while everyone lurches forward once more. Steel and rubber scream as the driver of another minibus stamps on the brakes. Wheels bump against the curb. Young men elbow past and jump up. You duck under arms and in between torsos.

“Parents, get in. Get in, get in, parents!” the new conductor shouts.

He makes a shield with his body to hold in half a dozen schoolchildren who are packed on the engine hub. You squeeze past, your thigh brushing his privates, the contact making you feel ashamed. He grins.

“Ow, Mai! My mother!” a child squeals.

You have trodden on her toe with the two-tone Lady Di heels of real European leather shoes that were a present received some years ago from your cousin who travelled abroad to study.

Tears trickle out of the child’s eyes. When she bends over to nurse her toe, her head bumps into the conductor’s bottom.

“Ha, you people, vana hwindi,” your hostelmate Gertrude drawls. One of her feet is on the combi step. Her voice is mellow and confident.

“Those are just little children. Weren’t you ever a child yourself? We call them kids, but our children are not the same as those of goats,” she says in the same languid tones.

“If you’ve come to look after children, that’s all right, but don’t do it here. Do you want to make us late?” a man in the back of the bus shouts.

“Ah, did she say anything to any of you?” says Isabel, who has clambered in after you.

Offended passengers murmur about your companions.

“Girls who don’t know what they’re talking about.”

“Youngsters who don’t have a clue about anything. They don’t know God gave them a mind for thinking and keeping the mouth quiet.”

Glad to have wedged yourself into a seat, you say nothing at first.

“Maybe our young women are asking for something,” the man in the back says. “Asking for something to be taught to them. If they are not careful, someone will teach it and they will have to learn it.”

“Those children should draw their feet in,” you say moments later. For you are part of this mass of being in the combi.

Isabel doesn’t speak again and finds a seat. Gertrude too stops fighting for the children and levers herself up. She pats the little girl on the head as she takes the last place opposite the conductor.

“She’s the best,” the schoolboy seated beside the girl tells Gertrude. “She is going to run at the school sports day. When she’s all right we always win.”

He looks down in disappointment.

Everything is uncomfortable. There are too many people in the combi, too tightly packed. The engine boils under the children’s bums. The smell of hot oil seeps into the air. Sweat runs down from your armpits.

In a few moments the conductor is collecting money and shouting out stops: “Tongogara Avenue. Air Force. The robots.”

“Change,” a woman pleads at Churchill Avenue. “I gave you a dollar.” She has a chest like a mattress, is the kind of woman that men themselves do not dare to start with.

“Fifty cents,” the woman begs, looking over at the young conductor. She is one of the people who laughed at the young men’s banter.

The youth scowls. “Where can I get change from, Mother?”

“Is there no one with fifty cents in that combi?” the woman continues pleading as she climbs out. “I can’t leave my fifty cents here.” But the conductor has banged on the roof and the combi is moving. The woman disappears in a burst of black fumes.

“Ah-ah! Didn’t she hear there isn’t any change?” the man at the back says. His mouth is a crescent moon of amusement.

Your hostelmates climb out at Borrowdale shops.

You go on to Borrowdale Police and make your way between the BP and Total service stations. By the side of the road, you peel off your Lady Dis. You pull out black Bata plimsolls and push the pumps into your bag.

You dread the people of the fine suburb seeing you in canvas shoes, especially as you carry a much better pair hidden away. So it is a relief when you arrive at 9 Walsh Road where Widow Riley lives without bumping into any acquaintances. You sit down on the drain bridge by the fence to squash your feet back into your pumps.

Lips are all you see to begin with and you are terrified. Swollen feet wedged into your Lady Dis, you leap up. The lips are arranged in a snarl around yellow teeth. They belong to a small shaggy-haired terrier.

“Yau! Yau!” the dog yelps, outraged at your presence.

“Who are you?” a high-pitched voice trembles through the morning air. “Ndiwe ani?” the woman repeats. She uses the singular, familiar form to address you. Since a person worth something is plural, where your value is concerned, this woman agrees with the dog.

“Don’t even think of moving or coming closer,” she warns. “If it reaches you it will eat you, truly. Stay there!”

Her words drive the canine’s tail into the air. It gallops up and down beside the fence. Its snout is speckled with foam. Its tongue hangs out and it dashes off at intervals to circle the speaker who approaches from the house.

Well-fleshed and egg-shaped, the woman emerges from behind a prickly pear bush. She waddles down the brick path.

“Just stay there, like I told you,” she says.

She unties the straps of her cotton maid’s apron and ties them up tighter as she nears you. The terrier trains one eye on her, the other on you, and subsides into guttural growling.

“What do you want?” the woman demands, looking at you through the fence.

“Ask those garden boys around these streets,” she goes on without allowing you to answer. “If you do, you’ll find out that I am not being bad to you. I am warning you for your own good. If you ask the garden boys, you will find out how many of them have had pieces torn out, because of this little animal.”

She continues to examine you. You do not look back at her. Her air is so imposing that you have become a country girl again, before a mambo or headman in the village.

The woman is mollified by your silence.

“Even me, it’s gripped me, nga, just like that, as if it wanted to eat me,” she tells you more kindly.

“Now, what do you want? Madam Mbuya Riley, she said someone was coming. Have you been sent by Grandmother Riley’s daughter?”

You nod, your spirits rising.

“The widow does not get on with her daughter,” the woman says. “That Madam Daughter Edie is always lying. We are all right, Madam Mbuya Riley and me. I am the one who works here and we do not need anyone.”

You pull from your handbag the smalls advertisement that Mrs. May gave you.

“I am here for an interview,” you explain. “I have a recommendation.”

“But there is no work here,” the woman says. A spark of suspicion flashes in her eye. “So there is no interview. Try down the road. They’re hiring for a market garden. Potatoes, or maybe sweet ones. And on the other side someone is farming chickens.”

It is your turn to be outraged. “I am not here for a job like that. I have an appointment,” you spell out slowly.

“What is an interview for?” the woman smirks. “It is for a job, isn’t it? You won’t get in here with your lying.”

The dog growls.

“If only you would just walk on,” the woman says. “Because this dog is mad. Every dog Madam Mbuya has had has been like that, ever since the war. And Mbuya

Riley up there is just like the dog here, if not even madder. So now, be walking!”

Snakes, the ones your grandmother used to tell you about when you were small and asked her the things you could not ask your mother, the snakes that hold your womb inside you open their jaws at the mention of war. The contents of your abdomen slide toward the ground, as though the snakes let everything loose when their mouths opened. Your womb dissolves to water. You stand there and your strength is finished.

A hole opens in a mesh of ivy vines that strangle the building at the top of the drive. The woman who is talking to you takes a step forward. She grips the fence rails tightly. Anxiety seeps out of her, as strong as an ancestor’s spirit.

Widow Riley, the woman you have come to meet, approaches. Her back is humped. Both bone and skin are fragile, brittle and translucent as shells. She totters over the uneven brick paving.

The dog gives a yelp and bounds to meet its mistress.

“Now what will I say to the madam?” the woman before you whispers. She speaks intimately now, as though to a friend.

“See! She’s already thinking you’re a relative. One of mine. We’re not allowed, not at all, not even when we’ve gone off. And now is the worst time because my off isn’t until this weekend.”

“An interview. For accommodation,” you whisper back. “Somewhere to live.” You are so desperate your voice climbs high into the back of your throat.

“She’ll cry,” Mbuya Riley’s help hisses. “She’ll say I’m bringing my relatives here to kill her. When her daughter

comes they talk like that. It's been like that since the war. That is the one thing they agree on."

"There is a cottage," you say. "The matron said she fixed something. It is not expensive."

"Are you hearing what I am saying?" Mbuya Riley's help goes on. "It's impossible when she cries. I have to feed her or else she shuts her mouth and won't take the food. Just like a baby! You go now."

The dog yelps up at the top of the drive. The frail white woman sinks to the ground. Her head, with its halo of soft white hair, rests on the paving like a giant dandelion. She stretches her arm out toward you and the woman in uniform.

"There!" complains the maid. "Now I'm going to have to be bending over and carrying her, even when my own back is breaking."

She hurries up the path, throwing accusations back at you over her shoulder.

"Go away from this number 9. Because if you don't, I'll open the gate and if you manage to shake this one off it won't help because I'll unlock the big one."

The woman bends down to her mistress. The little terrier whimpers, licks the widow's arm.