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To the esteemed Sirs and Madems

I am young man of 22 who dreams to be writer. I greatly beg your illustrious selves to assist by correcting attached story. How much do you charge for Publications?

Yours truly,

Mr Happiness Bhilitane

The attached story was written on pages torn from a school exercise book, in leaking ballpoint pen. The pages carried the faint smell of wood smoke, and something spicier: *mphepho*, the sacred sage burnt in traditional offering to the ancestors who helped to bring dreams to fruition. The postmark said Dutywa, a small town in a remote and impoverished region in the Eastern Cape.

Kate's eyes scanned the first page. The title was 'Your Heart Is Like Fish In River' and it was the story of a young man from a poor household trying to win the hand of his beloved despite no money for *lobola* – the required bride payment. It was clearly autobiographical to some degree and not without its charm, brought to life as much through its lapses as its words.

Kate had never been to Dutywa or any of its far-flung neighbours, but she felt she knew them, from the stories that came out of them. The writers, in their imperfect English, evoked all too vividly the landscapes of dusty poverty, the hardships of life in a region of zero job prospects and minimal resources, where often the only reading matter came in the form of used newspaper sheets that the shopkeeper wrapped bread in. It was always incredible to her that even in the midst of such unconducive literary deserts, the creative impulse could bloom.

She gathered up story and letter and put them, regretfully, on the 'to reject' pile. This was the part of her job that she disliked the most. She never had mastered the art of the 'form' rejection letter. It seemed too curt and cold in the face of so much eager hope. She could envisage only too well the effort that went into submissions like these, the difficulty of accessing even such simple resources as pen and paper in a world that had little use for them outside the classroom; the laborious trip to the Dutywa post office, the ill-afforded expense. She always felt such enterprise should be rewarded with some degree of encouragement at least, no matter how futile. It mattered not that for most of these applicants the dream of being a writer was as much a fiction as their stories. They deserved applause, if for nothing else then simply for daring to walk through that door of dreams.

Sometimes the writing had flair but was hamstrung by the limitations of technique; bad grounding in the complexities of the borrowed language of expression. Sometimes, against all the odds, the literary desert produced something magical: a Thokozani Shoji.

Kate's eyes slid to the large brown envelope at the top of the 'awaiting attention' pile. She knew what it contained: Thokozani's long-awaited second manuscript. It had arrived two days

ago but thus far she had avoided opening it. She wasn't sure why; too conscious, perhaps, of how much was at stake. As nervous as if it was her own work under appraisal.

She knew what a long and painful journey it had travelled to get to her: two years of creative drought, a writer's block so solid it seemed set to become permanent. It was not unusual for successful first-time authors to hit this hurdle. The curse of the follow-up novel, Alistair, Centaur's publisher, called it. The sustained glare of public attention, the pressure to perform, was enough to make even more experienced authors dry. The more momentous the first trajectory, the greater the risk of the next one falling flat.

Kate picked up the envelope and ripped the staples apart. It felt lightweight in her hand, too slender for a novel. The note inside said simply: 'For my editor. At last.' It was signed with the looping T that was Thokozani's trademark.

Flicking through the pages, she saw that it was not a novel but short stories. The impeccable presentation made her smile: all neatly typed on double-spaced, numbered pages. Very different from his previous submission. That one had been handwritten and hand delivered.

Kate thought back to that first inauspicious meeting. The timid knock at her office door, the anxious figure standing there, manuscript in hand. A small man with dusty dreadlocks and the face of a hungry street kid. If you passed him in the street you might mistake him for one.

'Excuse me. Are you the editor?'

'Yes,' she'd said brusquely, red pen still poised over the page she was busy proofreading at speed.

'Can I help?'

It was a bad day in the trenches. She was deep in the throes of a difficult deadline, short-tempered and impatient with the interruption. She wondered how he'd managed to get past Belle, fierce guardian of Reception and the appointment book. Unyielding deflector of hopeful chancers bearing unsolicited manuscripts.

'Are you wanting to make a submission?' Kate prodded.

He nodded, holding out the manuscript. It was a bundle of dog-eared pages held together with a straining paper clip. Ballpoint, not typeface, she saw.

'I'm sorry, we can't accept handwritten,' she said, more curtly than she intended. 'We don't have time to sit deciphering handwriting. You need to type it up and bring it back to us.'

He seemed crestfallen by this information. Something about the tension of that lean face with its intense dark eyes made her regret her terseness.

'Alright, leave it with me,' she said resignedly. 'We'll get back to you when we've had the chance to assess it. Probably in a few weeks. Does it have your contact details?'

He nodded, his smile transforming his face.

She watched him exit, saw him linger in the booklined corridor with palpable hunger. The manuscript sat on a corner of her desk, tempting her eyes away from more urgent tasks. The name on it was Thokozani Shoji. The address was a postbox: KwaNyuswa, she saw. One of the deep, inaccessible valleys on upmarket Hillcrest's doorstep. A winding labyrinth of impoverished, stranded households that went on forever, so far-flung that not even mortuary

vans went in there. She grimaced at her own presumption; anyone with that address was not likely to have computer access unless it was candle-driven.

She gave the first few pages a cursory glance. The handwriting was legible at least, the letters carefully formed in consideration of the reader. It must have taken him forever to write. The title was 'Hills of My Father's People'. And it was the story of his upbringing among the deeply traditional clan of his father, in a rural kraal amid the high green hills of Durban's South Coast. She'd intended to put it aside for attention later, but once she started reading, she was hooked. It was writing of a kind she rarely came across. Without literary artifice, raw and unschooled. Yet fuelled by something deeper than learned knowledge: an instinct for language that couldn't be inculcated by any amount of teaching.

He had a true writer's love of words, feeling them over with sensual pleasure, stringing them together into quirky combinations that somehow took fire and hung there on the page in all their strange beauty, long after the eyes had moved on.

He invoked with vivid detail the home he loved with the marrow of his being, the sunbaked grandeur of the sweeping slopes of rock and grass, and the heroic tenacity of the early hill people who were his ancestors. He wrote of the blue singing of water as it leapt to catch the flying sparks of the sun, of the tawny grass flicking its long tails at the plump black cloud flies that buzzed their sleepy shadows across it. He painted the lush green of the hills under the steep curve of sky, and the ancient rocks that drummed their stories to the dancing hooves of the cattle that moved over them, storing that ancient knowledge in their patterned hides, inscribed in the sacred language of colours, until the wisdom of the people ripened sufficiently to read it.

Kate felt goosebumps break out over her skin as she read on. This was indigenous history as she'd never encountered it – the holistic version, woven by an unschooled visionary with imperfect language as his tool. It was not just the human denizens that he gave voice to but the animal participants in the drama: the thin-ribbed hunting dogs, the jackals and Caracal cats, the spotted and speckled cattle of his forefathers, who roamed the hillsides of history and were witness to all of it. They too had their points of view and their stories to tell, as did the hills themselves; stories within stories.

Kate was blown away by the momentousness of this new find: the small humble man with his gigantic talent.

Alistair, when she passed the manuscript on to him, shared her excitement.

'You're right. This is going to be a gusher,' was his comment.

As usual, his prediction proved correct. A few months later, the published version of *Hills of My Father's People* hit the shelves like a meteorite, creating a storm of interest that still hadn't subsided.

Kate slid the present offering back into its envelope and replaced it on the pile. It remained to be seen whether this manuscript had the power of its predecessor. What she did know was that it deserved a clearer head than she could bring to it right now.

Ignoring the protest from her toxin-overloaded body, she went back to her dutiful sifting through the big boxful of new submissions at her elbow. Many of them were electronic

submissions, from which she'd printed out a sample selection of chapters. But a surprising number still arrived the old-fashioned way, by postman. In the uneven social divides of South Africa, network access was a resource beyond the reach of many.

It drained Kate's energy just to see the extent of the manuscript mountain that awaited her attention. They poured in on a daily basis, an ever-flowing cataract that spilled directly into her resentful lap. Under normal circumstances, the job of assessing incoming submissions would be assigned to a separate Commissioning Editor. But Centaur Press was currently without such a luxury. The last one had walked off the job in a huff after one tirade too many from Alistair.

That had been six months ago, and the post was still vacant; testimony to Alistair's stubborn denial. He was bent on preserving the fiction that Sahara's presence was not missed and her contribution too minimal to warrant replacing. It was a point of view over which he and Kate had many heated arguments.

As it was, Centaur Press operated on a shoestring staff; a tiny team responsible for prodigious output. Other publishers had editorial departments; Centaur Press had Kate. She was Commissioning Editor, Copy Editor, Managing Editor, Production Editor and Proofreader all rolled into one. True, they did some outsourcing to freelancers, but that brought its own stresses, since it was left to her to manage that process, too. There simply were not enough hours in the working week to see to all the urgencies.

Increasingly, she found herself sacrificing any attempt at a personal life, her off-duty hours eaten up by book launches and other necessary overtime, her weekends spent playing catch-up with the relentless submissions backlog, or frantically editing to meet tight production deadlines. These days Centaur even invaded her dreams! It was a recipe for burnout. And Alistair's high-tensile management style did little to help.

From time to time Kate toyed with the idea of joining the periodic exodus and leaving for saner pastures. What stopped her were two things: her misplaced loyalty to the dictatorial, exploitative but intermittently charming alpha male who was her boss; and the knowledge that she would probably be bored to tears in a more routine editing position, where her desired input would be limited to waging war on hanging participles and other syntactical sins. She might not love the stress of the constant overload, but she did appreciate the more rewarding challenges of her job: the chance to be at the rock face, engaging in the delicate archaeology of discovery. She loved working with authors like Thokozani, valued the deep connections forged in the course of the difficult shared journeys, the special pass that such manuscripts gave her to lives and realities far removed from her own. Entering those worlds, gaining admission to those private interiors, always felt to her like privileged access.

In this aspect of her job, at least, she had Alistair's full support. A gem from disadvantaged waters perked his interest and brought out his better side like nothing else.

Now, working her way diligently through the towering pile, Kate saw evidence that Alistair had been there before her. The manuscripts were littered with his famous tersiosities: 'Worthy but plodding,' was scrawled on one. 'Needs va-va-voom,' said another. On a third,

under the lurid title, 'Oh My Bleeding Heart Do Not Dessert Me', was simply written: 'Good God!'

Outside, the short June day was already on the wane. The Durban dusk settled in swiftly, turning the sky to the deep shade of cobalt you only saw in winter. Kate put lights on and went in search of something rehydrating for her pounding head. There was nothing but milkless chamomile.

She helped herself to some consolatory nicotine from the pack Larry had left behind and stood at the window, watching the world darken. A spangle of stars shone through shreds of cloud and a penile moon hung half erect above the eastern skyline. On the steep ridge opposite, the tall pines and gums held their stillness like respectful Buddhists. The houses in the valley had withdrawn into their own light haloes, shrouding themselves in the privacy of dusk and family togetherness. Sunday night and she alone stood lonely, a solitary watcher at the window, the only single person in the whole of suburbia. Or so it felt sometimes.

Someone was playing Josh Groban on loud, his amplified voice singing of love with such tender sincerity he almost made you believe such a thing was really possible.

Moving across to her computer, Kate clicked on the shortcut icon that brought up the DatingGame. She typed in her username: WolfWoman, a play on her surname, and checked half-heartedly for mail. There were a few new messages in her inbox. One or two 'fans' waiting for her to reciprocate the interest. None of them held the slightest appeal. Lighting up a second cigarette, she scrolled down through the list of computer-generated 'Ideal Matches'. These had been calculated according to a number of pre-determined 'search' criteria and assigned an automatic compatibility score. Top of the list was Real Pleazer, whom the computer judged to have a 95% compatibility rating with her. He was 51, looking for 'a lady who wanted to be treated as such'. His picture was a greyhaired mugshot, staring woodenly at the camera. Letmeluvyu was 48 and, like her, had no photo. His profile was to the point: 'I'm an ordanery guy downto Earth with lots to ofer the rit lady. I'm not fusy. She can be anything, as long as she respectabel and hav no bagage.'

She continued down the list, through the rows of portraits and cartoon icons that stood in for pictures. She knew most of them by heart now. The photos were not inspiring. They all looked like bad selfies. The men in them had a liking for peculiar headgear. Triple-decker cowboy hats. Peaks with side flaps that hung down like curtains. Hard hats. Swimming caps. Metal headphones. Even a pair of goggles. Some were badly cropped, with bits of female face or dismembered arms still attached.

The profiles had a depressing sameness. They all claimed to be 'just an average guy' who liked outdoors, sport and braais. They made a point of stressing that they had no baggage. They were looking for 'a lady' to take care of. A neat, attractive female who would play Eve to their Adam, who would merge into the readymade slot in their lives with barely a ripple.

Depression mounted as she scrolled through more pages. How had she ended up in this blind alley? The wrong side of 40 and still alone? Living in a house that was too big for her, with not even a cat for company. Spending her Sunday nights cruising a computer screen in

the vague hope of finding a kindred spirit to connect with. Could she even remember how that felt?

She had signed onto DatingGame in an impulsive moment, fed up with the boredom of yet another weekend spent in her own company. So far, it hadn't proved worth the joining fee. In 30 pages of 'Ideal Matches', she had yet to find one that hinted, even remotely, at true compatibility. It was probably her own fault. If she put her photo on she could probably attract a better range of hits. Or so the site promised. But she wasn't ready for that. The idea of displaying her face on the desperation board for all the world to see and judge was just too intimidating. Better to play anonymously until she was sure she wanted to play at all.

Not all faceless players were camera shy for motives of modesty. Some had less savoury reasons for desiring anonymity. Their chat names said it all: 'Swinger 69'; 'Pussylover'; 'Size Counts'. Their profiles stipulated a preference for women who knew how to be 'discreet'. But these were the exceptions. Most seemed innocuous enough. Ordinary blokes, just as their profiles said, wistfully looking for Lady Right to connect with.

Kate had been on a few first dates, none of which, by mutual agreement, had progressed into second dates. Larry was the exception. She was still not sure how it had happened that he had suddenly become a tangible feature in her life. Their initial coffee date had not fired her with any enthusiasm. But then she'd woken up on Saturday to the discovery that it was her birthday; 43, and her life empty of anyone who cared enough to remember. The depressing prospect of spending this day of all days alone with manuscripts had spurred her to phone Larry.

They'd met for dinner and on hearing that it was her birthday, he had insisted on a celebratory bottle of wine. This somehow became a second bottle. It was perhaps not surprising that she, who seldom drank and who had a notoriously low inebriation threshold, should have lost command of the proceedings. It was the first time in a long while that she had gone home with a man, let alone someone who was a virtual stranger. Waking to find him naked in her bed was not the birthday present she'd had in mind for herself.

Bypassing the rest of her 'Ideal Matches' Kate flipped through to the photo gallery, a more random selection. Feeling like a voyeur, she scrolled down the endless succession of faces. She paused on Gorgous Guy: 'I'm young for my age and fitter than men half my age. I keep myself good and want a lady who respects herself and appreciates to be adored.' She scooted past Horneybugger, Handsome Dud and Porky. Fourplay was dishy but into numbers. Funboy liked a good time. He thought it was worth mentioning that he had never hit a woman, '... well only once, but she deserved it'.

By page eight all the faces were blurring into each other. She bailed out, back to the home page and was about to log out when a new entry caught her eye. The username was 'Lifesabitch'. The headline underneath said: 'Cupid is Stupid and God's a Sod'.

She read through his personal details, such as they were:

Age: 42

Race: 50-metre sprint (Why are we still asking these crap questions?)

Starsign: Capricorn

Height, weight, hair colour and all other descriptive blocks had either been left blank or pre-selected to 'ask me later'.

His 'Ideal Match' was an evasive catalogue of 'anys'. He hadn't bothered to fill in much else. Under 'Starsign preferred' he'd written, 'None. Holding out for the 13th sign.'

The sour cynicism of his responses amused her. His 'About Me' was, at least, interesting:

What can I tell you ladies? I'm a guy same as every guy. Chasing my tail most of the time. Too busy running in circles to go looking for true love. So what am I doing on a dating site? Hell knows. I guess I get lonely like everyone. I'd like to say I'm romantic at heart but I'd be lying. Truth is, I'm long past all that hearts and flowers stuff.

(Sorry if this sounds too bleak for you ladies but at least it's honest.)

What am I looking for? Same as the rest of humanity. Someone to rescue me from my pathetic life. A bit of distraction, some company to fill the lonely hours, a few laughs, a few lollipops to make the bad dreams go away for a while. And if the click happens, if magic ignites and we fall in love for happy ever after ... then I'll start believing in tooth fairies and Santa again.

Kate was intrigued. His candid negativity suited her own jaundiced mood. He sounded like a barrel of laughs to be with. But at least it was something different from the usual round of lonely guys looking for ladies to spoil.

She sat staring thoughtfully at the suave sun-shaded cartoon dude that served in lieu of photograph. Then she typed in:

Hey Lifesabitch, read yr profile, liked your bleak view of things. Any interest in chatting?

She hesitated, wondering whether to say more, then pressed the send button and watched the message swirl away into the void of cyberspace.

The pulsing of her chat-window icon caught her eye. Someone called Barebak Ryder had seen that she was online and wanted to chat. She clicked on his profile. The photo was handsome enough, if you liked aging Ken dolls. But the blurb put her off. He was looking for partners who enjoyed taking risks and got a kick out of bungee-jumping and swinging without safety nets, including latex ones.

Giving it up as a bad job, she switched off her computer and went in search of something for supper.

Her cellphone was warbling, a startling intrusion in the quiet house. Probably just Alistair, wanting a captive ear while he downed his Sunday night Scotch and browbeat her about work issues. As someone without boundaries himself, he took it as a given that his entitlements as her employer included 24/7 access. By this stage of the weekend his conception of time tended, in any case, to be somewhat skewed.

Ignoring the summons, she fed herself on toast, the quickest option; then did her ablutions and wearily climbed the stairs to bed.

FROM: **"The Company of Dogs"** by **Elana Bregin**
(first published in paperback as "Survival Training for Lonely Hearts" by Pan MacMillan)
Available on AMAZON KINDLE
ASIN: B01MDLP9XN

AMAZON CUSTOMER REVIEW:

5.0 out of 5 starsA wonderful read whether you are 40 and single, or not!

By **JPL Bredius** on 2 November 2016

Format: **Kindle Edition**

The Company of Dogs is a wonderful read whether you are 40 and single or not.

It contains so many recognisable facets of what it is to be human and spinning in space with millions of other humans also spinning, whilst trying to find a meaningful connection with just one of them.

The Company of Dogs reveals the deeper thoughts and contradictions of a single woman who wants NOT to be single, whilst simultaneously finding herself unsure about giving up her singlehood for communion... life isn't cut and dried!

Brilliantly written by a South African author (tip: Shiva's Dance) who writes using the parlance of her environment which makes for a highly entertaining read.

I loved it!

For more information on Elana go to planetwriter.jimdo.com