



# NEW OLD WAYS

Sharmini Brookes

Mala Gounden

Muthal Naidoo

Sudhira Sham

Tom Swart

# **NEW OLD WAYS**

Stories and Reveries

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**SUDHIRA SHAM.**

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# MIXED MARRIAGES

Muthal Naidoo

Standing by the bed, Othello said, “Put out the light,” reached for the pillow and as he raised it, “And then put out the light.”

Juliet grabbed the pistol from under her pillow. “Hold it, buster, you’re in the wrong bedroom.”

Othello stared, “No, you are!”

Just then, in walked Romeo hand in hand with Desdemona. “Sorry Juliet, I’ve found a rose by another name.”

Juliet fired. “Sorry Desdemona, I’m not into wife-swapping.” Then she shot her too.

“That leaves you and me, Othello. I don’t know what my folks will say!” Swinging the pistol on her finger, she raised an eyebrow, “But I’ll fix that too.”

# SIX CHARACTERS IN SEARCH OF...

Tom Swart

*“It is so. When YOU think so.”*  
— Luigi Pirandello

*What the hell? We’ve just cleaned up the street – and now that rubbish bag is lying there... “Sibusisu! Who put that bag there?”*

*“Ug-, Ug-, I- It-”*

*It’s bad enough having to get past your thick Zulu accent. But dealing with your stutter is another thing... “Isn’t it enough that I have to pay the rubbish recyclers every week to clean up the street? They’ve just finished their job, and now this?” Can’t these people understand that they’re now living in a city suburb – not the location? There they can strew rubbish just as they like. But here? It’s an affront to decent, civilized people! “I can’t wait for you to get your mouth into gear, Sibusiso. Just point to who dumped the bag.”*

*“It, it w- was th- them.”*

*Just as well you’re a car guard. You wouldn’t have won top prize in the school speech competition! “Oh! Those people across the road again. Not enough that they play loud music ’til all hours... Now they must mess up the street for decent people! When did they do it?”*

“Ju- jus- n- now.”

*Ah-ha! There’s one of them coming out of the house! All dressed up to the nines! Pay all that attention to your own appearance and walk off leaving the street in a mess? “Good morning! Did you put that bag of rubbish there?”*

*Who is this? So rude! Does he not know how to greet? I’ll just walk on... Jumping in front of me will not help... ”*

“I said, ‘Good morning’”

“What do you want?” *Damn lekgoa!* *Thinks he’s still in charge!*

“I want to know why you dump your rubbish in the street like that? I pay forty Rand a week to have the rubbish cleared ever since Pickitup went on strike – and now, just when the street is clean, you spread your rubbish around again.”

*Does this phakane<sup>2</sup> think I give a shit for his forty ‘Rond’? “Get out of my way!” Does he not know who I am? I have been through Camalundi Training Camp, Qhibaxe Camp, Camp 32, Viana (with malaria), Pango Camp, Mogorogo and across the world from the GDR to Moscow to Finland... Fighting for his freedom to carry on telling us what to do in our own country! “Why don’t you go to Sandton where your type belongs? This place belongs to us now...”*

“Fuck you! I have been here since ’92. You jimmy-come-latelies will not come in here and tell us what to do!” *Does he not know who I am? I chose this suburb because it had the first non-racial referendum on the one-way streets. I started*

.....  
1 (slang) white man

2 (slang) a jerk; a mean or rude person

the first non-racial school in the country. “What do you mean, ‘your type’?”

“Get out of my way, chechela<sup>3</sup>!” Thinks ‘cause he’s tall he can lean over me.

I can swat this little fucker over with one hand... God, his breath stinks! ... Is that brandy?

“Yes! You tell him! Thinks he owns the street!” He did exactly the same with me in the street – publicly – as all his class do... Then it was about my dog barking... And he had to confront me in the street just as I was going to work! Sat on the bonnet of my car in his nightgown. Does he have no self-respect? At least he is clothed now! And he’s still shouting like the sky would fall! No manners!

Fuck! Now it’s the Zulu seaka<sup>4</sup> shouting from her window... She thinks supporting the ANC is enough! Fucking inxiles don’t know what we exiles went through! “Keep out of this woman! This is men’s business!”

Shit, I suppose Nomathembu had to get mixed up in the argument! Haven’t spoken to her for years after the dog-barking business. But at least it shut up the dog – and her... Had to endure the noise from her shebeen right through the nineties – and then we didn’t complain – all in the interests of Mandela and nation-building. Should have called the police and put a stop to her. Perhaps people round here would have seen that we mean business when we say we want to keep up the standards!

“Go, comrade! Show him who’s boss!”

.....  
3 small dried piece of shit

4 bitch

*Fuck you, sefebe<sup>5</sup>! Are we men going to stand the whole day glaring at each other?*

*“Out of my way!” That was a neat side-step, like my moves against the Angolan football squad while I was in Camalundi. You’re not getting out of this so easily! Two can do the sidestep move... Now I can see that you’re getting frightened by this tall mLungu staring into your eyes!*

*“Si-, sir! Le- let’s g-, g-, get b-, back into th-, the house!”*

*“Wait Sibusiso! I want to deal with this piece of rubbish first: you sit around all day – not working – loitering on your stoep, and don’t have the decency to put your rubbish into a bin!”*

*“Yes! You can talk, lekgoa! You dikolobe<sup>6</sup> still have the jobs! While us exiles have been betrayed by the inxiles at the feeding trough! I didn’t suffer in exile to be poor like this!”*

*“Henry! What are you doing? Get back here! What is a seventy-year-old man doing, shouting in the street like this? Doesn’t he know that it’s dangerous here, now?”*

*“Si-, sir, I t-, to-, told h-, hi, him t-, to – rub- rubbish b-, b-, bag”*

*“Sibusiso! Grab the old man and get him back in here!”  
I don’t want to lose him over a rubbish bag!”*

*Yes! Grab your unqingili<sup>7</sup> boyfriend. It’s an embarrassment living next door to such types. No self-respecting Zulu woman wants neighbours like this.*

.....  
5 bitch

6 swine

7 queer

“Leave me alone, John! I want to teach this fucker a lesson!”

“Fuck you!”

“Fuck you, too, you drunkard!”

Then, a single shot.

# RELUCTANT WRITER

Sudhira Sham

She sits poised and considers the blank page. Music she had selected to soothe her mind swirls gently around the room. “What should I write about? My history? Mmm ...that’s too long. I should write about a speck in my lifetime. A speck that is special, like the first love of my life, whom I spied on through the open door of the lecture room and who made my heart leap with joy. Maybe I could write about the highly dramatic stuff I did as a teenager. So not interesting!”

She thinks about that time of her life and thinks, “Was my life really so dull then? Everything I did was so censured, measured. So rigid with discipline, clear-cut lines of what was right and what was wrong. Always pleasing adults, always being the good one who did nothing wrong.”

Tapping the pen against the paper, she sighs. “If I censure the writing, I will be like that forever. Do I want to be like that forever? Do I want to stifle the dreams that remain in my heart, and leave them restless and heavy from being repressed? Why do I think that my dreams are impossible to achieve, that I should squash the ridiculous thoughts that dwell in my crazy mind.”

She grins to herself. “I’m a fifty something rebel. I’m being the teenage rebel I never allowed myself to be.” She longs

for her moments of rebellion to be acknowledged, to get some response from those close to her. “Maybe I’m too old to be rebelling. Maybe rebellion in fifty-plusses is seen as a sign of mental instability, craziness or midlife crisis. I don’t want my rebellion to be watered down, diluted by a civil response – ‘Yes dear – you should write. That’s great - I’m sure you have talent. You should keep busy now that the children are out of the house.’

“ I want to be feared, held in awe. I want for the burning discontent to burn out, not remain simmering under my skin. What if my choices had been different? What if I had insisted on being myself, on speaking my mind instead of being the compliant goody two shoes? Hmmm, that’s what I like about my life now. Being fifty has its benefits! I can make decisions without the fear of being wrong. I don’t mind being wrong anymore. I don’t mind being wrong anymore. I don’t mind making a choice that may offend someone.

Ah! The joys of being old! The arthritis and the diabetes are a small price to pay for the freedom of being able to do what one pleases with one’s life. The freedom from fear, and the relaxed pace and the time one has to do and be, and most of all to write. I should travel more, enjoy music more, write more, think more (and let everyone know what I am thinking, I suppose) and enjoy life in general. I love life now.”

The music floats over her and, as it reaches a crescendo, she feels alive. Picking up her pen she begins to make up a list. “A list is good. It will give me some direction. I’ll make a list of things I want to do. It will keep me going until I decide what I want to do with the rest of my life.”

‘No need to do – just be.’ The masseuse had told her. ‘Meditate and it will come to you. You will know the answers if you just meditate.’

She grimaced at the thought. “Meditation was for escapists. I, on the other hand, will be taking the bull by the horns and doing something worthwhile. I, fifty-something, foot-loose and fancy free, will be writing. I will be a fantastic writer! A spinner of fabulous tales, a recorder of dreams and a wizard of words.” Now as the music soothes her and she stills her mind, words of the masseuse ring true.

She pulls the sheet of paper towards her. Her pen begins to move and words flow from her. They seem to be an extension of herself, the deep, dark hidden aspects of herself that have suddenly found a way of revealing themselves. They curl darkly on the paper as if they have a life of their own and lay bare her soul. She is amazed. Now, maybe, she would amaze the world. She would amaze the world! The words continue to flow. How she loves them! How perfect they feel! She feels invincible now, ready to show her talent to the whole universe.

“Mum! Mu-um! Where are you?” Raju’s voice is urgent.

“Probably needs a clean shirt for his date,” she sighs inwardly and carries on writing, even though she feels her amazing talent slip a notch or two.

“Mum! Where are you?” The voice borders on panic.

“Honestly!” she grumbles to herself. “Such a production for a silly shirt! Well, he can find one himself. My laundering days are over. It’s Seema, the writer, from now on.”

Aloud she calls out, "Unless you are bleeding to death or are in some dire medical emergency, I don't exist for the next hour."

She hears his feet thudding towards her and rolls her eyes heavenwards in exasperation. Raju's head appears around the corner.

"Would a fire be considered an emergency?" he asks, trying to look normal, his eyebrows singed and his face red.

Seema's calm evaporates like the smoke she smells emanating from her beloved youngest. The wonderful words she had been crafting into wondrous tales scatter. She is Mum again. The writer has retreated and is cowering in some hidden corner of her mind. An alarm is sounding stridently, obliterating the soothing strains of Bach. Grabbing Raju by the arm she steers him out of the house, forgetting that he is nineteen and would probably have vacated the house if he deemed it necessary. She goes to the kitchen which seems to be the source of the smoke that is being drawn into every room in the house. A frying pan on the stove is ablaze. Oil spilled on the stove is smoking. The walls are blackened as are the super fried sticks of charcoal that were once potato chips. She covers the pan with a lid, killing the flames.

Raju has returned to the scene of the disaster and is surveying the damage. "Sorry I ruined your kitchen," he says, looking shamefaced.

"What were you thinking?" she mutters, glaring at the blackness that seems to have taken hold of everything.

"Just wanted to make you some lunch since you were busy writing. I'll clean up. Where's the cleaning up stuff?"

She doesn't answer. She is busy processing what has happened and feeling frustrated. "Even my disasters are not big enough," she moans inwardly. "Just big enough to make me feel miserable, and be inconvenient in the process!"

Raju finds the cleaning materials on his own and starts cleaning up with a show of enthusiasm. She leaves him to it and returns to the study to try to garner her lost calm and the wonderful ideas she had been revelling in earlier. The CD had played to the end so she selects a track and starts it up again. She settles at her desk and tries to still her mind once more. Only the recent disaster comes flooding back. "It won't do any good to write about it," she thinks.

Two hours later she is sitting in the gathering gloom, turning over the only sheet she has covered in her beautiful handwriting and forming in her mind the excuses she will make to Sanjay when he comes home to the smell of smoke and the evidence of her failure –one measly paragraph. Her earlier enthusiasm has faded and she shrinks at the thought of the smirk she knows will appear when he asks how her writing went and she tells him how it went up in smoke – *literally*. She is making up plaintive excuses in her mind, for her lack of volumes of writing and for the burnt kitchen. Before she can form the words to herself, tears choke her. Her rehearsal is interrupted by a meek tap on the door and she straightens her shoulders in preparation.

Raju appears, eyebrows still singed and face red from the burns. He is bearing a tray laden with freshly made toast, two bowls of soup and two small desserts that come ready made from Woolies.

"We missed lunch. You must be hungry."

“I am,” she says. “At least I taught him to be considerate,” she thinks. “That should count for something. I could say to Sanjay, “Guess what, I failed at my first attempt to write but I raised a son who is considerate.”

“Soup’s good,” she comments after her first tentative sip.

They are sitting in companionable silence after the contents of the tray have been polished off when they hear Sanjay enter the house and go straight to the kitchen where he expects Seema to be, where she usually has been for the last twenty five years when he arrived home every evening.

She is tense, expecting him to comment on the state of the kitchen, but he simply calls out, “Seema?” and proceeds to the bedroom.

Raju picks up the tray and carries it into the kitchen and Seema follows him, wondering what excuse she would make about not making Sanjay any supper, the state of the kitchen and the state of her writing.

She is startled to see there is not a vestige of anything burned, not even the smell of smoke anywhere in the kitchen. Even the walls are sparkling clean.

She turns wide eyed to Raju who is flushed with pleasure. “You cleaned up, by yourself?”

“Muu..m! I’m nineteen, not five. Of course I cleaned up.” She hugs him, grinning even more widely when she sees him rinsing off the dishes and loading the dishwasher.

“Seema?” Sanjay’s voice comes down the passage towards the kitchen. She sucks in her breath to make the excuse she has not yet formed properly in her mind when she sees

another tray set on the table. She gives Raju another hug and calls out, “In here!”

He comes into the kitchen with a sheet of paper in his hand. It’s her effort from this afternoon. She flinches.

“It’s terrific! You have such talent! You could send it to magazines like Working Woman. I think they’ll put you on the payroll immediately. You’re a fantastic writer.”

Seema assembles her features into a picture of cool confidence and turns to face him. “I can’t imagine why it’s a surprise to you, Sanjay. I thought you knew I would be amazing at whatever I do.”

# MAD MARIA

Sharmini Brookes

It was one of those hot, dry summer days in Pietermaritzburg; the blue of the sky whitened by the strength of the sun. It was approaching noon and the heat twanged like a taut guitar string. The early morning farmhouse bustle of Brookside had gradually receded. People ebbed away into cool dark interiors. In the stillness sounds were amplified. A bee zagged from flower to flower. One miserable fly zinged annoyingly in mid-air. On the far edge of the farm the China-guava trees whispered to each other.

The four of us were spending some of our summer holiday here as usual - my cousin, my two sisters and me. We liked the casual freedom of the farm. No watchful parents barking orders asking for this or that, telling us not to do one thing or another. No babies or younger brothers to look after. Our grandparents were too busy with their own chores on the farm to take much notice of what we were up to. There were vague warnings not to go too far away from the house and to be careful of snakes in the grass but they slipped off our young, careless shoulders like butter off hot toast. We had been prancing about all morning, taking turns in the wheelbarrow as Dhlamini ferried piles of logs for grandma's kitchen range, watching grandfather milk the cow and collect the strawberries for our breakfast, picking the ripe, juicy mulberries off the tree before they dropped to the gobbling turkeys below and playing with peculiar farm tools and bits of machinery while grandfather wasn't looking.

Now though, as noon approached, even we had begun to droop with the heat. It was just then, as we were moseying along languidly looking for something to spark our interest that we saw Maria. We called her mad Maria. She was ugly as sin with a lopsided walk, drunken mouth and glazed eyes. She rarely came near the house and only ever grunted and scowled. We giggled nervously as she lurched passed us. ‘Maria! Hey Maria!’ we called tauntingly. She snarled in our direction and made as if to pursue us. Fearfully thrilled by the expected response, we ran off towards the house screeching in delight.

We looked at each other slightly out of breath. Then my cousin said ‘Shame. She must have a hard life.’ Suddenly a wave of remorse overcame us. How could we be so cruel? She was only a servant after all, with no family or real home. ‘Let’s go and visit her and say we’re sorry.’ I said. Hmm, silence. Would we dare? We didn’t even really know where she lived. It was somewhere on the other side of the farm. Somewhere we never went and were definitely not supposed to go. Nevertheless, determinedly contrite and full of righteous courage we traipsed single file towards her dwelling.

It was a mean, crooked tin shack. It provided shade from the burning globe above but no cool comfort. It must have been like a roasting oven. It was hard at first to make out Maria in the dark bare interior. Slowly she came into focus, sitting on her haunches, an open tin of peaches in one hand, the jagged lid in the other. We watched in horror as she scooped up the peach slices with the lid and brought its jagged edge to her lips. ‘My god! Doesn’t she have a spoon?’ ‘Let’s get her a spoon from the kitchen.’ Why, she could do herself damage with that jagged lid. Maybe that’s how she got her crooked lip. Here was our chance to say sorry and do something useful. How wonderful. My sister

raced back to the kitchen and returned with a nice round dessertspoon.

Maria was now looking at us warily out of the corner of a hooded eyelid continuing to greedily consume the peach slices. We tiptoed towards the opening and hovering on the line between darkness and light, we proffered the spoon as though it were gold, frankincense, myrrh. 'Please take this, Maria. It's better for you. Here.' She stopped eating or maybe she had finished. Her glazed eye locked onto us as though really seeing us for the first time. Suddenly, she rose, flung the can to the floor and leapt towards the entrance with a look of pure hate and a gut-wrenching howl, waving us away with arms wildly flailing in the air.

We sprang back, dropping the spoon and fled. Hot tears of dismay welled up inside me. 'Well, that's the last time we try to do be nice to her!' I said spitefully.

In truth, her response had hurt me more than I would admit at the time, strange though it may seem, it changed the way I looked at Maria. Her reaction to our pitiful charity, her howl of pain, animal-like though it sounded, made her more human in my eyes. Ever since then, I regarded her, not fondly, but with a curious respect.

# PNAP

Muthal Naidoo

Behind the wheel of her Conquest, a car chosen for its name, her short white hair like a bush in the wind, Mynah Bird streaks down the congested M1 from Johannesburg. The blood coursing through her veins at high pressure has always ensured that she live life at breakneck speed. She has to be home in time for the ICC Twenty20 cricket: the match today, South Africa versus England. Though four by fours, minibuses, pick-ups, large sedans and trucks dwarf the Conquest, the little car continues to career down the extreme left lane of the highway in the slipstream of an auto transport tractor trailer carrying three layers of shiny new cars.

Mynah's car is never intimidated by these new-fangled creations that look like refugees from space films. Her car, like her, stands for the age of stolid responsibility and her competition on the highway is always a truck, a Red Baron, throwing out a challenge. One of these days she will overtake one. Then, like Snoopy, goggles on her pilot's cap and red scarf streaming behind, she will sail past – Mynah Bird the Conqueror!

An old non-conformist, Mynah, the racing road menace, is well known to traffic cameras in Centurion that are always on the lookout for her Conquest. Strict upholders of traffic regulations, the cameras are not subject to bribery and corruption. For them, all are equal before the law. There

are no extenuating circumstances! Drunken judges who crash into walls will find no mercy here. The moment that Mynah exceeds the sixty-kilometre limit, there is a flash but the bird unawares drives on and is only confronted by her crime when she finds in her mailbox that ominous notice from the Traffic Department with its photo of the car on Jean Avenue breaking the sound barrier at seventy kilometres an hour.

The latest of these unexpected bolts from the blue shows a picture of the Conquest alone, no traffic behind, in front or alongside, on the N3 to Durban early in the morning before the workmen have set up their road works. There's the Conquest just past the Tugela Toll Plaza, trying to break all Michael Schumacher's records, going one hundred and fifteen kilometres an hour in an eighty km speed zone. The bird so addicted to speeding hadn't been aware that the speed limit had changed yet again, for the umpteenth time, for road works required for the 2010 Soccer World Cup. When the unexpected summons from the depths of the bureaumania that battens on the poorest of the poor arrives in her mailbox making demands on her meagre pension, the shameless old bird is outraged. The fine is an imposition on one whose existence is stripped down to almost its barest minimum. She cannot see that in her recklessness she contributes to the soaring crime rate in the country. Her myopic view is concentrated on personal circumstances and perfunctory injustices.

The shock of the summons, the last straw, forced her to take stock of herself. She looked in the mirror and was amazed. Standing before her was an irate old woman, goggles perched on the pilot's cap covering the white hair and red scarf flying out behind. In that moment, it smashed into her brain like a meteor – Snoopy was the Red Baron! They were one! Not separate! Not parts in pursuit of the

whole! They had come together and were standing before her as one looking at her. Looking at her – out of her eyes! Her eyes! And she saw – Mynah-Snoopy-Baron! Her manifest destiny! It was an epiphany: the mission of the final phase of her life revealed!

And she laughed. What were cameras? Divisive instruments, tearing instinct from reason, creating categories of good and evil, destroying the unity of being. Inhuman monsters! Down with cameras! She instantly renamed her car, Papo, after Joan of Arc's warhorse, and was ready to ride into battle.

And she would. But today there's cricket. When she gets home she parks Papo in the garage, grabs her knitting, switches on the TV and watches delighted as the Proteas bowl, catch and run out the English team for just over a hundred runs. What brilliant fielding!

When the Protea's opening batsmen, Graeme Smith and Jacques Kallis, come to the crease, Mynah is looking forward to flashing fours and soaring sixes, but the batsmen stand there poking leisurely at the deliveries. "This is not a five-day test match," the bird yells at the TV, "get on with it!" Then while she is picking up the stitch she dropped, Graeme Smith, the captain, is out. In the replay, she sees his shot fly high in the air and land neatly in the hands of an English fielder. Dammit, she can't take her eyes off for one minute and something awful happens.

In comes Herschelle Gibbs, the roller-coaster man, up one day, down the next. As he too pushes at the ball, Mynah drops a few more stitches. This is a down day. "Get him out, get him out," she yells at the English bowlers. "Get AB or Duminy or Morkel in." But Kallis and Gibbs continue their

calm, unhurried pace to the sixteenth over and Mynah Bird has to pull out eight rows of knitting in which the pattern is no longer visible and gaping holes wink at her from all over.

Then Gibbs is out. Thank goodness! Now with AB there will be action, boundaries left, right and centre. But no! AB is out before she has picked up all her stitches. They're going to lose. All they had to make were a mere hundred and twelve or so runs. She dashes into the kitchen to take a pill; her pulse has overtaken the required run rate twenty times twenty. When she comes back into the living room, she switches off the TV. Why am I wasting time? I have work to do.

She has to devise a plan to rid her immediate surroundings of dastardly cameras, but her mind keeps flashing back to the cricket; if only AB could have repeated his glorious performance against Scotland – six sixes in seventy-nine runs off thirty-four balls. His sixes flow off her retina in replay. The ball, ricocheting off the bat, flies over the heads of the fielders, flies in among spectators, flies onto the roofs of stands, flies over the boundary, flies into the lights. Each shot captured on camera from every possible angle.

Cameras, marvellous instruments, reflect moments of ecstasy over and over and prolong the euphoria of each magnificent boundary. Historians par excellence, cameras provide a living record of events.

She catches sight of the traffic fine on the side table. BUT they should never be used to make moral judgments. Their total objectivity turns them into monsters. Where's the glory in trapping an old woman, driving perfectly safely? Where's the glory in trapping her for a slight, unintended infringement of the speed limit? Where is the traffic's third umpire? Cameras for cricket are fine but without the third umpire – arbiters of justice? No, no, no! Didn't somebody

say that justice has to be tempered with mercy? When cameras become policemen, there is no mercy. They have no heart.

Mynah Bird jumps up, toyi-toyis around the living room and begins shouting, “Down with traffic cameras! Pansi! Pansi! ng’-ama-ka-méra, pansi! Ng’-ama-ka-méra, pansi!” All the dogs in the townhouse complex join in the chorus and for a glorious few minutes there is absolute accord between the bird and the canines. But the harmony is ruined by an indignant call at her gate. “Stop that racket!” Mynah desists but her heart has been warmed; the dogs understand. Snoopy is a hero.

She has a mission! But how to proceed? She doesn’t even know where the cameras are. She must find them. She dashes out of the house, out of the complex, oblivious of the darkness. Normally she doesn’t venture out at night – afraid of being mugged, raped, murdered, hijacked – but here she is walking boldly down the streets. The night people watch from makeshift shelters, from narrow alleys, from doorways. They recognise her. A sister. Old, unkempt, adrift. She doesn’t resemble the bird that drives Papo. That bird is an alien, one of the haves, who keeps her eyes looking straight ahead, not acknowledging them. This bird hopping around on the pavement in the middle of the night is one of them, a have-not. They watch as she stops to look up lampposts, at fences, around buildings. One of them hobbles out to her. ‘What are you looking for, sister?’

When she tells him she hates the spying street cameras, he invites her to join them around their bowlah, a tin container inside which cheerful embers glow. Someone offers her a piece of cardboard on which to sit and the leftovers of the meal they have scrounged from a bin somewhere. But she is not hungry. Then as they sit there, smoking dagga and

drinking tshwala, they begin to reminisce and are carried away out of present circumstances.

The bird listens as stories unfold; stories of people who see the frame and, therefore, are outside of it, like criminals. So they sit under the stars, look up to where we have come from and laugh at all those who live within the frame, personify it and call it God. And what's in a name? Naming doesn't mean knowing. Naming, a way to control, hides from us the truth that we have merely projected our limited view on an enigma. The ineffable mystery is not that easy to unravel. Mynah, lying back with these new found friends, looks up into the stars, stars that she cannot name, that she condescendingly imagines none of them lying there can name, but all of them know that they are looking up at the hieroglyphics that hide the history of our origins. If only they could lie there forever, perhaps they would begin to decipher the code. But they were born with bodies and bodies force them to limit their perspectives, force them into the here and now, force them into hunter-gatherer mode.

And they all hate cameras, cameras in constant surveillance over their foraging. Why do cameras persecute those struggling to survive? Why are cameras out on the streets hounding the ragged and homeless? Why are they not spying on those who commit crimes against humanity? Why are they not in offices of rulers, businessmen, bureaucrats, and all those, powerful and petty, who preserve the frame that protects their worldly interests? "Pansi ng' ama-ka-méra, pansi! Down with cameras, down!" And they stand up as one and toyi-toyi. They stop when the sound of a police siren, screeching at them from a distance, chases them all into the bushes where they remain hidden until the police flashlights stop probing and the police car drives off again. When they gather around their bowlah once more,

Mynah wants to know what they are going to do about cameras. And when she suggests that they find them and destroy them, one of the men, Mark Oosey, shakes his head. “No! We must find them, yes, but destroy them? No. We must turn them against Big Brother!”

Mynah, asks, “How can we do that?”

“Only one way,” replies Oniks Manganye, former Umkhonto we Sizwe operative, “guerrilla warfare!”

And from among them he names a team of men and women with all kinds of expertise: a former cricket player, a former cat burglar, a former electrical installer, a former electronics professor, an optics and photographic expert, a computer genius and Mark, the strategist, who will plan the operation.

Then, as the sun is coming up, the group has to disband. Bulldozers will soon be at this vacant plot to clear it for a new housing development. But they have located another campsite across the road, only a temporary home however; a board there is advertising luxury units with full title for those who want more privacy and can afford to pay at least one and a half million rand, the price of the smallest units.

The group agrees to meet again at the end of the day when the plan will be unrolled and all homeless people including street walkers, beggars and street children, will be briefed so that operation PNAP (Pansi Ng’ amaKa-méra, Pansi!) can go into action immediately. Mynah is amazed. How quickly things get done where there is absolute trust and no bureaucratic processes to protect governors from governed. But she feels guilty. These people trust her and she’s here under false pretences. She is not homeless.

That night, sheltered behind the big hoarding that announces the luxury housing units for sale, the group hears the plan. Some will be taking down cameras while most of the rest will be courting arrest so they can obtain access to police vans, police cells and charge offices where they will reinstall cameras and reprogram computers to send images to all police stations, police headquarters, all human rights organisations, NGOs, parliament and the Constitutional Court.

Mynah is alarmed. “Aren’t we going too far? Just for my speeding fines?”

One of the ladies of the night pats her on the arm. “This is not just your fight you know; it’s ours too?”

Mynah doesn’t understand but there isn’t time now for explanations. Mark is still unfolding the plan. The old bird has been paired with the cricketer, Basil d’Oliviera, and tomorrow she is to go to the Curiosity Shop at Irene Homes, where she is a volunteer, to buy a cricket bat and all the cricket and tennis balls she can find. She sits staring in shock.

“Oh yes, we know you work at Irene Homes. We know all about you,” says Johnson Tshabane – formerly of the Scorpions, an investigative unit – a kind of Big Brother secret service operation.

*So they know I am not homeless. Why have they accepted me?*

Mark breaks into her thoughts. “Bring the balls to Zara Salim here and she will convert them into tear gas canisters. You and Basil are to provide a distraction while the team is removing cameras and reinstalling them. Don’t worry; Basil will explain exactly what you have to do. You’ll need your car for this. Make sure you remove your number plates.”

*Oh my goodness! So they know about Papo too!* She can't understand why they trust her.

The next night, Basil and Mynah begin their rounds of the police stations. They drive to the first one, park Papo a good distance away, creep up furtively, Basil with cricket bat, Mynah with cricket ball bomb, and hide in the shadows opposite. They are wearing balaclavas. When Mynah had tried hers on at home, Mynah-Snoopy-Baron had disappeared from the mirror and before her stood a Baader-Meinhof with cold, murderous stare. She had pulled the balaclava off in terror. But now creeping along with Basil, she feels a powerful sense of purpose flooding every muscle and tendon; she is ready to reform a corrupt society in the only possible way – Urban Terrorism!

She and Basil are in position opposite the police station. She raises her arm and bowls. At school, when she played cricket in PT lessons, she was wicketkeeper so she has no bowling skills. Basil, however, is an amazing batsman ready for anything, and he picks up her feeble toss and turns the ball into a guided missile as he smashes it right through a window and into the station. With hands up for a six, Mynah jumps about in wild exhilaration. If only the Proteas had a batsman like Basil, they would easily win the Twenty20 series. But there is no time for celebration and Mynah can't stay to watch as police personnel come running out of their premises, coughing and choking, holding handkerchiefs over their noses. Basil grabs hold of the bird's arm and they run off together to Papo and drive off to the next station – and the next and the next. Mynah is mad with excitement; she hasn't had this much fun for years and years and years.

Just after they bomb the last police station, a call on Basil's two-way radio: the group installing cameras inside the

Home Affairs building, is under siege. Police snipers on the roof of the building opposite are trying to pick-off Dag (short for Daguerre) and Yoshi (Yoshihiso Hirano) on the fourth floor. The order comes through from Oniks. “Basil, you and the racing road menace go after them. Ride up the parking garage ramps to the roof and teargas the snipers. Tell the bird to push the accelerator to the floor.”

Mynah is trembling, “But, but, but ...”

“Come on, Mynah, no time to lose,” Basil yells.

“But, but, but ...”

“No buts about it.” But – Mynah is frozen. “Aren’t you the racing road menace?”

“But ...”

“Aren’t you the one that traffic cameras catch?”

“But ...”

“Aren’t you Mynah-Snoopy-Baron?”

“But ...”

Basil throws his hands up in despair. “Are you not our comrade?”

Suddenly, a pilot’s cap with goggles descends over the balaclava and a red scarf streams out behind and Mynah is galvanised. She pulls the goggles over her eyes and jumps into the car. Papo, vibrating with excitement, is ready to take off. Basil just manages to get in and bang the passenger door closed as Papo screeches off at lightning speed, flashes down streets taking corners on two wheels, arrives at the parking garage opposite Home Affairs, crashes through the boom, streaks up the ramps to the

roof and like a menace makes a circuit over the flat surface while Basil flings cricket ball bombs at snipers who drop their weapons and run for the stairs.

Then Papo, launched like a rocket into space, shoots off over the parapet. Mynah-Snoopy-Baron, red scarf billowing out behind, holds the car steady as it makes a trajectory over buildings and houses, and finally lands safely under a guard of honour of jacaranda trees.

Basil laughs, “You did it! You did it!”

The two-way radio crackles. It’s Mark. “Mission accomplished,” he shouts, “good work Snoopy-Baron!”

When Papo finally brings her home, Mynah can’t sleep. Her dash through town, up ramps and over roofs, run in continuous replay before her eyes. And she sits shivering with fear. How the hell did she do it?

When the group meets again the next night, Mynah sees that a flat screen TV monitor has been set up against the billboard. How did they get it? How did they connect it and set it up here? She marvels at the ingenuity of the group.

When they are all seated, Mark Oosey turns to Mynah, “Now you will see cameras put to their proper use.”

He calls to Spielberg who turns on the monitor and on the screen Mynah is looking over the shoulders of police officials collecting cash and tearing up dockets; at police shouting at an old man being taken down to the cells. Though he is cooperating, he is pepper sprayed, pushed and shoved into a cell and then beaten. His relatives, who have been searching for him all night, come into the cell to find him dead.

Johnson Tshabane shouts, “And all because he helped

himself to a chocolate in a supermarket.”

And Mark adds, “The old man was suffering from Alzheimer’s.”

The scene moves to the inside of a police van; a policeman is demanding sex from the sex workers that he and his partner have just arrested. The women refuse, are beaten and raped. Mynah is horrified.

Next, they are inside the Home Affairs Department.

“We wouldn’t have got the cameras in there without you, old racing road menace,” Basil whispers.

The cameras focus on a confusion of hands on one side of counters collecting money and depositing it in pockets, in handbags, in bras while hands on the other side of counters collect fake ID documents, fake passports, fake marriage certificates.

Then they are into the Social Welfare Department where money is steadily being siphoned off to ghostly ancestors on behalf of orphaned children, widows and pensioners.

Eleven-year old Jabulani, sniffing glue to keep warm, shouts, “That’s what happened to my welfare grant!”

Finally, they are inspecting six shining silver Mercedes Benz sedans lined up in the garage of a mayor.

Basil laughs, “You have to admire the guy’s restraint; he could have got seven, one for each day of the week.”

Tina, the sex worker, laughs, “No, no. He’s a good Christian; he knows that Sunday is a day of rest.”

Mynah shakes her head, “What are my fines compared to all of this?”

“But that’s where your fines are going,” says Mark.

Still Mynah wants to believe, “Now that you – We – have exposed these people, action will be taken and we will have helped to reduce fraud and corruption.”

The laughter that erupts from the group threatens to bring squad cars into their midst. Mynah turns on them. “Why did we go to all this trouble if it won’t change anything?”

“Oh, we’ve made a change all right,”

Dag, the optics expert, chimes in, “We’ve changed the focus. Cameras won’t be following your car for a while.”

“And,” Yoshi nudges Spielberg, “we’ve got ourselves a whole series of genuine reality shows, not the artificial simulations you get on TV.”

Mark puts his arm around Mynah, “Stop fooling yourself. You know you don’t believe in the goodwill of those in power.”

A bag lady bursts out, “You see how they club together to keep prices high!

And, a streetwalker shouts, “How they exploit and abuse! How they close ranks to protect one another when their excesses are exposed!”

Oniks, the MK veteran, shakes his head, “As long as you live in fear Mynah, you will never be able to join us.”

Mynah knows he is right; hers is a pusillanimous existence. She can’t live outside the frame because she can’t give up the basics that she derives from the system. So she doesn’t challenge. Look how she slavishly pays those traffic fines that she so resents. She lives within the frame in fear

of its profit-driven power-mongers and their insurance-broker mentality, but she won't challenge. She lost hope after apartheid when she saw that it didn't matter who governed.

She gazes earnestly into Oniks' Gandhian features, "So why have you accepted me?"

He pats her hand. "Though you have named your car Papo, you are not Joan, not even Snoopy-Baron. But, hovering on the edge of freedom, you are one of us."

Zara, the chemical engineer, smiles. "When you are ready, you will find us. Not here though. These housing complexes springing up all over, keep us on the move. But you are one of us; you will find us."

As Mynah heads off towards her complex, Basil calls after her, "In the meantime work on your bowling."

## BEE-LOVED

Mala Gounden

Shrien, dashing handsome was one year my senior. I was thrilled when he became taken with me and started seeking me out. We fast became good friends and soon were deeply, madly, truly in love. After we had completed our studies we found good jobs, saved up money and got married. Then came our dream home. There was deep longing for a child. We were not blessed to have it all but we were blissfully happy. Or so I thought.

I was grateful for Mavis, my housekeeper of four years whom I inherited from mum. I had known Mavis for most of my life and when I got married, mum insisted she come work for me. Mavis was as efficient as a sniffer dog in an airport terminal. My loving husband was away for a week. He was a satellite technician and he was wiring up the Rustenburg stadium for an upcoming international event. I never liked being alone at night so it worked out perfectly that we turned the downstairs study into a cosy room for Mavis. This way I was never alone at home. Mavis never moved around quietly so there was always welcoming sound rather than eerie silence.

After putting away the dishes and wiping the granite counter top and the sink bone dry, Mavis settled herself comfortably to watch her favourite soapie, 'Muvhango'. I bade her goodnight and retired to my bedroom to call

Shrien. He gave me the good news that he would be back home in two days. I couldn't wait!! As I got off the phone, I heard Mavis knock. She wanted to make sure I didn't need anything else as she was also going to bed. I was surprised because her programme was still on. She said that she had a throbbing headache. I offered her one off my pain capsules that I took religiously every night for my chronic backache.

“Haw! Ai! Ai! Ingane yami. My head, it hurt very much. One capsule don't do the magic.” I smiled and handed her another one. She thanked me, said goodnight and waddled out of the room. I swallowed my daily dose and made a mental note to go to Dischem the next day to refill my prescription. I did not have any more capsules left although I had just bought them last week. Shrien had clumsily dropped the container in the bathroom basin when he helped himself to one of them. I had noticed that he had been looking stressed lately and put it down to his hectic work schedule.

I awoke to the birds serenading a glorious morning. I stretched and yawned and lazily navigated my way to the bathroom. After a refreshing shower I sauntered downstairs to Mavis and my steaming cup of coffee. But I was greeted by an empty dining room and a table with only the vase of day old flowers and the woven placemats. I went into the kitchen calling out for Mavis. Quiet and stillness greeted me. Assuming she had overslept due to her headache and the medication, I poked my head into her room to see how she was doing. I was unprepared for the sight that glued my sandaled feet to the tiled floor. Mavis lay motionless on the bed. Her mouth distorted and laced with froth. Streaks of rust coloured blood caked her nose and cheeks.

I cannot remember when I regained my composure or how I called the paramedics. There was this hive of activity around me and I felt as if I were watching a movie on fast forward. Mavis's body was bagged like a laundered suit and taken away. Meera, my best friend, sat by my side, encouraging me to drink something. She sought my hand and held it as Detective Khumalo asked all the routine questions. Between sobs I relayed the previous night's happenings; she complained of a headache and I had given her two pain capsules. He enquired about her medical history. I was strict in making sure Mavis had her yearly medical examinations. She was not diabetic or hypertensive. Her cholesterol was border line and the doctor had advised her to correct it with the diet.

Detective Khumalo thought it could have been a haemorrhage. He said, "There will be an autopsy to determine the cause of death." He thanked me and left. I felt the gaping hole in my heart grow larger.

Mavis was family to me and I to her. Mavis lived in Mutubatuba and started working for our family when we lived on the farm in Nkwalini. After we left the far North coast of Kwazulu Natal and dad bought a house on the beach in La Mercy near Durban, Mavis decided to continue working for us and made the decision to move with us. She went home during Easter and Christmas every year and after her parents passed on she went only during Christmas to visit her only other family, her brother. After he married, Mavis's yearly visits came to an abrupt halt. Her sister in law did not take too kindly to Mavis's visits even though she readily accepted her money and the gifts that she took them. After Mavis stopped her visits, she still sent money to her brother.

When he became a victim to a mining disaster and lost his life, Mavis took a month off to go and perform the burial

rituals and be a source of comfort to her sister-in-law. But she came back home as soon as the burial ceremony was over. Her sister-in-law did not want to have any ties to her. She didn't want Mavis there to intrude on her privacy. Unbeknownst to her husband or Mavis, she had a boyfriend while she was married to Mavis's brother. And she did not want Mavis's interference. Never having married, Mavis had cried that she had no family left. We soon made her put that thought to rest since we were her family. She could live with us till her dying day.

Mavis was a happy, carefree, funny and very opinionated individual. I remember all the tongue lashings I got when I was a rumbustious teenager. She was traditionally built with her hair always weaved into a tight braid. A scarf was always knotted around her head. She had the clean smell of lifebuoy soap mingled with Clere Lotion and a hint of Vicks Vaporub that she applied to her full, well-defined lips. Her set of perfect white teeth enhanced her wide dimpled smile. I loved the magwenyas and the mealie bread that she used to make and the funny Zulu stories and anecdotes she would tell. She was also very spiritual and honoured her ancestors. She believed in keeping the ancestors happy to receive protection and ward off evil spirits.

Mavis was also very superstitious. She would put a brick beneath each leg of her bed. When asked why, she would relate the story of the tokoloshe. The tokoloshe was said to be a brown, hairy dwarf that caused mischief and evil. It was said to have a long penis and that it raped women. Mainly single women. This scared Mavis to her bones. We were banned from even uttering the word tokoloshe. It was often sent by someone's enemy to cause illness and sometimes death.

She was protective over me like a mother hen. A healing balm when I was ill; a friend and a confidant, my warm blanket. She was a pillar of strength during my two miscarriages. I smile through my tears when I think of the way she would pronounce the word happy. 'Heppie' she would say, with a lopsided grin. 'Darling', her term of endearment for me, would be pronounced 'Daleeeng'.

Oh Mavis! I burst out into fresh sobs. The tears just rained down uncontrollably. It just struck me then that a few nights earlier while she was clearing the dinner table the owl hooted outside on the Moringa tree. Her face became as pale as the moon outside. When I asked her what was wrong she hesitated and then replied that when an owl hooted it meant that someone was going to harm you. It also meant death.

We gave Mavis a very dignified funeral respecting her tradition. I made sure she had a fine church service and burial in accordance with her beliefs. Her few friends were present as well as my entire family. She lay so restful in her ebony casket. Her face was etched with a peaceful smile. I placed a red rose on her chest and promised we would see each other again in the afterlife. She believed in the afterlife, my daleeeeng Mavis!

The next couple of days were a blur. My sweet, loving and attentive husband never left my side. He was a real source of comfort and a pillar of strength.

Detective Khumalo phoned me a few days later. What he told me left me horror struck and alarmed. Arsenic was found in Mavis's blood samples. A large dose! There must be some mistake!! But there was no mistake. Shrien and I were taken in for questioning. The detectives were satisfied with what we had told them and found no logical reason

why we would want our beloved housekeeper dead. She was worth more to us alive.

Mavis would visit me often in my dreams. They seemed surreal. She would point out dead ants covered in a silvery powder on the kitchen sink. She would point at Shrien's sleeping form with blood on his hands. I would get up shaking and in a cold sweat. I did not know what to make of my dreams. I just called them nightmares and left it at that.

Shrien was away again for a few days so mum and dad came to stay. We had just sat down to dinner when the doorbell rang. The cold night air greeted me as I opened the door to find Detective Khumalo wiping his shoes on the welcome mat. I invited him in although he was already half way to the lounge. "You had better sit down my dear." he said. "I have been investigating this case and some light has been shed on some issues. Are you aware that six months ago your husband had taken out an insurance policy of two million rands on your life? He is the sole beneficiary should anything happen to you."

I was dumbstruck! Was this one of my nightmares?

"Mavis was not the intended victim. You were!" he continued.

This is a nightmare!! His words goose-bumped my flesh and froze my limbs. "There is more" he stammered hesitantly.

"What is it?" my voice was quivering.

Averting his eyes from me his gaze came to rest on the wall frame and he said, "He has been seen many times in the company of a woman. They seem to be very close"

Mum gripped my hand and steadied me into the recliner. It just couldn't be! This only happens in the movies. Mavis was dead so this was really happening. I just couldn't believe it. Sweet, loving, attentive and caring Shrien! He always professed his love for me. He had just surprised me a few weeks ago with tickets to go to Thailand and Sri Lanka in November. I was so looking forward to that trip. I had never been outside the borders of South Africa. So can you imagine my excitement and euphoria at being given the tickets?

The truth fell on me like a ton of lead. All the whispered phone calls. The late night text messages. His frequent dinners with so called clients. How could I not have seen this? How could I have been so naïve and gullible? He had been pulling the wool over my eyes and I was so blind not to notice it. I had been a real dumb-ass. All the signs were there but I had been a real idiot and overlooked them. Waves of anger coursed through me. How could he do this to me? To poor Mavis? How long had he been cheating? Who was she? I was sure it was that slut-face bimbo whom he had hired as his receptionist. Well I guess she was doing more than answering the phone and doing the filing. She was also giving him a good service. I am going to show him! Son of a bitch!

“Remember?” Detective Khumalo's voice sliced through my thoughts. “The morning of Mavis's death you mentioned giving her your pain capsules? Well I am certain he had emptied the contents of one of your capsules and filled it with arsenic instead. A deadly dose! It would precipitate a heart attack or a haemorrhage or a stroke. He didn't anticipate your unknowingly giving Mavis the capsule.”

Poor Mavis. Still my protector even in death!

A painful twinge of sadness gripped at my heart. It made sense. It made a lot of sense. He did not accidentally drop

the capsules when he feigned a headache and asked me for my pain capsules. He had intentionally dropped them down the drain. He was making sure that I had exactly a week's supply left. This way I would have definitely taken that dreaded deadly capsule before he got back home. He would have had an airtight alibi.

Although we were certain beyond a doubt that he had done it, we had no proof. It seemed that he would get away with it scot free. Detective Khumalo advised me to be very careful. The fact that he had tried to kill me and had failed meant that he would try again. Mum and dad had worry painted all over their faces. They were panicking and wanted me to start packing and to leave immediately with them. I nearly did. I was terrified. Petrified!

But I just could not leave it like that. I needed time to think. And what was I going to say to him? Did you try to kill me? Are you responsible for Mavis's death? I already knew how he would react to that. Denial. Denial. Denial. I did not have any proof to rub in his face. Mum and dad wanted to stay even after his arrival but I advised against it. It would induce suspicion. I promised them that I would be very careful. I had Detective Khumalo's and their phone numbers on speed dial. The pepper spray and a knife lay comfortably in my headboard drawer.

My cunning, conniving, deceitful, money loving, murdering husband arrived home a few days later. He greeted me with his usual warm kisses, not even a hint of misdemeanour. He could put Johnny Depp to shame when it came to acting skills. I was shaking on the inside. I forced myself to act normally and not arouse suspicion. I prepared all his favourite foods not giving away a hint that something was amiss. I laid out the table with dishes of roti, kebabs, tandoori chicken, mint chutney and for desert, Malva pudding with an extra-large scoop of vanilla ice cream and

a dollop of chocolate sauce. I could see how much he was enjoying his meal.

After his shower I asked him if he would please go down the road to the BP Express Shop to buy me a bottle of ENO. “All those hot spices have upset my tummy” I complained.

“Anything for my honeybee,” he retorted, grabbing the car keys.

I stared at the grandfather clock that was waving time away. The expected knock eventually came. The police officer took off his hat. I heard him say ... “husband” ... “accident” ... “dead”.

I smiled inwardly as I feigned shock and a dramatic faint. The rest of the words echoed ... “stung by bees in the car. He must have been driving with the window open past the blossoming pear trees down the road. The bees must have got in. I don’t think he had his allergy kit with him.”

**OFF COURSE HE DIDN’T!!!**

I took it out when I emptied the jar of bees into the car while he was showering. The motion of the car would have certainly agitated the bees enough to sting with a vengeance.

After all, he did call me his HONEYBEE.

Revenge - as sweet as Honey!!!

# AN UNEXPECTED VISITOR

Sudhira Sham

I did not recognise her at first. She looked so fragile and tender, sitting on the veranda like a friend waiting to share a secret. I looked into her fathomless eyes. They were filled with compassion. Even as her identity dawned on me, I was unafraid. Death: beautiful, loving, welcoming and compassionate. Her presence was so comforting that I found myself wanting to lay my head in her gentle lap and close my eyes.

Was it really so easy, so wonderfully easy, to accept Death as a friend? Why wasn't I afraid? Why did I not shrink back and quiver in fear?

She smiled at me and asked gently, "Are you ready?"

What? No fearsome hood, no bloodthirsty scythe? No threatening, fearful spectre. I almost laughed. Whose idea was it anyway to portray Death as scary and to be feared? I thought about my answer for some time.

Death sat calm and relaxed, not concerned with time. Strangely I felt no need to reply with words. She sensed my emotion and understood my feelings. I was confused –unsure whether I should leave everything behind and go with her or stay behind and do what I was doing everyday:

being someone's sister, aunt, grand aunt, friend or confidante. She understood the dilemma I faced.

"If you stay," she said, without changing her expression, "You have to change." I looked at her, not understanding. "Everything changes. The seasons, people, the times. Life is about change. When you don't make the change on your own, I come to help. I am everywhere, all the time. You needed me so I came."

"Why do you say I needed you? I don't remember calling for you or even wishing to die. How can you say that?"

"I have been with you a long time. It is not your body that is dying, although that too is happening a little every day. It is your spirit. You. Who you really are."

"I am still alive." I said warily.

"Yes, you are, but are you alive like her?" She pointed ahead and I saw a little girl with her dog trotting faithfully alongside her. It was me! Seven years old, laughing a really happy laugh because I had found a patch of touch-me-nots.

"Well, I grew up and changed," I muttered sulkily. "You just said I couldn't remain the same forever."

"You did change. You grew. Your body changed. Your thinking changed. You fell in love. You fell out of love. You worked and had fun. You loved life. And now you have stopped. You are not changing. You are only repeating what you did last week, last month, last year. In fact you have not made any good changes in the last four years. If you were happy, I would not have come. As I said before, I have been with you for a long time. You have been dying for a long time. I have come to take what is left."

Every time she said “you”, I flinched. She said it a lot and it made me think about myself. My soul felt papery, dry and insubstantial. It did not feel robust or light. It felt worn out with promises not kept and tattered along the edges by little white lies and false smiles made to please others. It was tired, too. Tired of being dull and unenthusiastic and tired of being unhappy.

Death understood. She had seen the signs a million times before. She felt sad when someone followed her without question when they should have chosen life instead. They were ready for the wrong reason. They were tired of living because they did not LIVE, did not love life and what they did. It was different with the wise ones. They took care of their souls, nourished them with good deeds and happiness and made them strong. If they repeated their actions, it was because those actions were the right ones. They strode firmly alongside her with determined strides. They were ready when she came.

It was not too late. “You can change.” Death said. “If you really want to. Be happy. Do something you really like doing. Do it for yourself.”

She stood up and strode off without a backward glance. I gazed at her retreating back wistfully, tempted to call aloud to her that I had changed my mind after all but she had disappeared among the trees at the edge of the garden and I was alone. Just me and the possibility of change for life.

# WINDING WIND

Sudhira Sham

I watched the fallen leaves flutter to the ground and lift and scuttle along, nudged reluctantly by a desultory breeze. The breeze seemed not at all enthusiastic to move the golden leaves along. It was almost as if the wind was taking a break from its duty to enjoy the last of the warm summer sunshine or gathering its strength to perform its great work. Every few minutes it made an effort to lift a few leaves up as if wanting to admire them in the sun's slanting rays. It played with the leaves gently, not breaking up the fragile crispness or the gossamer wings of the aging gold parchments.

Was this wind the same hurricane that crushed a little nation in Haiti, flattening houses and flinging cars off roads? Could it have been the same typhoon that flattened trees and swept fishermen to their deaths?

Maybe this innocuous breeze was once a killer tornado, picking up houses and barns and school buses in Kansas and had then decided to retire to a quiet corner of the world to replenish its force before it returned to its destructive ways with a vengeance. It looked innocent enough. More like a kitten than a tiger, with its soft, soft kitten paws playing with the golden leaves in the golden sunshine.

Whatever it could have been or wherever it could have blown, it was here now, gentle, soft, loving, probably thinking of soothing a fevered child's brow or carrying a grandmother's lilting lullaby to sentimental ears. Would it have curled around the legs of carefree children lolloping with their kites over grassy hills? Or perhaps, scattered some artist's sketches of dreamy landscapes from his portfolio.

Had it once carried death to dusty orphans with distended bellies and skinny legs or had it just come from a princess' balcony where it played with her flowing tresses as it cooled her rosy cheeks?

Was it the same monsoon bringing welcome rain to the upturned, expectant faces of weather beaten Indian farmers whose prayers fell from parched lips. Or maybe it was the Chinook that shrivelled everything in its path.

But it was here now, in a peaceful corner of my garden, playing with leaves and resting like a lamb in springtime, dreaming of the time it blew snow in the face of Alexander the Great as he crossed the Himalayas into India or Scott as he raced to the Pole or Amelia Earheart as she soared high above the land. Did it remember King Arthur in all his glory or some poor beggar huddled in the street?

Did it find its way to little children labouring in airless rooms, weaving carpets for uncaring tourists to carry over the ocean to sterile homes in need of someone else's sweat to make them beautiful ?

Did it caress heartbroken widows of soldiers who died in meaningless wars or shake dictators to the core? Did it care at all that children were terrified of bombs falling around

them while it blew winter to their country? Or did it simply blow over them to the beaches of the Mediterranean to cool happy swimmers relaxing in the sun.

Dispassionate or Compassionate? Is it just the wind, blowing without knowing, just a force of nature or imbued with human kindness or cruelty. Vayu: majestic, powerful, life giving force playing gently with the leaves in my garden.

# SENIOR CITIZEN

Muthal Naidoo

When you become a senior citizen people's attitudes toward you change drastically. Suddenly, you find a ring of vultures surrounding you, waiting for you to die. Having been declared redundant, forced to retire and pushed onto the verge, you apparently have no purpose except to bequeath if you have anything to bequeath. And if your health takes a nosedive, you seem even more useless and pathetic. Society no longer recognises your ability to contribute despite the fact that you have become wiser in your old age than you were earlier, when you were a cog in the machine. But you are treated as incompetent and weak.

As a cog you took your existence for granted. You went to school, to work and raised a family. No one, not even you, questioned the perfunctory nature of your existence. And once you fall out of the machine, nobody can understand how you fitted-in in the first place. And then, if you are seen to be involved in any kind of activity, you are regarded with condescending sympathy, "Ah, so you are keeping busy." You send a look that says, "At least I am aware that I am keeping busy."

Without a job, your active brain apparently has nothing to feed it. People tell you to do crossword puzzles, Sudoku, play bridge and join senior citizen soirees. These things don't restore a sense of purpose. They are distractions from feelings of uselessness.

All nonsense – you have at last come into your own.

As a pensioner, it is the time in your life when you have the opportunity to be most inventive. Like an artist, you are free at last to explore your real interests and recreate yourself. It really isn't too late. In fact, you are at the beginning of *genuine* existence. Before, you were a slave to the machine, always putting aside the things that really interested you for the sake of the job and the family. Now, at last and for the first time, you are free. Now, at last, you can be the trailblazer of your life.

But the strange thing about freedom is that for most people it is a frightening condition; like Columbus and Magellan, you have to take to the seas without a map and with only a small compass. If you cling to fear and go back into your memories, you become fixated on the past and become a ghost of yourself. You exist only as a former incarnation of yourself and are an outsider intimidated by new norms. You don't realise that you have stopped living and are trying to stop time.

Constantly dredging up old happenings that you live and relive, you are caught in a vortex, churning up the same happenings over and over; you cannot move forward. The desire for what has been and cannot be again, overwhelms you and you retreat from present realities because you cannot find yourself in them. And so you either withdraw to continue a benign but pointless existence waiting for death or, if your outrage gets the better of you, you begin to present with various forms of senile dementia and become a burden on yourself and all those around you.

As you are marginalised when you have retired, you tend to think that there is nothing more for you to achieve. True, you are not at the centre of things any more, but that does

not mean that you are nothing and your only function is to wait for death. When Copernicus made us aware that ours was a solar system and that the earth was not at its centre, we did not commit suicide. Instead we began to explore and gained a greater appreciation of our unique existence in an ever expanding, infinite universe.

Though society relegates you to the margins, you are still alive so when you become a senior citizen, it is NOT time to retire. It is a time, according to Hinduism, to embark on the fourth stage of life, that of a sannyasi: “One who, having had his fill of the material world, having fulfilled his family duties, turns to the spiritual path, and dedicates his life to the spiritual growth of himself ...”

The reference to spiritual growth in the above quotation does not have to mean prayer and meditation unless that is what you choose. You are free to determine what you mean by spiritual growth. Before you retired your growth was structured by society. Now you can determine your own growth. Having been bumped from the centre of the social universe, you finally have the opportunity and the *freedom* to explore and discover your true self. So *explore!* If you put aside fear and set sail, you will find adventure because you are creating it.

You live in a world in which knowledge increases exponentially so by the time you get to be over sixty, you have become a child again and are at the beginning of learning. If you love yourself, you will allow yourself to embark on a quiet, even solitary journey that expands the knowledge you have already acquired, a journey that reveals more of you to yourself. It could be the most exciting adventure that you have ever embarked on. Excitement does not have to mean the roller coaster ride of an action movie; it often is the quiet but exhilarating

encounter with new ways of living, living – not existing – *living*. You don't realise it but you only existed before, when you were a cog in the machine doing the things that others expected of you. Now you can live. Now you can employ the skills that you have developed to express yourself in new ways.

Your life begins again, a private life of personal satisfaction.



