

Cia is my sister and I am her leader. The two of us are sitting on the flagstone steps outside the kitchen door eating our peanut butter and jam sandwiches. Cia peels hers apart, as she always does, and slowly licks out the filling, while I squash the slices of bread together between my palms until they turn doughy and ooze peanut butter and jam goo, then gulp it down.

Sometimes we take tea like the Afs do, dunking our sandwiches into our green enamel mugs, then taking a dripping bite, followed by a swig, which we swill around in our mouths before swallowing. We have to pretend our sandwiches are nothing like the dainty little crustless quarters we're served, but are instead hunking Af door-stoppers.

Anyway, it's called mixing cement and we aren't allowed to mix cement. If we get caught – spluttering cement and giggling – Mum hollers at us not to be so disgusting all our disgusting little lives. We only do it to sort of charf like Afs and in the end we always go back to the peeling-and-licking and mashing. Afterwards we loll around lizardly on the rough stone, licking crumbs off our fingers.

Cia is smaller than me, but not by much, and she's been here as far back as either of us can remember, but we've found that somehow, being bigger and older, I know all the things that Cia does not so I am the induna.

'What shall we do now?' she asks, after a while.

'Don' know,' is my reply. So we saunter on down to the swings – just worn tyres sawn in half and hung from a branch of an old acacia tree if I'm being truthful – in which we coil ourselves up, twisting the rope tighter and tighter until it will twist no more, then kicking off with our feet and spinning wildly undone. I feel a little ill but, still, it's a good way to pass the time.

Not for Cia, though. She's rocking dolefully now, waiting for something, anything, to disrupt the steady rhythm of our day. Over the years that have passed – seven and a half for Cia, eight and three-quarters for me – our days on the farm where we were both born have come to have a sameness about them, a metronome of ritual metring out the well-worn path of the sun across the faded blue sky.

And there's nowhere but the farm. It's far to the end of it – to the fence line that takes the fence boy days on end to get around – and far from there to anywhere. Dad says it's only twenty miles down the dirt road to Umtali, but twenty miles sure feels far when you're hanging on the back of the Landie. Normally, after swinging, we plop ants into the ant-lion lairs under the swing tree. Ant-lion lairs are tiny ant-lionmade craters in the earth. Ants who slip (or get pitched) into a crater never get out – the sides are way too steep and too loose to climb – but the ants bust a gut trying, and that's what springs the trap: the dirt avalanche they set off, scabbling frantically up the

embankment, rouses the slumbering antlion. He claws his way out from a secret chamber beneath the lair and eats them alive.

But today is different. Today Cia gets just what she's been waiting for: an ear-splitting shriek pierces the air. We elbow out of our tyres and race down to the Afs' khaya towards the shrieking.

We arrive to find a chicken slaughter under way. Even though as many chickens hatch on the farm as are slaughtered, still Cia and I relish the slaughters. We clamber up the sides of the compost heap to get a bird's eye view from a warm nest of rotting vegetation churning with fat green chipolata worms.

We aren't really allowed to skulk around down by the khaya like two mongrels, but we go on down there and have us a good look. The compound buildings are low and squat with dark doorways yawning in the whitewash. All the farm workers live there, with their wives and picanins, about forty families. The compound is ringed by rickety mud huts with roofs made of bits of stick and hay, like in the three little pigs, and there are hordes of picanins scrambling about in the dirt courtyard that's been pounded and brushed bald. They are named Siphon, Themba, Javu and whatnot; they have scabby knees and belly-buttons that stick out like shiny black marbles. They stare at me and Cia something rude, but old Blessing's always nice to us. She squats down by the fire and gives us a hunk of sadza dipped in sugar to suck. Our grandfather, Oupa, says we're naught better than a pack of scavengers.

The chickens that are going to die today have already been caught from the chicken run and brought to the executioner's block, the stump of an old tree – decently out of the other chickens' sight. They huddle together in their cage, clucking quietly, but to me it sounds quietly hysterical. The executioner, who is also our old houseboy Jobe, is standing by, an axe clasped in his hand, ready to behead the condemned chickens. Blessing, Jobe's wife, is busy plucking dead chickens at a galvanized sink a short way off, the water bloody and roiling with feathers. And while the whole business of the beheading makes for a great spectacle, it is really for the aftermath of a killing that we watch and wait. We sing the chorus from 'Here Comes the Axeman to Chop Off Your Head' in the interval.

'Chip, chop! Chip, chop! The last man's dead,' Cia yells lustily.

Then, pinioning a chicken by the neck, Jobe swings his axe. He slows for a heartbeat at the height of his arc. There is a sharp intake of breath from Cia, and she grips my wrist as the blade falls, severing the chicken's head. We flinch. And then, incredibly, headless and lifeless, the chicken wrenches free and proceeds to run in wild circles, blood spurting from the gaping artery. Cia's nails dig deeper and deeper into my flesh as the chicken performs its dance of death, until at last, drained of its lifeblood and spirit, it falls. Only when it lies utterly still does she let go, leaving behind small white crescents in my skin. I hear a warm, damp sigh close to my ear. Over and over we watch, stricken, as a chicken, dead but still alive, dances for us.

It is late afternoon by the time we head wearily back along the winding track towards the farmhouse, our shadows grotesque by the time it comes into view. I am shadowed, too, by foreboding.

The old house feels like a ruin, somehow. The pillars stationed along the length of the front veranda are being slowly strangled by Zimbabwe creeper, and a frilly grey lichen is feeding off the gangrenous roof slate. Inside, the house is high-ceilinged, cool and dark, but the 'art deco' tiles, imported from Europe for the entrance hall, are fractured now, crisscrossed with dark veins, and the Zambezi teak beams in the rest of the house are rotten in places. They creak and groan in the night as if tortured in their sleep by something that prowls up there in the eaves.

Its name is Modjadji, the rain goddess, and it was built by our great-grandfather in 1912, which is so long ago that there is no one still alive who remembers it. The year is carved in relief on an oval white plaque set into the plaster of the Cape Dutch gable. Sometimes I think of the hands that carved it in 1912, dead hands. It was Great-grandfather who first staked the surrounding land in the shadow of the Vumba mountains, which are in the east of our country, Rhodesia. Oupa tells over and over the tale of how Great-grandfather had to toil for years to hew the farm from the savage African land. It was his blood, sweat and tears that watered the earth, and every generation since has borne his legacy. It is Cia's and my duty to bear Great-grandfather's legacy too, when the time comes, although it is a crying shame we aren't sons.

There is a faded sepia daguerreotype of Great-grandfather, framed in ornate pewter, standing on the mantel above the stone hearth in the voorkamer. Sometimes I hoist Cia up so she can snatch it down, and we pore over it, somehow yoked to this echo of the past. To be honest, though, in his old-fashioned collar, with his stiffness and haughty chin, Great-grandfather looks rather forbidding. It's in his eyes most of all – they're colourless and polite. After a while, I have to turn away. If I look at that portrait for too long, I can feel his ghostly eyes watching.

Outside, the decay goes on, but it is a glorious kind of decay. Decadent. The air is sultry, perfumed, but with a sweetly sick scent – 'putrid', Oupa says. It seems to soften the light, veiling the too-vivid colours in the garden. 'Bloody obscene,' he says of it, shaking his head. 'Like a Parisian bordello.'

Bougainvillea spills down from a tall conifer, huge tree ferns unfurl themselves from the time before Eden, and the soil in which Cia and I love to root is rich and loamy and slithers with dark, slimy creatures of the underworld. Ripe mangoes burst, their fermenting guts gorged on by fat fruitflies who die drunk, bloated and addled in the sun.

'It's what happens when you try to foist England on savagery,' Oupa mutters darkly. 'Gets all corrupted like – rank and fetid. But will that mam of yours, nostalgic for something she's never known, ever see past her quaint, too-garish flowerbeds to the stink of corruption underneath? Will she buggery!'

He broods for a while. 'What is it she won't see, lasses?'

'The stink of corruption, Oupa.'

'Aye, that she won't, quixotic as she is wont to be. Her and her fancies.'

Mom ignores Oupa and the stink, though. She may have given up on Modjadji – the great rotting hulk – but to her garden she is devoted.

The terraces carved up the steep mountainside behind the house grow ever more unruly as they climb higher, until they disappear into the dark tangle of virgin forest.

Tree pythons slowly tighten their hold on the boughs of their host trees, their long, serpentine roots grasping back down to the soil; the lush undergrowth is alive with the whisper and clawing of small, secret lives; fungus sprouts from slick, rotted tree trunks, suckling on death. In the forest, the living prey upon the dead.

There are ancient Shangani warriors buried up there, and sometimes the rains plunder the graves, washing the warrior skeletons down the mountain, angering the ancestors, cursing the earth.

Oupa calls it Paradise Lost, and it's Cia's and mine. Today, though, homeward bound, my unease has solely to do with the matter of us wearing our ponchos. They are magnificent, crocheted in every shade of ice-cream imaginable and fringed with tassels, but splattered now with chicken blood and smeared with compost heap. This morning when I pulled them off their coat-hangers at the back of our wardrobe it had seemed a fine idea. Even Cia didn't take much persuading.

'Jislaaik, man, Nyree!' She sucked in her breath and flicked her wrist. 'You're gonna get it!'

'Why? Are you gonna tell, hey?' I spat, as scornfully as I could.

She stared at me for a long, loaded moment, then at the ponchos, and succumbed to the goading right there and then, telling me to shut up and snatching hers from my hand.

We each donned a poncho, then vigorously rubbed Vaseline jelly on to our cheeks to shine them up, and took turns shoving each other out of the way the better to see ourselves in the old stained mirror that's mounted on the door of our big wooden wardrobe. At the time, in her ice-cream poncho, with ridiculously shiny cheeks, Cia was most pleased with herself, but she sure is sorry now. Matters are made worse because she is wearing my purple leotard underneath her blood- and slime-streaked poncho. Secretly, I'm scared witless of Mom catching us, and catch us she surely will.

As I glance up, I spy her lying in wait for us on the stoep, she having spotted the ponchos from some way off. I shove my hands deep into my dungarees

pockets and whistle tunelessly, as if I haven't a care in this world, while out of the corner of my eye I see Cia trying for a bashful-like smile, but she ends up looking sassy.

Cia's face has a cheekiness about it that cheats her of her sweetness, and a smile like a Cheshire cat that slits her eyes. All up, she reminds you of a small, wickedly smug Chinese monkey – but cute in a way against which I can't compete.

Still, cute won't save either of us today. As we reach the steps, my whistling gets more tuneless, while Cia gives up and looks plain scared.

I don't blame her. Mom has a face on her enough to scare the bejesus out of anyone. She stares and says not a word, which makes me start gabbling on about how me and Cia got attacked by a khaya dog that looked fit to have rabies, and how he tried to eat the ponchos and how we were lucky to escape being eaten ourselves, but Oupa, from the shadows behind Mom, says he can see the lie festering in my teeth, and Mom, without even deigning to bring up the beastly business of the ruined ponchos, just hisses, 'Get to your room. Now. And come out for supper only if you want to be thrashed to within an inch of your lives.'

I trudge upstairs with Cia on my tail. We're supposed to sit and think about how ashamed we are of ourselves, but later on, hungry and bored instead of ashamed, we spy on the Man instead. Every night after the generator dies, we take up our sentry posts. Kneeling on my bed, draped in the secret shadowy space beneath the bottle-green Paisley swirls of the curtains, Cia clutching Grover, her mangy, one-eyed teddy bear, we watch him through the pane. Lurking in the shadows of the neighbouring shed, he seems to be wearing a trilby tilted over his face and a long, shapeless trenchcoat. He stands utterly still, threatening. Part of me knows he isn't really there, that he's just shadows and light, but I still watch him with something crawling up the nape of my neck.

Afterwards I lie in the dark, my heart pounding from my chest cavity into my head, listening to its echo through my pillow. It sounds uncannily like the crunching of footsteps on gravel.

'Nyree?' Cia whispers, in the spidery darkness. 'Are you awake?'

Silence.

'Nyreee,' she whispers again, insistently.

I pretend to mumble sleepily.

'Can I come and sleep in your bed? Please?'

I sigh. 'All right, then,' I say in a tone I don't feel, but which I know both of us need to hear. Cia and Grover scramble across the spidery, crawling corridor between our beds and we snuggle down gratefully together.