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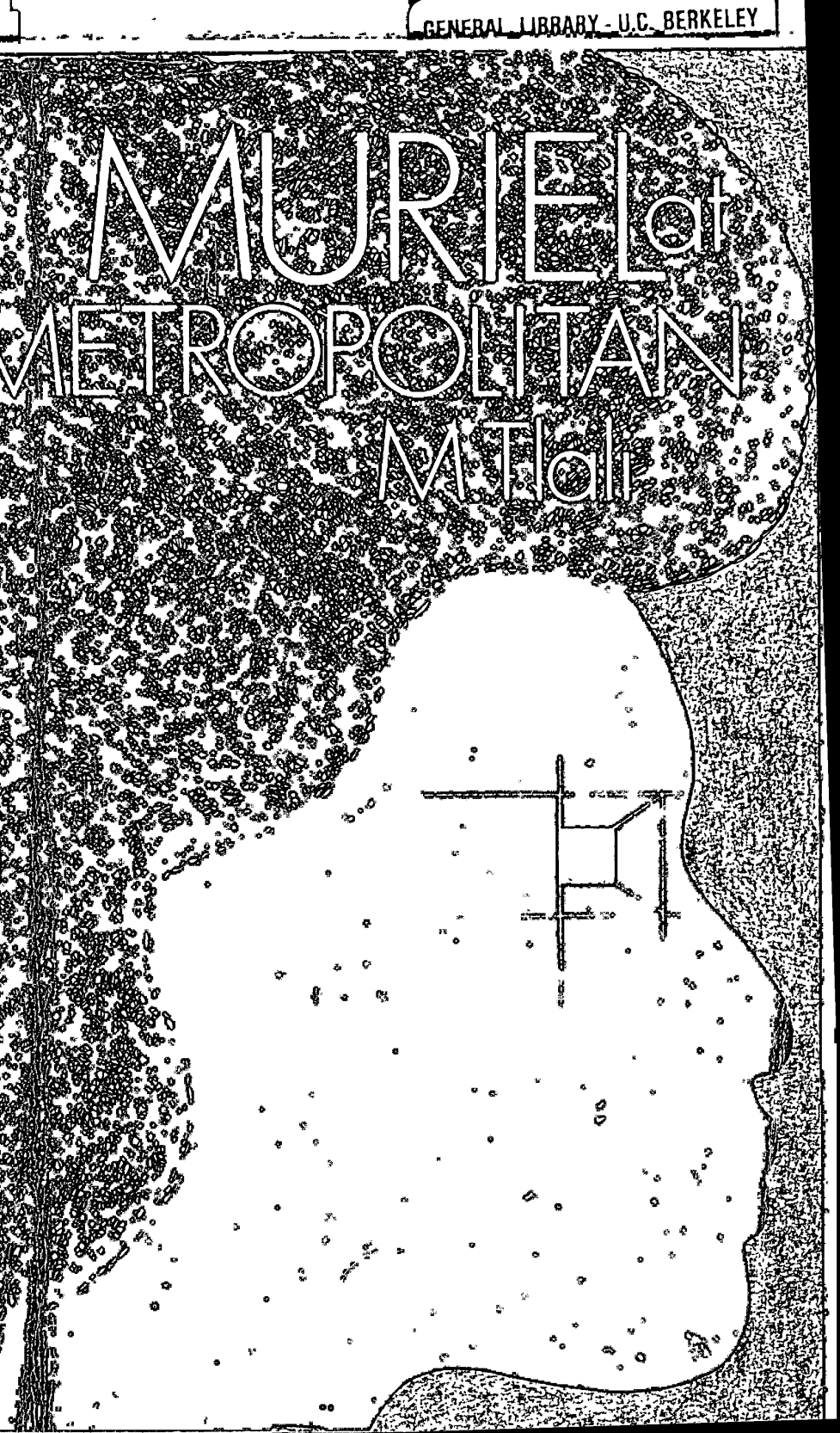
MURIEL at METROPOLITAN



MURIEL AT METROPOLITAN

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M. TLALI

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RAVAN PRESS
Johannesburg 1975

(2)

Published and distributed by Ravan Press,
508 Diakonia House, 80 Jorissen St.,
Braamfontein, Transvaal, 2017

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ISBN 0 86975 045 3

First printed August 1975

75-332893

Designed by Wim Reinders
Printed by Galvin & Sales, 170 Buitengracht Street, Cape Town

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FOREWORD

Muriel's story tells of ordinary workaday experiences. She talks "shop" but with this difference – she neither raises her voice nor flexes her intonations as we all do when (usually irksomely for others) we talk about our jobs. With restraint and humour she tells us what it was like working for Mr Bloch and his people in a furniture and radio store.

There are no strongly dramatic moments in the narrative, no unbearable tensions leading to climactic peaks. There *are* tense moments of anger and anxiety such as we all suffer at work. And there are the usual moments of resentment which we all experience when we feel we are being imposed upon, or overworked and underpaid. But here the similarity of Muriel's story with any white's shop-talk story ends. From beginning to end her narrative handles with superb control a condition of compounded unawareness which surrounds the white workers on "the other side" of the cashier's grill. Every day the whites inflict innumerable petty insults on the blacks, ignorant – to be as undisparaging as possible – that they are being insulting; that the blacks are perfectly capable of feeling wounded; and doubly ignorant that the blacks view and discuss their speech and behaviour with a critical ability which they, the whites, through their complacency, have deprived themselves of. The whites take awkward pride in not being able to cope with the African names of the customers: an elementary knowledge of the vernacular might not only have made the daily course of business easier but might also have given the whites an intimation of how the blacks were responding to them.

What struck me in particular when I first read this manuscript was the writer's exposé of how whites in offices pamper and coddle themselves. If tea is not served, tempers run high; a slight headache can spoil a white woman's day; unremitting work is a torture; time-off is expected for shopping, etc; and loud chatter the normal thing when the boss is out. But the same self-pamperers are indifferent as to whether blacks drink tea or not. They disbelieve that blacks can feel ill or experience family problems. They expect non-stop activity from their black colleagues, and find nothing more irritating than black people talking heartily together. But the writer touches on an even more sensitive spot in this dichotomous arrangement when she deals with the question of lavatories for the black workers. The indifference of the whites is so thorough that they are even insensible of the black person's normal reserve (as natural as their own) about the use of the lavatory. So the black person has to put up with totally inadequate facilities, as the writer so cleverly depicts. Or he may be prevented from working for a more scrupulous white who would like to but cannot supply the required separate facilities because he, the employer, is afraid of "them" – the Authorities. Muriel ends up jobless partly

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because of this absurd situation, but primarily because her ordinary human decency cannot tolerate the bluff, unashamed dishonesty of Metropolitan Radio's dealings with their black customers.

The concerns of this narrative, in terms of the accustomed themes of the English novel, might be considered petty. Muriel's story moreover is never strident in hatred or resentment against those who have turned her, in Fanon's words, into "an object in the midst of other objects". There is even at times a latent warmth in her attitude towards those on "the other side", a warmth which she knows they will never allow to develop. But this story should enlighten, surprise, and even delight readers, both black and white, and perhaps it will serve as encouragement to more black South Africans, at present in silence, to examine and express their lives.

Sheila Roberts
Johannesburg, 1975

To My Mother, Moleboheng

1

The boss walked in fast past the waiting customers to the other side of the counter behind the burly bespectacled white cashier.

'What's going on here, Pont? Why is the shop so full?' he asked.

'Bruce, there, is waiting for his commission,' said Pont, pointing to a tall neatly-dressed black who stood leaning against an old radiogram, his arms folded. He seemed bored and tired, possibly of waiting. The cashier added;

'Those standing in a queue are waiting to pay. That one next to Bruce, with a cap in his hand, has been sent by Day-Nite Patrol. He's a night-watch boy. You asked them to send you one yesterday, remember? Those mineboys there near Adam are refusing to pay; they say they want to see the boss.'

He pointed to three very dark-skinned, bushy-haired Africans who stood also with their arms folded, staring blankly in front of them. The boss removed his jacket and hung it on a stand next to the glass wall showcase which stood behind a woman with red hair. The customers waiting to pay gave way as he returned to this side of the counter, beckoning to the night-watchman.

'You. Come here quick!' He sounded impatient.

'Bruce, ask this boy how much he earned where he comes from.'

'Five Pounds a week,' Bruce said, interpreting.

'From what time to what time?'

'Five to five.'

'Tell him I want him to be here from six in the night to six in the morning. All right?'

'Yes.'

'You must be here every night. If I find you drunk, I'll throw you out. If I find you sleeping, you go. If you miss out one night, I chuck you out and I don't pay you. Come, give me your pass.'

The boss held out his arm impatiently. The man quickly took out his pass from the inner pocket of his coat and gave it to him. Turning to a second white woman, also sitting on the other side of the iron bars, he said;

'Here, Lieda, here's his pass. Just check if it's all right and then we can send him to Pass Office for registration.'

Again addressing the new night-watchman, the boss said;

'You must be here at a quarter-to-six hey?'

'How will he get to the Pass Office, Larry?' asked Lieda.

'It's about three miles away,' put in Bruce.

'Yes, it's far,' said the woman; 'and it will take him the whole day unless he is with a white person.'

'Who shall we send? There's nobody here. Lennie has gone out but maybe he won't be long,' said the boss. Then turning to the night-watchman he said, 'Go. Go and wait outside. I'll call you in later when the other boss comes.'

'And now, what do you want?' he said, pointing to the very dark-skinned Africans who were staring at him morose and motionless. The one nearest to the boss was just about to say something when he impatiently pushed him away.

'Stand that way!'

The boss's eyes focussed on an approaching white couple, presumably customers.

'Can I help you?' he said, smiling.

'Yes, please,' replied the gentleman, also smiling. 'Can we have a look at your bedroom suites, please?'

'With pleasure. After you, Madam.' The boss pointed the way to where the bedroom suites were displayed and followed closely behind the couple. After about five minutes he returned and said to the woman with the red hair sitting behind the counter;

'Mrs Stein, will you please attend to those customers. They want to buy a bedroom suite and they can't make up their minds. I just want to clear this shop a bit.'

He looked towards the three Africans who were still standing motionless and staring blankly. He went up to them and asked each one in turn, pointing;

'What do *you* want, and *you,* and *you*?'

The man nearest him mumbled something, the boss cocked his ear, leaning slightly towards him.

'Hmm . . . I can't hear. What did you say?'

But he could not get anything from them. They just stood there at attention, motionless, staring. The boss shouted:

'Adam! Get rid of these boys, man. They've been too long here, man. What are they all standing here and bothering me for? What do they want?'

The elderly African with the soiled dust-coat answered,'They wanta repair, Baas. They don wanta pay six rands for repair, Baas.'

He addressed one of them in Fanagalo. The man produced a piece of paper and handed it to the boss.

'Where's the radio? What has been done to it?'

'There, Baas, on the table. Dire kod and new eriel.'

'Dial cord and a new aerial? Tell them they've got to pay six rands, Adam. Did you put in a new battery?'

'Yes, Baas.'

'Well, I haven't even charged them for that. Tell them.'

Adam explained to them in Fanagalo. They were still unyielding. The boss decided to tackle them himself.

'Mangaki mali wena funa kipa?' (How much do you want to pay?)

The men hesitated, looking at each other. The boss bargained.

'All right. Mabili mapondo kuphela.' (Two pounds only, then.)

The three men looked astonished. They looked at each other their eyes widening and shook their heads. The boss tried again.

'Mina haikona badalisa wena lo malahla.' (I'm not charging you for the coal, meaning the battery.)

'Serataputa, senora, miranda siranda. Wena lo Portuguese eh? Wena lo Mashangaan?'

We all laughed. One of the men, grinning, took out four rands from his trouser pocket and paid. His companions laughed, with their gleaming white teeth contrasting sharply with their pitch black faces. They were given a cash slip and left.

Some of the tension and anxiety I had felt seemed to be eased off. I stood, waiting my turn. I fumbled nervously for the letter my previous employer had given me. The burly white man at the counter seemed suddenly to remember me. He pointed and said;

'Oh, Uncle Larry, that girl there; she's the new typist. She's from the unemployment agency. She's got a letter from her previous employer. I told her to wait for you. Her name is Muriel.'

That was how it all started, when I took up a post at Metropolitan Radio, a retail shop dealing in radios, furniture, and household electrical appliances.

It was arranged that I should come in on Saturdays for a trial period. As I did not work on Saturdays at Rand Bookkeepers, where I was still employed, the arrangement suited me. When I arrived on my first Saturday morning, Mr Bloch, my new boss, looked around for a chair for me to sit on. He found one and pulled it forward, but just as I was about to sit down, he whipped the rubber cushion from its seat and seemingly deep in thought placed it against the glass show-case behind us.

On the following Monday when my 'old' boss, Mr Levenstein, asked me how I felt about my new job, I had nothing to complain about except that it was too noisy at the shop. Concentration was rather difficult with all the customers walking in and out, with the continuous clicking of coins at the till and the continual buzzing of the telephone, mingled with the endless noise from the keys of the office machines and the eager, loud, unmistakable voice of Adam. And from outside came the endless droning and hooting of the traffic. I was accustomed to the quiet, airy, bookkeepers' office, high up on the eleventh floor of Helion House in Pritchard Street, where I sat alone for most hours of the day, answering telephone calls now and again. So I looked forward to coming back to my quiet office on the Monday morning.

But my movement from one place of employment to another could not go on forever. Mr Levenstein had sold his business; my trial period was over, and I had to take up my post at Metropolitan Radio permanently. In my bag I had a testimonial from Mr. Levenstein. Not that it was much of a testimonial; he had conveniently omitted to mention that

tan Radio we kept the European cards in one section separated from the non-European cards. It was all very confusing for a person who did not know the different coloured townships because that was the only clue to where the card should be filed or found. The coloured names were the same as the European ones. Inevitably a lot of misfiling occurred.

Then we had inside sales and outside sales. Inside sales were where the customers came into the shop to buy goods. Outside sales were for those customers who signed agreements outside the shop, that is, with the assistance of the agents or salesmen. There were more than six agents selling mostly in the suburbs to domestic servants living in the backyards of the white homes or at the top of blocks of flats – 'locations in the sky'. These agents were each given a scooter and free petrol by the boss. As a rule they were to report every morning with whatever monies they had collected and they were given petrol slips with which they could have their scooter tanks filled at the garage. The salesmen who came frequently into the shop, sometimes bringing in new hirepurchase agreements, were Abraham, Silas, Hudson, Simon, William No. 1 and William No. 2.

William No. 2 was liked by all the white staff. He was fondly referred to as 'Little Wil' by the white staff.

'He is as straight as a reed, that William. Never touches the boss's money,' Mrs Kuhn would say, her voice ringing with sincerity. William No. 2 travelled in his own car — a huge blue American 'Biscayne'. He was as proud of his car as he was of the position he held as top salesman for Metropolitan Radio.

'I earn more money than any other salesman in this place,' he told me. 'You will be happy to work here if that red-haired boer does not work you out of a job. With me she has failed. She's jealous of any good thing an African does. Fortunately the boss knows her and just pays lip service to what she says. Every month when I must get the cheque for my commission and she sees the amount of money I must earn, she feels like going to the lavatory to go and crap!'

'Do you have a lot of customers?' I asked.

'Hundreds! Haven't you seen my name on all the cards? Of course, maybe she won't even let you touch them; she's too jealous. I don't go in for small business like selling portable radios. I sell big things like furniture, stoves, electrical appliances, and so on. But the only thing I am not happy about is the rate of interest at this place. It's killing our people. Every time I introduce a person here, I know he'll pay and pay and pay. It makes me feel guilty, like I've brought him to be slaughtered.'

'How are the other shops? Don't they also charge interest?'

'They do. But not as high as here. You'll see.'

William No. 1 left me and descended the stairs. I sat alone thinking and trembling. I suddenly experienced a feeling of uneasiness and loneliness such a I had never experienced in a job before. I felt hopeless. How was I going to work with people who were not even prepared to give me a chance and who were squeezing as much money as they could out of my own black fellow workers?

2

There was no place quite like Metropolitan Radio. And Metropolitan Radio would not have had its unique character without its sole proprietor, the unpredictable Mr Bloch, undoubtedly the most eccentric character I have ever met.

'I am over forty years in this business and I have never had a partner,' the boss boasted to a traveller one day.

The white assistants complained that of late Mr Bloch had taken to grumbling. Once when Mrs Kuhn, his sister, pointed that out, Mrs Stein answered;

'I am not surprised, Mrs Kuhn; how can he hope to do everything alone? Be manager, business consultant, salesman, clerk, all at the same time? And he is not growing any younger. His memory isn't so good anymore.'

Ponty, the cashier, added; 'Yes, he has no manager. He uses Adam!'

Mr Bloch did not employ shop salesmen, white or black. Of the white salesmen, he said, 'They just sit and gaze around. The next thing you have to pay them a lot of money.' Of the black ones, he said, 'They think they know a lot. But they are all liars and thiefs!'

He was short and plumpy. He wore his clothes loosely. He walked fast with his feet somewhat turned out, nearly like Charlie Chaplin. His grey hair was, when you looked at it from the back of his head, shaped like a horse-shoe with a bald circle at the crown of his head.

Mr Bloch had no office of his own. This, I learnt from Adam, was by design. Having an office would restrict him to some secluded spot. That was not for him, Adam told me. He had to be near to see and hear everything.

One day I had been out for lunch and on my return I found him busy fiddling with the articles and papers on my desk. He was scrutinizing every bit of paper. I just stood and looked on helplessly. The disgust I felt must have been reflected on my face because he turned to me and said apologetically;

'You see, Muriel, I must know everything what's going on.'

Then he blurted out;

'Muriel, why do you bring in such a big bag?'

I later complained to Adam that if that sort of thing went on I would resign; that I couldn't stand being watched all the time like a convict. Adam in his wisdom laughed and said;

'Please, Muriel, just ignore him. He is a sick man. Don't you see him always looking at me suspiciously or hear him asking me what I'm carrying every afternoon when I go home with a parcel? How long have I been here?' Adam answered himself emphatically; 'I have worked for

he had used me for two years as his senior Balance Sheet typist. He had had hundreds of clients, and the arrangement and layout, typing and binding of all the Balance Sheets was left entirely to me. But I was black so he was not mentioning it; nor was he going to encourage his successor to pay me for my experience.

When I reported to Metropolitan Radio on my first week-day, I found my table and cushionless chair ready for me upstairs in a sort of enlarged attic, part of which was used as a workshop. The three radio mechanics – two whites and a coloured – occupied places along a working table pushed against a wall and fitted with all kinds of gadgets, lamps, plugs, etc. On the plank floor next to the mechanics were arranged portable radios, portograms and radiograms of different sizes and makes, with a brown tag attached to each.

Donald, the coloured mechanic, was very friendly. It was from him that I learnt a lot about the place and its staff. The boss, Mr Bloch, he said, was a kind man but was unfortunately henpecked by the two middle-aged women, Mrs Kuhn, the boss's sister, and Mrs Stein.

'You would think Mrs Kuhn owns the business, the way she is forward,' said Donald. 'Mrs Stein, the one with the red hair, has been with the firm for many years. She makes it a point of remaining with the boss every evening long after everybody else has left, back-biting. She works for a good name! Then there's another white woman, a Miss Nel. She has gone on honeymoon. But she's the only one besides the boss and Ponty, the cashier, who speaks to you like you are a human being. You wouldn't say she is a boer like Mrs Stein and this fool here', he added bitterly, pointing to the empty chair normally occupied by one of the white mechanics. 'His name is Lennie. They should have named him Stupid!'

I grew to like being in this elevated place. From there I could see clearly what was happening in the shop; who came in and who walked out. I noticed that besides the customers and the members of staff and labourers, there also came in from time to time the postman, agents or salesmen, travellers – mainly whites representing firms all over the reef, beggars – black and white. From here, too, I could listen to the high-pitched voices of the white women downstairs enjoying a chat whenever the boss wasn't in. Even if I didn't actually see the boss walk out, I could easily tell from their voices that he was away.

'I expected them to object to you sitting down there with them,' said Donald softly to me. 'I knew they'd do something about it. Now you've been tucked up here!'

'I don't mind, Donald. I like it here. I like to be alone. Only I do not like those steep stairs. I feel nervous when I go down. And I like Mrs Kuhn, she is always so friendly and kind. I think she likes me too. I don't know how Mrs Stein feels about me, though; she never greets when I greet her, and she sulks when I ask questions.'

'What do you expect?' said Donald. 'She's a lousy boer like this fool here.' He pointed to the empty chair Lennie occupied.

'What about the other mechanic? He always greets me. Why aren't they here today?'

'You mean Peter. Oh, he's all right. He's a Jew too, a relative of Mr Bloch's. He's not as stupid as the boer. Of course he's still learning. They attend classes at the technical college once every week while they're apprentices. I don't know what they learn there because they come out there just as dom as they went in. Hey listen!'

I listened. It was Ponty speaking loudly on the telephone:

'Hmm ... Hmmm ... what did you say your name was? What? You want to know what is left in your F.M.? Didn't you get a statement? A statement ... a paper ... a letter! We send you letter every month. Yes. That paper you used in your lavatory was the statement. What did you think it was? Yes?' Then turning to the white women, who were giggling uncontrollably, Ponty said;

'Listen to this, she says yes. She would say yes if I asked her to kiss my toggas! Oh, you're too stupid. Mrs Stein, please take this call. I can't stand it. She's too stupid. Says yes to anything.' Then to himself he mumbled. 'Oh, no wonder I have an ulcer.'

I was employed as a helper, and I went on helping. As I mastered the easy tasks without any trouble, I was given more by degrees. Later I was to help to fill in particulars forms for Hire Purchase Agreements where the customers were blacks, coloureds and Indian. This was to remain my exclusive duty.

The two senior women tried to reserve certain jobs for themselves and to allocate the more mechanical ones to me, like folding letters and statements and putting them into envelopes, and printing addresses on statements with the Elliott addressograph machine. I would accomplish these in no time and find myself idling.

There were approximately 4 000 customers. The white staff could not cope with all the work requiring skill and thinking. I was there and I could do it. I had proved that I could type anything, as good as they could, if not better. The boss was not blind to the fact, so he called upon me to do more and more of the seemingly complicated work. He was not going to employ someone else while I was there.

So my stay upstairs was to be short-lived. The new customers for whom I had to fill in particulars forms were sometimes elderly and could not be expected to climb the stairs to where my desk was. So I had to come to them. Another thing was that at times I would be using the ledger or an invoice book upstairs and then one of the staff downstairs would need it and I would have to interrupt my work and take it down. It was all too cumbersome and awkward and a lot of time was wasted. So down I came with my desk, chair and all. Old furniture standing behind filing cabinets was moved; a more or less convenient place was created for me just below the stairs. I was separated from the rest of the white staff by the cabinets and steel mesh wires.

I had seen apartheid applied in many spheres in the Republic but I had never before seen it applied to ledger or record cards! At Metropoli-

tan Radio we kept the European cards in one section separated from the non-European cards. It was all very confusing for a person who did not know the different coloured townships because that was the only clue to where the card should be filed or found. The coloured names were the same as the European ones. Inevitably a lot of misfiling occurred.

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'Please, Muriel, just ignore him. He is a sick man. Don't you see him always looking at me suspiciously or hear him asking me what I'm carrying every afternoon when I go home with a parcel? How long have I been here?' Adam answered himself emphatically; 'I have worked for

him faithfully for twenty-six years but he still doesn't trust me even for one second!'

Adam shook his head.

'He even says he doesn't trust himself! What can you do about a man like that?'

Yet of all the people at Metropolitan Radio, black and white, Adam was the only one Mr Bloch trusted, a little, that is. If he was not in the shop, or if he was to go away somewhere, then Adam had to sit *on* the chair Mr Bloch occupied and watch the door. Once I asked Adam why Mr Bloch always asked him to sit and watch the door, and he said that he had to see what was coming into the shop and what was going out of it.

So Adam could never stay away from work. When he fell ill, which was only once in all the time I was at Metropolitan Radio, the boss told Mrs Nel to phone his own physician.

'Don't call Dr. Schelling, Mrs Nel, please,' he said.

'But why, Larry?' asked his sister, surprised. 'He has been your family doctor for years. Surely . . .'

'He is a liar, like all doctors and lawyers! They are blood-suckers. For over twenty years he has been telling me that I have a weak heart. A weak heart, a weak heart, all the time. Now the other day, on Davie's advice, I went to see Dr Linsk and he said it was not true. He's the only one I can trust now. Tell him to come to the shop as soon as he can, Mrs Nel.'

When the doctor came, he examined Adam right there behind the wardrobes, administered injections, and prescribed medicines, after which Adam returned to his post like a sentinel.

Mr Bloch's knowledge of business methods and procedures was very extensive. But he made decisions irrespective of whether they were acceptable in bookkeeping or not. For example, he would pay out of his own pocket for certain minor purchases without putting it on record. Or he would take money out of the till and pay for things and not bother to make a note of it. This resulted in confusion and waste of time as the cashier would very often not be able to balance the cash for the day and would spend hours trying to trace the irregularity. He had also never overcome the habit of dealing in sterling instead of in Rands.

You could never know with the boss. He could be very firm, even hard as granite, but he could also be very soft and disgustingly lenient. Perhaps the most appropriate description of him was the one given by one of the cashiers: 'Mr Bloch appears to be very hard on the outside, but inside he is very soft. His bark is harder than his bite.'

I walked in one morning and passed Adam in the passage speaking to three black women. The boss was at the telephone so I did not bother to greet him. He interrupted his conversation;

'Wag 'n bietjie. Just hang on a bit, lady, please. Sh . . . sh . . . Adam, shut up there man, you're making noise!'

'I am serving custom, Baas!' Adam shouted back.

'You can serve customers without making all that noise. Your *woice* is like . . . like thunder man!'

I guessed that he must be in a bad mood. He continued with his telephone conversation;

'I am sorry I have delayed so much with the delivery. My boy hasn't turned up for a week now, the one who drives the big truck. You see, only the small van is doing the deliveries. We can't take your bedroom suite in that one as it might get scratched. He has been sick. If he doesn't turn up tomorrow, I'll engage another one. Please don't cancel the sale. Your goods will be delivered day after tomorrow, that's for certain. Thank you ma'am.'

He hung off and replaced the receiver on the hook, mumbling to himself;

'This Aggrey is a waste of time, man.'

He was obviously worried about the absence of the driver.

Word must have spread that the Metropolitan Radio driver had not been coming to work for nearly two weeks and that the boss wanted to engage another one. There are scores of drivers roaming the streets looking for work. One who said that he was still employed at Nel's Rust Dairies, but had already given notice to leave came in to try his luck. Mr Bloch asked him;

'Why do you want to leave where you are working?'

'We do not agree with money.'

'Why?'

'I been working there ten years and they don't give me no rise.'

'Do you like phuza?'

The man shook his head.

'You don't take? Not even one bottle a day?

'You never make accident?'

The man shook his head again.

'You know how to repossess? Take the stuff back from the customers?'

'I can do it, but I never did it before. I drive a truck delivering milk.'

Henry, the other driver, who was standing next to the stair, said to me in the vernacular;

'That will be that. He'll never hire somebody in Aggrey's place.'

And Adam, who had finished serving his customers and had come to listen, also repeated the question, 'Who will repossess?'

None of the clerical staff had come in yet. As I passed Mr Bloch on my way to the kitchen to drink some water, he called me;

'Muriel, just come here a moment, please.'

'Yes, Mr Bloch?'

He moved towards the kitchen entrance and I followed him, wondering what was to happen to me. Was he going to ask me to make the tea?

Anything could happen, you know. I thought. He spoke to me softly;

'Mrs Stein and Mrs Kuhn have complained to me that you have been using their toilet.'

'Yes, Mr Bloch, I have.'

'Well, they don't like it.'

'I'm sorry. A day or two after I arrived here I asked Adam which toilet to use and he said I could use the ladies' toilet, Mr Bloch.'

'Yes, Adam didn't know how they would feel. I am sorry about this Muriel, but you see, we are not all alike. I don't mind, but some people *do*, you see.'

He looked sincere, and I couldn't help feeling touched.

'Yes I know, Mr Bloch, and I promise I shall never use it again. I'm very sorry . . . I . . .' Before I could say more, he continued;

'I'll fix up the toilet in the yard here any day now for you. It's quite all right except that the tank isn't working well. I'll call in the plumber to have a look at it. In the meantime ask Donald to show you the one he's using until yours is ready.'

He looked sad, like a child who had taken a lot of punishment.

I understood the true position. I was sorry that I had not been warned about the white women's feelings earlier. I would have spared them all that inconvenience and ill-feeling. I did not want to impose myself where I was not wanted. Besides, I knew the laws of this country did not allow blacks and whites to share the same facilities, and I was not going to stage a one-man protest against them. It had simply been a matter of habit because at my previous job, the boss and all the other white staff and I had used the same toilet, and none of them had objected. But it seemed I had carried the idea of being accepted too far.

As if to save the boss from an embarrassing situation, Hendrick called;

'Baas, come make a receipt. The customer is in a hurry. He's going to work.'

As the boss walked to the counter, he recognised the customer and said;

'Oh, it's you, Capetown! You're still paying. When are you going to get finish? When you bought this furniture I was still a young man, now look, I am old and grey, and you're still paying. You must get a *move* on and finish this account.'

That was Mr Bloch. You couldn't help laughing when he was around, no matter how tense the atmosphere might be.

'All right, madala,' Capetown said, laughing as he went out and putting the receipt in his pocket.

I was dusting and tidying my desk when he called me again;

'And Muriel, one other thing . . . I would like you to help with putting in of statements into the ledger cards. Do you think you can do that?'

'Yes, Mr Bloch, that should be easy,' I said with relief.

'When Mrs Stein comes in, she'll tell you all about it. I'll clear up here somewhere for you,' he said, pointing to a desk near the switchboard.

I thought he might have forgotten who he was speaking to, so to remind him I said;

'I can do that at my desk, over there, Mr Bloch.'

'You can't take the ledger cards to your desk. They are very important. They are the only record we have, and if anything happens to them, we're finished. Too many people come to your desk, agents, customers, the boys, everybody... we don't want everybody peering into our records. When you have finished, you can go back to your desk that side.'

Henry said to me in vernacular, smiling scornfully;

'So you're going to sit with them now!'

'Tula wena!' the boss said to him. He must have guessed what the driver had said.

'Go and do your work.'

I looked at the little space I was going to share with the unfriendly white staff. There was no proper office with convenient, modern, labour-saving, systematic methods of record-keeping. There were just piles and piles of papers, books, catalogues, stacks of folders and files containing invoices, statements, delivery-notes. Hire Purchase Agreements, approved and pending approval, old and recent, lay about. In fact, everything you can think of. Things were just jumbled around on tables and desks – a continuous stretch of office records mingled with portables of every description labelled and unlabelled with service cards, some coming for repair, others going out, some repossessed, others traded in. There were radio spare parts, tape recorders, irons, electric kettles, and so on.

Later, when everybody had come, I looked and wished the boss would give it another thought and change his mind. There were too many people moving or sitting in too small a space, and there was too much brushing against and bumping into one another. And yet I was to be accommodated there somewhere, somehow, because the boss could not risk having the ledger cards and other valuable documents on the other side of the 'line'.

And so I waited. For hours I had nothing to do. Late in the afternoon, I grew more and more restless, so I went and asked him if there was nothing I could do while waiting for the clearing to be done.

'Just wait, Muriel,' he said calmly. 'I'll empty the desk for you and you can sit there and do the work.'

I just had to wait. No-one else was allowed to touch those piles of stationery. He alone could do it.

3

It was a quiet Thursday afternoon. A traveller walked in, put his case on the floor next to the counter and stood holding the shining brass bars over the counter with both hands and leaning his head on them. He was clean-shorn and neatly dressed in a safari suit. I noticed that his black hair was specked with dandruff. He looked at the boss and smiled broadly.

'Good afternoon, Mr Bloch.'

'Good afternoon. What can I do for you?'

'Buy.'

'Buy what?'

'Floor polishers, Kempar home appliances . . .'

Mr Bloch shook his head slowly.

'Phillips car radios . . .'

'What discount?'

'Twenty-five.'

'No. That's no good. Supers give a third and twenty-five.'

The traveller, disappointed, nodded and sighed. Mr Bloch continued;

'Come and see me some other time when you don' have the time.'

The traveller frowned, puzzled, then perhaps remembering Mr Bloch, smiled and picked up his case to go. Mr Bloch joined him and together they moved towards the door.

'Business is quiet. Everybody is complaining,' the boss added.

Halfway along the passage the two men met an African beggar who stood facing them with both hands cupped ready to receive. The boss called to Ponty at the counter;

'Just give him something, Pont, please.'

After a while the boss returned, removed his jacket from the rack and put it on. He looked towards the door and said;

'It's too quiet man, like a cemetery! Too many shops dealing in the same business everywhere. In every corner there's a furniture shop. I must go to town. Adam, come!'

The boss signalled to Adam to sit on his chair, then he went out. Everybody thought he had gone, but he came back again. He passed hurriedly to the switchboard and dialled a number. He looked at two African 'boys' who were standing nearby ready to pay.

'Get rid of them quickly, Pont, they're smelling the shop out!'

He waved impatiently at them with one hand, the other still holding the receiver.

'They're engaged. Mrs Stein, just keep dialling this number. As soon as you get through tell them I'll be about ten minutes late or so.'

He wrote the number down and left. The boss had finally gone. The rare occasion deserved to be celebrated. Both white and black members

of staff relaxed. On the white side of the 'line' there was as usual a lot of talk with voices pitched a little louder than usual. Appetites also seemed to be whetted by the boss's absence.

'Johannes.' one yelled, 'Go and get me a cold drink and a cream cake.'

'Order me a toasted cheese too, Johannes, I'm so hungry, I could eat a horse!' cried another. 'I've been on strict diet for thirteen days and I lost only one and a half pounds. I sometimes wonder whether it's really worth it. Life is so short and then one must still suffer!'

Johannes was just about to leave when the cold-drink-and-cream-cake one called him back, taking a packet out of her handbag.

'Oh, Johannes,' she said, 'go back to the chemist where you bought this lipstick yesterday and tell them the madam wants a shocking pink and not a rose colour like they gave you. *Shocking pink*. Now don't forget!'

'Shocking pink, yes Missus, shocking pink,' Johannes recited as he came towards me. Then reverting to the vernacular, he said;

'The things are all so spoilt. Sit on their backsides the whole day and call *Johannes, Johannes*. No wonder their husbands don't pay any lobola for them. They're worth nothing. Lazy!'

We both smiled.

'Would you like me to bring you anything from the shops, my child? Don't be afraid to send me.'

'No thanks, Johannes,' I said.

I was reluctant to send him. How could I? He was a man and I was a woman. According to our custom a woman does not send a man. We reserve a place, an elevated place, for our men.

For the moment it was quiet. Then Mrs. Stein spoke up;

'Pont, did you hear what they said? They are expecting trouble soon.'

'Who?'

'Don't you ever read the papers?' Mrs Stein and Mrs Kuhn nearly spoke in unison.

'You mean in South-West?'

'Yes,' retorted the two ladies, again simultaneously.

'There may be a war very soon,' warned Mrs Stein darkly.

'What!'

'Well . . . fighting . . . or some trouble.'

'Oh, I thought you meant *war*. I don't think there'll be any trouble,' he replied almost absent-mindedly, his eyes returning to the door. He seemed bored by the whole conversation.

'They had a cabinet meeting last night about it. They are expecting something really serious. The whole world is against South Africa. The new African states and everybody,' moaned Mrs Stein.

'Yes, but the whole thing rests with the Security Council. Not the new African states.'

'Don't you know they took another vote?' Mrs Stein insisted. She was now quite excited, standing and fumbling amongst the papers on her

desk and searching for something.

'Where's the *Mail*? Adam! Where's the paper? Don't stand there looking at me. Don't pretend you don't know where it is?'

'What, Missus?'

'The paper!' she screamed.

Adam was in the habit of 'stealing' the paper whenever he could lay his hands on it. Then he would sit in a corner out of sight. He would read for a long time quietly studying the columns on horse racing. You could do anything with the morning paper, but spare him the page with the 'tote'.

He slouched smiling to his favourite relaxation spot behind the long linoleum squares to retrieve the paper. Mrs Stein grabbed it from him with a click of the tongue. She started reading loudly to the others, her voice tight with anxiety. When she had finished, Ponty remarked;

'These black leaders with their eloquence and boastfulness, what can they do? They arrive at nothing, achieve nothing. You know in one of those countries, I don't remember which, I heard they had a table in their Parliament or something. Then instead of doing real work, they sat and argued about who's going to sit at the head of the table. So finally, after two weeks, they decided to get a round table instead of a square one.'

They all laughed. Agrippa, who had come to sit next to the cabinets near me turned to me;

'Are you listening, my sister?'

He pointed to an African woman who had come in with a white baby strapped to her back tightly in African fashion.

'No, I'm not listening to you Agrippa. The conversation on the other side is more interesting.'

'Yes, I can see that. You are on this side with us, but your ears are on the other side, with the whites.'

Most Africans rarely ever listen when Europeans or whites speak amongst themselves. They have learnt to live in their own world.

'What are you saying, Agrippa?' I asked, wishing that he would leave me alone.

'I was just asking this woman why she gave birth to a white child when she is black.'

The woman looked abashed. She quickly looked around to see who was listening. She tried to explain;

'No, it is not *my* child, it's my missus' child.'

Agrippa ignored the explanation and added:

'That's the trouble with you women. We allow you to come into the towns and work. The next thing you bring us babies with hair like that of the mane of a horse, and blue eyes. There is only one woman I can really trust, and that is my mother. In this work of repossessing that I do, my sister, there are many temptations. In most cases when I call at a house to repossess goods, the woman cries and begs me to leave her

furniture and asks me not to disgrace her in front of her neighbours. In some cases where the husband is not present, she will even push me into her bedroom and offer to sleep with me rather than lose her goods. It's pathetic.'

'What do you do in cases like that, Agrippa?'

'I am Mlambo's son. I never yield to the temptations of any woman. When I do my work, I do my work. Where has the boss gone anyway?' he added. 'That laughing and yapping won't stop unless he comes in.'

He looked at the women on the other side. I was sorry I had missed all the discussion on South-West Africa.

'And then there was also another one of those black states where a cousin of one of the cabinet ministers who was put in charge of something or other went and bought a golden bed costing thousands of rands. So later he was chucked out because the people were starving while he was sleeping with his wife on a golden bed,' Mrs Stein was saying.

They all laughed, except Mrs Kuhn who must have decided to go on with her posting on the Burroughs machine. She suddenly stopped and dug her finger-tips into her hair. Something had gone wrong. She shouted;

'Oh what a donkey I am! What a clot!'

Then Mr Bloch walked in. He took a quick look around. Nobody looked at him. Suddenly everybody seemed to be engrossed in his or her work. It was quiet.

'Well, I liked it,' he said, looking at his nephew.

'Liked what?' his nephew asked.

'The new shop. I think the spot is the best I've seen so far. It's just at that busy area where the rank is. All the buses from Ferndale, Newclare, Albertville, and all the townships, near the Indian market. Every morning you see them coming in like bees from Westgate station also. That is where they all pass, hundreds of them!'

'Who?' asked the cashier.

'Soggadikas, blacks. I tell you there are hundreds of them passing there every minute of the day. And weekends. You can't even walk there. I've brought their books and we can have a look at them.'

'You've even taken their books already. And you haven't even got enough staff here!' Mrs Stein said, smiling and looking at the others.

'It's the best shop so far. And at that price! I couldn't let that chance go. Lewis made me a special offer. Many other people wanted it, but he remembered me because I helped him out once.'

'But who'll manage that shop? And that area must be pretty bad. What about all the tsotsis moving around there?'

For the first time Miss Nel spoke up;

'I wouldn't be able to sit for even ten minutes in a shop like that.'

'Yes, but how have the other people being doing business there? We can also do it. I think with a strong boy like Joe to keep an eye at the door it shouldn't be difficult.'

'Who's Joe?' Miss Nel asked.

'That tall hefty boy without teeth. He's always involved in some kind of fighting with the tsotsis at the location. I think he's just the right boy to keep at the door and scare them, I mean. I think . . . Ponty, *you* can go over and manage things there. We can get you one or two more boys to help with the sales and the cleaning. You also must have two honest boys to escort you when you take money to the bank or when you go home at night.'

'I suppose that's a promotion, Uncle Larry, but where are you going to get honest boys from? *Adam* is the only one we can trust so far.'

'How much does Lewis want for the books?' Ponty added.

'Two shillings in the pound. And they don't have as many bad debts as we have here.'

Mr Bloch called the tea-boy;

'Johannes! Go and fetch the two big books from my car outside and bring them to Baas Ponty.'

'Come, Agrippa,' he said, moving away, 'let's go and see what you've got on the lorry. Come! Don't waste time.'

The driver followed the boss. On the way the boss stopped abruptly. His attention was attracted by an open glass-shutter on a show-case.

'It must be *him* again!' he shouted. 'Adam, why do you leave this shelf open? I told you to shut it every time after you've sold a battery or a portable!' He looked at the shelf bearing the portables.

'What was here? What's missing here? Did you sell anything?' he asked, pointing to a clear rectangular spot on the dust-coated shelf.

'Yes, Baas, to mine boys. 'A Blaupunkt 3-Band Barracuda, Baas.'

'How much deposit? Don't tell me you've let another monkey walk away with a brand-new portable for nothing again, Adam?'

It was Mrs Stein who answered, after being quiet for a long time.

'It was a cash sale, Mr Bloch.'

'Was it? How much did he sell it for this time?'

'Forty rands cash,' answered Mrs Stein.

Mrs Kuhn looked up and added, smiling;

'They'll give anything for a radio. They would rather go hungry and naked. As long as they have an effemm, they are satisfied. She added, looking at me, 'Shame!'

4

Adam kept on bringing customers to me, one after another. It was again the beginning of a new month, and I expected more to come. But for the time being it was a little quiet. I had just finished fixing up the last one, who had come to buy a portogram. He had made the boss's decision easier in his favour by adding four rands to the twenty rands he had given Adam earlier. I decided to go to the yard.

Ben, the flat-cleaner, greeted me loudly. He seemed very excited.

'What's all the excitement about, Ben?' I asked him.

'Look what I've got, money!' he said, emptying his trouser pockets to show me coins and crushed bank-notes which had been stuffed into them. I was surprised. I thought he had been gambling.

'What money is that?' I asked.

'It's mine,' he exclaimed, weighing the money in his palms.

'Yes, but where does it come from?'

'From my room.'

'What do you mean, from your room?'

'Don't you know that I hire out my room to people?'

'What people?'

'To couples, lovers, any two people who come to me looking for a place where they can hide and make love. I make more money for myself that way. They have already started booking for the week-ends. The compound and hostel people are my best customers. They come almost everyday and they pay well.'

'How much do you charge them?'

'I only charge twenty-five cents per couple. I charge more for a white man and an African or coloured woman.'

'Why?'

'Because Europeans have a lot of money, so I must charge them more. Besides, I have to help to get them black or coloured women.

He went on to explain that with such mixed couples, the risk of getting arrested was greater. Most of those bookings were for after dark and the night-watchman had to be on the alert, for which he had to be bribed. And the police-boy on patrol in that area had to be 'encouraged' to be friendly.

'Do you have many such mixed cases?'

'Oh yes!' Ben exclaimed. 'This Saturday night, for instance. the Marshall Square police sergeant is coming with Hazel.'

'Who's Hazel?'

'Don't you know her? The beautiful Beauty Queen who is always coming out in the *World* and *Post* and the other papers?'

'No. I suppose I haven't noticed her.'

'He is always coming with her, and he gives me a lot of money. Ten rands per night. I don't mind. I give them the room and squeeze myself into the boiler-room or in the toilet.'

Only then did I remember that I had actually come to the toilet, and not until then did I become aware of the heavy stench which emanated from the stagnant urine on the floor of the toilet. It was filthy. It was open to anybody from the street. I had forgotten that I had resolved never to use it again. Being in there was like being in hell. As you sat (if you could summon enough courage to do so) holding your breath, drunken men of all races kept pushing the door open and peering in at you.

'Oh Ben, that terrible smell! Why don't you use dip, Jeyes Fluid, or something?'

'I always use it. It doesn't help. It's because these men drink a lot of Ndambula.'

'What's that?'

'The kaffir beer which is brewed by the white people and is sold in cartons to our people,' he said, pointing to the many empty cartons which were scattered over the grass in the yard.

I felt sick and I immediately turned back. I went down to the park. It was two blocks down, and it cost me two cents in the slot every time, but at least it was locked and clean.

When I returned after about half-an-hour, the shop was in a turmoil. Adam's head was sticking out over the heads of the customers and he held his right arm high up, impatiently beckoning me as I entered the door.

'Hurry, hurry!' he shouted.

'What's wrong?' I asked as I walked past the lines of customers along the narrow L-shaped passage towards my desk. I could also hear the boss asking anxiously somewhere inside a group of Africans although I could not see him;

'Where is Muriel?' he was shouting.

The customers were waiting and gazing about them. Impatience and anxiety was showing in their faces. Some were sitting on old chairs, others were leaning on the second-hand furniture. When he saw me, the boss said;

'This customer wants a three-foot bed. He is in a hurry. He wants to get back to work. Fix him up with an agreement quickly. There are ten others waiting to be fixed up,' he said exaggerating. 'We've been looking for you. Where have you been?'

'I went down to the park, Mr Bloch,' I said.

'What did you go there for?'

Before I could reply, Adam asked;

'Where she can go, baas?'

The boss, understanding, kept quiet, perhaps also remembering that he had not called the plumber to attend to the tank of the toilet he had

promised he would have fixed up for me. Later, after serving a white customer, he came over to inspect the H.P. Agreement.

'Let's see the Agreement, Muriel. Who is he?' And turning to the customer, he asked; 'A *three*-foot bed! Where will your wife sleep? On the floor? Are you married? I can give you a big bed and you can sleep with your wife.'

He looked at the amount given for deposit and asked;

'He's got twenty-four rands deposit?'

'Yes, Mr Bloch, that's what Adam told me.'

He looked at the man's hands, and without saying anything, smiled and grabbed the bank-notes from them. He was in a better mood now, twisting the money in his fingers and moving towards the till without bothering to scrutinize the H.P. Agreement.

'Make out a receipt for twenty-four rands, Mrs Stein, please.'

I proceeded with my work, feeling happier too. He came back for more agreements, and bringing with him the booklet containing the receipt for the twenty-four rands. He gave it to the customer, smiling and saying;

'Now you can go home with your wife and sit and wait for the lorry to bring your bed, and you can both sleep on it – if you *can*.'

He patted the customer on the back and the customer mumbled something. Mr Bloch turned to me and asked;

'What did he say, Muriel?'

'He wants to know on what day you'll deliver the bed, Mr. Bloch. On what *date*.'

'Tell him I'll deliver it yesterday,' answered Mr Bloch.

Everybody waiting, except Adam and myself, looked at the boss surprised. The customer asked;

'What? How can he deliver it yesterday?'

'That's right. Good-bye now!'

Adam consoled the obviously disturbed customer by saying;

'No, you can go home my brother. The bed will be delivered in a day or two. He's only joking.'

The customer left.

5

Monthly letters are an indispensable part of the hire-purchase business. It seems that as soon as some customers have been supplied with goods, they quickly forget their pledge to pay every month.

All you have to do is give the 'baas' a small cash deposit, or in some cases a trade-in in addition to the cash deposit, and within a very short time you are the proud owner of a radio or a beautiful piece of furniture. Some are so grateful to the 'kind baas' who makes it possible for even the poorest to own something, that they never fail to pay the monthly instalment. Others pay regularly for a few months, then when the novelty of ownership has passed, they begin to scrutinize more closely their monthly instalments, and realize for the first time and to their disillusionment, that the stipulated time of one, two, or three years is not as short as they imagined. Quite often they come to enquire why it is that instead of the balance decreasing, it seems to increase. Others fail to pay for a month or two because they cannot meet all their weekly or monthly bills – after all, it is not only the instalment on the furniture; there is also that on clothes for the whole family, the rent, train or bus fares, school fees, food, school uniforms, etc. All these bills have to be paid from the meagre pay packet. Gradually the account falls into arrears. At times the arrears pile up until the stipulated time elapses, then the whole balance is in arrears and the customer is now in real trouble.

As there are thousands of letters to send every month to unsatisfactory customers, circular letters are printed. For instance, at Metropolitan Radio we had the 14-day, the 5-day, the 3-day, the Last Chance, the Green Letter, and the Personal Summons. And lastly, the Summons. When all these have failed to make the customer pay, the driver is instructed to go and load on the goods and bring them back – this in the case of blacks. Where the bad customer is a European, the account is handed over to solicitors; an attachment order is sought; a messenger of the Court accompanies the truck, and the goods are repossessed.

To these general letters a few words or sentences are added to suit the particular case. The wording becomes more severe as failure to pay continues. Hence the letter and the words must be able to exert just the correct amount of pressure to produce the desired effect. In the case of African customers, the letters could be phrased in any manner. And I noticed at Metropolitan Radio that the letter-writer was given licence to deviate from the usual accepted business letter. In fact, some of the remarks I found to be personal, insulting, even abusive.

At Metropolitan Radio who could be more suitable than Mrs Stein for the role of letter-writer? She knew the particulars of the over three thousand accounts (inside sales, outside sales, and Europeans), and she

could recognize most of the faces of the white and black customers and could tell their names just by looking at them – and this is no exaggeration! The blacks found it unusual for a white woman to take the trouble to remember their faces and their names, and actually commit to memory the difficult spellings of their names. The black salesmen and customers were so bewildered by the excellent memory of this woman that they often praised her. Most, however, accorded the baffling memory to the fact that she was a typical Boer, one who had an insatiable desire for persecuting blacks.

Often one would hear a customer say; 'Of course these Boers are envious when we buy better furniture than them. Even if they try to keep us down by not paying us anything when we work for them, they won't succeed. We still try our best to buy good things! Don't you know that most of their young men join the police force, my sister?' they would ask me.

6

It was drizzling softly outside. The first summer rains were imminent. At least so the weather bureau had predicted. Nobody complained. The rains were welcome as during the past three weeks it had been very hot, unbearably hot. The temperature had just continued to soar. 'Thanks God it will be cooler!' Everybody sighed with relief.

Lebitso Pharahlahle, carrying a cumbersome roll of sacking under his arm, greeted me. He put the bundle on the floor next to my desk and out of his inner coat pocket produced a letter and handed it to me.

'What is this?' I asked.

'It is a letter addressed to me,' Lebitso answered.

'Why are you giving it to me?' I asked, surprised.

'Because I want you to read it and explain to your boss what it says. I am tired of coming here talking about the same thing. I have paid my money.'

I could see that he was furious, so I asked him to sit down while I read the letter. It was written in vernacular.

'It's informing you that your wife hasn't received the dining-room suite yet,' I said.

'Yes! And how long is it since I finished paying for it?'

I remembered. He was a labourer who was working on contract for a building construction company. He had bought furniture from Metropolitan Radio and arranged that it be railed to the Orange Free State. After he had finished paying, I was instructed to write down clearly on a card the name of the person to whom the goods were to be railed and the station at which they could be collected. Lebitso was then given a P.M. 9 Battery for his portable radio (which he had also purchased from us) as a free gift. This was usually done in the case of very good customers, who had paid up in a relatively short time. Lebitso was then assured that within a few days, a week at the most, his wife would find the goods waiting to be collected at Senekal Station. He had instructed his wife to expect the goods and arrange for their cartage from the station to the location.

Lebitso held his receipt book with all his receipts in it angrily under my nose.

'Adam,' I called; 'Hasn't this customer's furniture been sent away yet?'

'I . . . don't know . . . I do not think so . . . ag I feel ashamed and never know what to say to customers these days. Mr Bloch is really a spiteful man. I think he is now becoming too rich. Everytime customers have goods ultimately sent off there must first be a string of quarrels.'

'Why did you leave this matter for so long? You should have come to complain long ago.' I said.

'He has come here . . . quite a number of times. And everytime the boss tells him that the goods have been railed,' answered Adam.

'Yes, I used to come once every month until three months ago. Our firm has moved to the other side of Krugersdorp and it is now too far for me to come. But now I've saved some money to fight this matter in court, if he doesn't give me my money back. And I've got my sacking with me to wrap the goods and send them to the Johannesburg station for railage *now*!'

'You'll have to wait because Mr Bloch has gone to town and when he comes back I think he'll be too busy to speak to you because . . .'

'I don't care. I can wait. I'll even sleep here if he doesn't talk to me. I'm tired.'

Adam looked at Lebitso sadly and shook his head slowly. The cashier shouted from the other side of the steel bars;

'What's that boy waiting for, Adam? Did he buy something?'

Adam explained to her why the customer was sitting and waiting so she nodded to Lebitso and said,

'All right my boy, just sit and wait for the master.'

Also coming in at intervals to lengthen the queue of hangers-on were the outside agents or salesmen. They moved in on their noisy scooters and parked them on the pavements. It was the day which is normally set aside for collecting their cheques. Agrippa, the driver, was already sitting next to Lebitso and smoking a cigarette. He would have to wait for Mr Bloch to check the deliveries before he could leave. And Lambert, who worked at the store, and who was sometimes used as a clerk in the absence of Ricky, the store-manager, was told to wait for the boss.

Some were standing, others were leaning against old furniture and engaged in quiet talk. William No. 2 came in last. With the load of portable radios he was carrying in both hands, he seemed to be even shorter than he actually was. As soon as he appeared, Agrippa shouted;

'Sbona wena, we Matanzima!' (We see thee, oh Matanzima!)

'Ever since this day dawned, I'm seeing a human being – a real one – for the first time, oh Matanzima!'

William, putting the portable radios down, smiled, and going nearer to Agrippa to shake his extended hand, replied loudly;

'Ewe, Sobhuza!'

All the others, looking at them and amused at the performance, laughed heartily. It was Lambert who remarked in ridicule;

'What's all this Sobhuza and Matanzima business? Why are you greeting Aggrey as if you are entering a kraal and dressed in amabheshu, making the bayete salute of the days of Shaka.'

I added;

'Yes. Agrippa should be sitting on a grass mat spread over a floor smeared with cow-dung, and you, William, should be carrying a skin shield and a spear instead of those portable radios.'

They all laughed. Adam, pointing to Lambert and myself, said;

'By the way, we have here Johannesburg born and bred ones; children of the houses with door numbers.'

'Yes, Adam,' said Agrippa, 'Lambert does not have a chief. He knows nothing about the real things a young man *should* know, the same as most of you here.'

'Just what are those things anyway? Tell us!' asked Simon.

'The correct way of greeting your elders and other respectable people is one of them. Chiefs must be respected . . .'

Lambert cut him short, impatiently;

'What is a chief anyway? In what way does his presence affect my life?'

'Yes, tell him, Lambert!' said Silas. 'And I'll tell you, our chiefs are just our location superintendents, all of us here. All of you are governed by the laws of the superintendents, not by the dummies you call chiefs. They too, Sobhuza and Matanzima, and all the others, when they come here, they must be under the superintendents or the city councillors – the white men.'

Agrippa refused to accept that. He boasted;

'Not *my* chief, not Sobhuza, King of the Swazis!'

'Well, yours too, Agrippa. To a certain extent,' Lambert said.

'How?'

'The greater part of your land is owned by the white man, is that not so?' said Silas. 'Your own boss, Mr Bloch, owns a huge farm there, does he not? So tell us then, who's the boss *there*, Sobhuza or Bloch?'

They all laughed, and so did Lebitso who until then had been sitting, morose, waiting for the master as patiently as only an African can wait. But Mrs Kuhn was already beginning to complain about the noise 'on the other side'. She called;

'Adam! You better go and watch the door.'

Turning to the other two ladies, she said;

'The noise they can make! I can't take it, you know, Mrs Stein. Can't concentrate!'

Adam asked the agents to move towards the far end, nearer his watch-post. They all moved away with the exception of Lambert who stood watching me as I continued to fold statements. Adam and Agrippa were still arguing about the chiefs, with Adam's voice still more audible than those of the others. He was saying;

'It makes me sick, this antiquated nonsense of the chiefs in the towns here. Who needs a chief? If people want to have leaders or people who make regulations for them, then the people must choose those leaders. Besides, we are long detribalised. Our fathers and our grandfathers also had no links with their chiefs.'

'Yes,' said Lambert, 'we Africans are undergoing a change. We are fast acquiring the white man's way of life, not only in the towns but also in the reserves. We *have* to in order to fit into this modern world.'

'And, you know,' he added, 'last month we had a city council police-man visiting our homes in the evening. He had a file and in it he had

papers with lists of all the houses. Under each number he had to fill in details of identity for each member of the family. The heading on the last column was, 'State Name of Chief'. I looked at all the numbers. What struck me as very interesting was the fact that under each one of them was written 'No Chief'.

William No. 2 had just left the group of agents, and as he came towards us I could hear Silas say;

'He's the happiest man in South Africa. As long as he sells portable radios on 7½% commission, is referred to fondly as 'Little William' by the white women, and is allowed to pay his wife a visit once a year in the Transkei, he's happy.'

Lambert continued;

'The nationalists divide us up into pieces for their own gain. They try to sow hatred. I'm afraid it is too late for that.'

'What are you saying about the nuts, Lambert?' asked William No. 2.

'Not nuts man, *nats*! The nationalists. You people... the nats throw a few breadcrumbs at you and you imagine you've got the whole loaf already. You speak of your Matanzimas as if they were Kaundas and Nyereres. Let me tell you one thing – from the nats you'll have to wait a long, long time – you'll have to wait until the end of time to get *half* a loaf, never mind a loaf of bread. That much I can promise you!'

The argument on the nats and chiefs might have gone on and on if Mr Bloch had not walked in, followed by an African to whom he signalled to stop on this side of the counter whilst he proceeded to the other. All those waiting, Lebitso and the agents, Agrippa and Lambert, moved nearer the counter from where they stood looking eagerly at the boss.

'Stand there!' Mr Bloch ordered the black man, who stood erect with both his arms crossed, one hand holding a greasy cap. The boss turned to his sister and said;

'Lieda, I've brought in this new boy for Ponty's shop. He'll do the cleaning there. Just look at his pass and have his engagement fixed up.'

It was Lambert who broke the silence with:

'They'll be abolished!'

Everybody looked at him.

'What?' said the boss to Lambert.

'The *passes*!'

All the Africans present started giggling, with the exception of Lebitso, who did not seem to understand what the amusement was about. The whites did not seem to enjoy the joke either. Mr Bloch looked at his sister and asked, pointing to the giggling Lambert;

'What does *he* want here?'

Before the woman could answer, Lambert said;

'I have only been waiting nearly two hours for money to buy a screwdriver. That's all!'

The boss, hearing the sarcasm in Lambert's voice, said impatiently;

'Give him what he wants, Lieda, and let him go. He's got a big mouth!'

Lambert took the money and went out, still laughing. The boss looked at the agents.

'What about their commission, Mrs Stein? Have you worked that out yet?'

'I haven't had time, Mr Bloch. I was doing the letters. You said I must attend to them first, didn't you?'

'Of course. I had forgotten. Can you just leave the letters for a while please, Mrs Stein, and do their commissions. Otherwise they will be standing on my head. But no . . . the letters are very urgent. I think I'll rather borrow them a little money each, just for them to go on with until we are ready with the commissions. Go on with the letters, Mrs Stein.'

Mr Bloch went over to the salesmen who were now shaking their heads in despair. He gave them permission to 'sub' whatever advances of cash they were in urgent need of and after they had reluctantly left, he sat on his chair and sipped his cold afternoon tea. Then he noticed Lebitso.

'What's that boy hanging around for, Adam!' he shouted.

Lebitso stood up quickly and answered sharply before Adam could intervene;

'I want you to give me my furniture and I'll send it off myself! Otherwise I want my money back!'

Mr Bloch looked at the customer but didn't seem to see him. It was as if he was thinking of something else. Adam leaned over the steel railings and said;

'The custom wante hise money beke, Baas.'

'Tell him to go home. We'll rail the goods. What does he want to do? He can't take them and post them away. It's a big job to crate goods and send them away. What does he think? Does he think it's like eating mealie-pap?'

Lebitso answered;

'But you will never send them away. I've waited so long. At home they've been travelling for miles to the station hoping to collect them. They've been spending money on hiring lorries to fetch them. I want my money back. I'll go and buy elsewhere!'

'Go, man! I'll send them now because I can see you're cross with me.'

The customer was not listening. He was looking at Adam, speaking in vernacular and issuing threats. The boss asked;

'What's he saying Adam?'

'He say he wanto teke you to kott fess, Baas.'

'What? He wants to take me to court first! Well, let him go to court.'

Then looking at the customer, he asked;

'Which court do you want to go to? The high court or the low court? There's two kinds of court you know – the high one and the low one.'

Mr Bloch was smiling, raising his arm and lowering it like a conductor before a choir, holding his pen like a baton. The customer went out without speaking. I called him back to take his receipt book and the letter. He grabbed them from me and left, with the bundle of sacking under his arm.

'Dise no gudu, Baas. You maké custom kros,' said Adam seriously.

'All right, then, Adam. We'll send the goods first thing tomorrow morning. The next time he comes here he'll find the consignment note waiting for him. Ag, Lieda, just ring the store and tell Ricky to tell the carpenter to crate that 8-piece 'Manchester' dining-room suite ready for railing tomorrow. Tell him its urgent hey!'

Then he called to Adam and Agrippa;

'Come on Agrippa, don't sit like that. Go and get your boys and let them help Adam to load on that 'Kaigor' Kitchen scheme. Come on Adam, quick! Agrippa, you've only got three deliveries to do this afternoon. You'll have enough time to do the repossessions tonight.'

7

Why the driver of the 8.05 a.m. Nancefield-Faraday train decided to leave Nancefield station at 8 a.m., five minutes earlier, I shall never know. Most of the passengers walking towards the platform briskly, but not rushing, were disgusted. The trains had been late the previous week and I had made up my mind to start the new month on a different note, so I felt discouraged. I arrived at the shop at about 8.45 a.m. Mr Bloch was at the counter. A quick look round told me that Mrs Stein had not arrived yet. So that made two of us late.

'Johannes, has Adam arrived yet?' I asked anxiously.

'No. I haven't seen him. He must be late. It could be the Midway trains.'

I sighed with relief.

Minutes later Adam slouched in complete with his churchill hat pulled right over the eyebrows as usual and his knob-kierie in his hand.

'Mind the customers, Adam,' said Mr Bloch. 'You come in walking like a bear and a whole hour late at that!'

'What I can do, Baas? The trains . . .'

The telephone rang and Mr Bloch snatched up the receiver;

'Hello! . . . mm . . . mm . . . yes Pont, I'll see. O man, you don't know man, this Agrippa is a bloody nuisance, man. He hasn't even turned up yet, man, and I've promised people deliveries. He never does anything right. On Saturday he delivered a kitchen dresser and it was brought back this morning by Hendrick. The customer wouldn't take it. It was torn into two pieces. They must have been dead drunk by the time they delivered it, and dropped it. I don't *want* him. He can take a walk, him and his drunken lorry-boys. I'm going to take my keys and truck from him and 'trow' him out! He should be in gaol that boy, he's got a head like iron!'

He was throwing his right arm into the air, gesticulating, and with his left hand holding the receiver onto his ear.

It was rumoured that the driver had borrowed money from a friend some time ago and had since then only been making promises to repay it. His friend had grown impatient and had taken away the keys of Agrippa's truck and refused to give them back. So Agrippa got the truck to move by connecting wires. He then drove all over Soweto trying to raise the money to repay his debt. These rumours, passed by the lorry-boys, were circulated amongst the black staff in whispers and, somehow, the boss and the white staff never heard anything.

The lorry-boys, who were sworn to secrecy, reported on Monday for work. All they could tell Mr Bloch was that they did not know where the driver was. So for the next few days they continued to come to work every

morning and kept themselves busy helping Adam with the window-cleaning and dusting. Or they just idled. On the third day of Agrippa's absence, I began to feel worried, wondering what would become of him and his job. When I asked Adam what he thought the boss would do, he just said;

'Nothing.'

'What do you mean *nothing*?'

'I mean he'll do nothing. He'll perhaps scold him and take off some of his money on Friday. That's all. Haven't you seen him do just that when he loafs on the other Mondays?'

'Yes, but this time it's many days. Besides, there's the lost truck keys and the broken kitchen dresser... it's too much.'

Adam shook his head and said;

'He can't do anything.'

'Why not?'

'Who will repossess?'

'Can't he get somebody else to do it?'

'Do you think it's anybody who will risk his life in the locations of Soweto just to recover a white man's goods?'

'Why does Agrippa do it?'

'Can't you see that he does not care about his own life, or his wife or his children? Nothing. As long as he gets money to drink he doesn't care. He's like a dead thing.'

I looked at the calendar. It was exactly three months since I started at Metropolitan Radio, and I was not sure yet whether I liked working there. As usual at this time of the month, I was busy with the entering of the ledger cards and, of course, I was occupying a desk on what I call the white side of the line. Of late, since Ponty had left to manage the new shop in town, Mrs Green (who used to be Miss Nel) was in the habit of indulging in light conversation with me. She asked me personal questions about my family and about my married life. She wanted to know more about our African customs. I would also help her with the spelling of some of the African surnames. Some kind of an uneasy, friendly relationship developed between us. I got the impression that she was, to a certain extent, being ostracised by the other women. At times, when they spoke, she would make eyes at me. They rarely ever spoke to her in a friendly manner, except when asking her questions concerning the work, or giving her instructions. Mrs Green and I were both juniors, but because of the colour of my skin, I was the least. She had once said to me confidentially in Afrikaans;

'Muriel, luister altyd as hulle skinner van my. My man is al moeg vir hierdie plek.'

I was annoyed and felt like telling her that I did not like being used as a spy. At the same time I did not think it was necessary to make an enemy of her. All I would do was to pass no information to or from any of them. To me it mattered very little what they said about each other.

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Sometime during the next afternoon the telephone rang. Mrs Green picked up the receiver and said, handing it to Mr Bloch;

'It's Agrippa, for you, Mr Bloch.'

Mr Bloch took it and listened. Then he took up his pen and began writing.

'Where are you?' he asked. Covering the mouthpiece with his hand, he said to Mrs Kuhn;

'I like the way he just says *send me two boys baas, I want to load the Fireline stove,* after staying away nearly four days!'

Mr Bloch replaced the receiver and called to the mechanic upstairs;

'Lennie,' he said, 'Take Long John and that new boy with the impossible name, the strong one . . . take them to this number, here, 106 Q-o-d-a-s-h-e- Street, Pimville. Agrippa needs help there. Take the keys for the small 'Hino' van.'

So Agrippa's orders were carried out. It seemed Adam was right, after all, I thought. And by the time the truck-driver arrived, there was no quarrel and he wasn't kicked out either. When he appeared at the door, the boss shouted at him;

'Hey, dronklap! What have you got on the lorry?'

'Five repossessions, baas.'

'Which are they?'

'One 'Fireline' Coal stove, 8-piece 'Paarl' dining-room suite, six-piece kitchen scheme, one studio couch, one 'supersonic' radiogram, baas.'

'Let's go and see,' said the boss, and added, 'How much money have you put into the right pocket and how much into the wrong pocket?'

'I only sub five rands, baas,' Agrippa said, following the boss out.

The truck was packed full.

Later Agrippa said to me;

'My sister, what did they say about me during my absence?'

'What do you think, after staying away so long? Of course the boss said he wasn't going to give you the receipt book any longer.'

'That doesn't scare me. You see, I know what the trouble is with him. He is influenced by those women. When I want anything from him I just wait until they are all gone. When they are not here, there's none of this nonsense. We get along smoothly together. How do you think I get him to give me money even when he has promised on his word that he'll never let me sub any more money?'

'How did you get that truck loaded when you were on your own?' I asked, and he answered, speaking slowly and boastfully, throwing his head back.

'I have Swazi royal blood in my veins. My name is Agrippa. I am Mlambo's son. And this is my work!'

8

I had tried hard to hold on to my job. There had been moments when I had decided to give in and had contemplated leaving, but as usual, and typical of my old self, I had experienced a great deal of inertia. The idea of going about from place to place looking for a job had always been repugnant to me. I had known that I would have to work hard to keep my post, and God knows, I had tried. But I was beginning to despair. What gnawed at me most was the fact that I always had to explain to the boss about one thing or another. Time and time again, no matter how much I tried to avoid it, I would find myself standing before him to explain. I remembered the toilet incident, and the morning when I walked in and greeted the boss, but instead of responding he demanded why I had been interfering with the invoices in the basket on his desk. Of course I had not touched them and did not know why some had disappeared. Then there was the day when the boss told me sternly that if it took me as long as *two whole weeks* to put entries onto ledger cards, I should have to look for another job. I pointed out to him that I had only been busy for a few days on them and that that very Monday he had kept me waiting nearly the whole day while he cleared a desk for me. He had nodded slowly and said;

'Oh yes, now I remember. Sorry Muriel. All right. Just go on with your work.'

And I shall not easily forget how Mrs Stein had, one afternoon, shouted from the other side of the line;

'Muriel, you claim to have worked in an office before and yet you do not seem to know what a legal document is.'

I was confused and shocked to hear her address me. She had never spoken to me since the day of my arrival. I felt embarrassed too as the remark was passed in the presence of customers, agents, and other members of the staff. What is more, I feared the impression it might make on the boss.

'Why do you say that, Mrs Stein?' I asked, my heart pounding.

'Well why did you erase? Don't you know that a Hire Purchase Agreement is a legal document and that you may not erase anything you have typed on it.'

She spoke proudly and audibly enough for the benefit of everybody around. I was still confused. I did not remember erasing in any of the Agreements I had typed. I went over to see my 'error'.

'But I never typed *that* Agreement! That is one of those typed by Mrs Green!' I exclaimed.

She did not bother to apologise to me.

I was even more shocked the day Mrs Kuhn grabbed the telephone

from me after Mr Bloch had called me to speak to an African customer whom he could not understand. Mrs Kuhn snatched the receiver and said;

'Larry, you make me sick. You're always calling Muriel, Muriel, every time! Why do you let her speak on the phone when *we* are here?'

The boss immediately turned away without a word and I also left her struggling with the customer's broken English.

But perhaps the worst incident was the one which occurred when I was accused of *educating* African customers.

An African customer had come to me, after paying the balance on his account, and had wanted to know about the interest charged. He had paid the whole Hire Purchase price, that is, the cash price plus interest for two years. But he drew my attention to the fact that he paid the Hire Purchase price within eighteen months instead of the stipulated twenty-four months. He was therefore entitled to claim back the money he had paid as interest for the last six months. Or so I thought. I advised him to ask for a refund. It was only logical, I thought. He took his receipt book and a copy of his invoice and went to the cashier. I went to the kitchen for my cup of tea.

After the white women had examined the case, the customer was refunded the money he had overpaid. I was surprised to find the customer still waiting at my desk when I returned. He said he wanted to thank me for helping him, and he put a ten cent coin on my desk. I protested, telling him it was not necessary for him to thank me in that manner; I had only been doing my job.

'My sister,' he said, 'it is not polite to refuse anything you are offered in good spirit. Take that shilling and go and buy yourself a cake and have it with your tea, and may God bless you.'

He left, and I took my empty cup back to the kitchen.

I only realised the gravity of the matter when I returned from the kitchen. I met the boss along the passage. He looked furiously at me. I was scared as I had never seen him look like that before. He said;

'Muriel, you take customers and pull them aside and ask them to claim monies they have already paid in so that they may give you part of it!'

I was horrified. Before I could find words to defend myself, he added, his eyes blood-shot and the thick dewlap below his chin shiny with sweat;

'If you have such a big mouth, I shall not keep you here.'

'Mr Bloch you are actually accusing me of being a thief!'

His sister stoked him even more. She shouted;

'She can't talk to you like that, Larry. Let her go. Of course she sat there telling the customer all about interest!'

'So what? The customer wanted to know, didn't he?' I said.

'You did it because you wanted to get part of the money!'

'If you think that I did that in order to get ten cents, then your intention is to insult me!' I said.

I did not care that the boss was listening. He had been breathing deeply with rage and heaving, but now he seemed surprised to hear me answer Mrs Kuhn back. He stood listening to our heated exchange until he said;

'Keep quiet man, Lieda, I'll deal with her.'

'So *you've* been telling Mr Bloch lies about me?' I said.

She would have struck me if the boss had not stopped her.

'Go back. Sit down, Lieda. What's wrong with you?' he said. 'If she wants to go she can go. I can't pay her for telling customers nonsense!'

Then turning to me, he said;

'You come here.'

He led the way towards his other desk, the one he rarely used unless he wanted to talk confidentially with someone. He said;

'You say you will leave! Now let me tell you, if you leave without my having discharged you, and you have not given me notice, I shall not pay you your leave pay. I shall only pay you off for the days you have worked in this month.'

'Mr Bloch, I never said that I wanted to go. Mrs. Kuhn said you should fire me and I answered that I would not mind going if by advising a customer I allowed myself to be called a thief. Besides, I was never told that I should not tell customers the truth. All I did was explain to him the implications of the Hire Purchase Agreement, that's all. And I did it with a cool conscience, not aware that it was wrong.'

Mr Bloch said, speaking softly:

'All right. I'll give you another chance, Muriel. But don't forget – *you must be loyal to this firm*!'

And he repeated, knocking softly with his fist on the desk:

'Everybody who works here must have *loyalty to the firm*. Do you hear that now?'

'Yes, Mr Bloch,' I answered meekly.

What next, I asked myself, and wondered. I spent almost sleepless nights just thinking of what would happen next. I came to dread the very idea of going to work. So far, Mrs Stein had hardly spoken to me. She would only nod or shake her head like a mute whenever I asked her a question. I got the impression that she waged her fight against me through Mrs Kuhn. She had never risked a direct verbal onslaught against me; she was too diplomatic a woman for that sort of thing. But one look at Mrs Kuhn told me that the war was not yet over. It made me shudder. Thanks to Adam's wisdom and moral support, I was able to drag on during this trying period. Whenever I complained to him, he would calmly console me by saying;

'You just sit there and do your work. Never mind those two women. This is not their shop. It's Baas Bloch's shop. You have already proved yourself to him. He will never drive you away because of *them*.'

It was nearly teatime in the afternoon. The boss had removed his coat from the hanger, put it on and left. He had summoned Adam as usual to occupy his chair situated at the angle where the shorter and longer arms of the L-shaped passage met. From there, one could see almost every part of the large shop except the workshop above and perhaps the small area behind the long linoleum squares where Adam used to sit reading the horse-racing columns of the morning paper or just dozing. The white women began gossiping about a previous white cashier who had very poor spelling. Recalling her bad spelling struck them as hilarious and there was so much laughter and talking on their side of the line that after a while Adam must have thought it a free-for-all talking time. He came over to where I was. I was sorry when he disturbed me.

It was his intention, he told me, to slaughter a goat as thanksgiving to the ancestors for his son's success at school. His son, Thabiso, was very clever, he said. He had retained the first position in class ever since he started school, and was now in Standard Two. I was just about to warn Adam to speak softly, when I heard the white women stop speaking abruptly. It meant that Mr Bloch had walked in, or so I thought. Mrs Kuhn shouted out;

'Shut up, you two!'

Then turning to Mrs Stein, she said;

'I can't stand those voices... those baboons there, sitting and talking.'

'But we are not making any noise, Mrs Kuhn,' I said; 'Adam was just telling me...'

'Well I said shut up! I don't care what he's telling you. And don't you dare answer me back!'

I said; 'I'm just trying to explain that...'

'What *are* you, after all?'

The woman was now standing and looking at me, shouting at the top of her voice across the bars.

'What do you mean, what am I? I am a human being, of course.'

Just then the boss walked in slowly, listening. He said nothing for a while. He just stood there looking at both of us with his hands in his trouser pockets. The woman went on hurling insult after insult at Adam, then at me. The boss then said, like a tired man;

'What's going on here?'

Nobody answered him.

'You baboon, you champanzee, you monkey, you...' yelled Mrs Kuhn. 'You know, Mrs Stein, I can't stand that girl there. She and Adam are always sitting there and making a noise. One can hardly concentrate!'

Adam was also speaking, looking at the boss and gesticulating, trying to explain to him what the cause of the trouble was.

'But they are the ones who are always making a noise,' I said; 'I speak only when I have to speak because she insults me when she hears my voice!'

Mrs Kuhn was now quite hysterical. I thought she was going to jump

at me through the steel rails. She was calling me all the names she could think of. I felt that it was too much for me to take. Adam was also talking, and the noise was almost unbearable. Mr Bloch shouted;

'Adam, shut up, man!'

'Yes, it's her fault. She makes him cheeky like that! Ever since she came here you can't speak to any of them. She's always talking to all the agents, the customers, all the men.'

I thought this was really very childish. I asked her;

'But that is why I am here, to speak to customers, agents, and everybody who needs my help. What do you think I am, a doll or something?'

I had had enough. I took my handbag and wanted to walk out, and for good. Adam stood in front of me.

'Sit down, Muriel,' he said. 'Sit down!'

Mrs Kuhn was panting and heaving with rage. Her brother stood in front of her, stopping her from dashing out. She said;

'If you don't kick her out, then *I'll* go. Who does she think she is?'

I sat down again at my desk. I thought it fortunate that there were no customers in the shop. Only the three mechanics upstairs were standing looking through the openings between the wardrobes which served as a screen at the edge of the plank floor above. Mrs Kuhn went on;

'Just because she knows a bit of English, she thinks she can just say anything.' I replied.

'Thank God I did not have to pick my English up in your kitchen or your backyard.'

Mrs Kuhn turned to Mrs Stein.

'She thinks she's like us, you know, Mrs. Stein.'

'That's an insult, Mrs Kuhn,' I replied. 'I don't think I'm like you. I don't *want* to be like you. I am very proud of what I am. I don't envy you. You're too small, too full of hatred. You are always occupied with issues that do not really matter!'

It was almost quiet now. This was it, I thought. Any moment now I shall have my pass-book signed off and with that, unless I find another job within a short time, will go my right to be in the magisterial district of Johannesburg for more than seventy-two hours. I remembered what my husband had once said; *they* are like the Omnipotent; *they* have the power of life and death over us.

At that moment a customer walked in to pay the balance of a deposit which Mr Bloch had required on the previous day. Mr Bloch brought the customer's receipt book to me and said in his normal voice;

'Just fix up this customer with an Agreement, please, Muriel.'

I took out an H.P. Agreement form and a Particulars form from a drawer and started writing. I was shivering and my hand was unsteady, but I went on doing my work.

If they decide to let me stay, they will have to respect me, I thought. Now that they know exactly what I think of them, and that I can speak up if I like (and thank God there is no law yet against speaking your

mind to a white person, or am I wrong?) they will have to insult me behind my back, as they do with everybody else and not just say what they like to my face, at any time, and before anybody.

It was twenty-past-five. I started clearing my desk. I was feeling uneasy and shaken. Instead of feeling relieved that I had been given another chance, I felt disillusioned. I had not expected to receive insults from Mrs Kuhn. I could hardly believe it. She had always looked kind and motherly. Somehow I was disappointed. I had made the mistake that thousands of Africans make every day. If I had been insulted and abused by, say, Mrs Stein, it would have been easier for me to take it. You always know what to expect from the Boers.

At five-thirty I took my handbag to go home.

'Good night, Mr Bloch,' I said with a trembling and uncertain voice, not really expecting him to respond.

'Good night, Muriel,' he said as if nothing had happened.

9

'Lennie! Where's Lennie? Has he gone out again?' the boss called out, pulling out the cuffs of his spotless white shirt from under his coat sleeves and straightening his tie below his thick double chin. I noticed the beautiful, striking black cufflinks with shiny gold stripes to match the tie-pin.

'He's gone to Gants for a cold-drink, Boss,' replied Donald, the Coloured mechanic.

The boss went back into the office, shaking his head slowly and saying;

'Oh man, that Lennie...'

'He makes me sick,' said Mrs Kuhn. 'I can't stand him. He can't repair a single radio properly. I had such a fight with him yesterday.'

'Why, Lieda?'

'Because he can't repair Mrs Miller's portable. He's had it opened up and dismantled, lying on his table, for nearly a week now. He won't finish it. He says he hasn't got parts. Mrs Miller has been ringing and coming in. When I asked him about it he said he was tired of us Jewish people. I told him it's through the Jews that he's got food to eat.'

'And Mrs Stein? Where is she?' asked the boss.

'She said she was going to the C.N.A.'

'Has she started with the letters?'

'No, she hasn't started yet.'

Mrs Stein came in carrying parcels and followed by Lennie. They were speaking in Afrikaans and smiling. Lennie was carrying a Pepsi Cola bottle.

'Lennie, I'd like you to drive me to town quickly,' said the boss. 'Have your cold-drink. I'll wait outside in the car for you.'

'You know, Mrs Kuhn, Mr Bloch surprises me,' said Mrs Stein softly.

'Why, Mrs Stein?'

'Because it seems to me he can't see that we simply cannot cope with the work. Yesterday I was doing the invoicing, and in exactly five minutes he asked me to do five different things. I was still invoicing when he called me to make out a receipt; while I was still doing that, he said I must go and serve a customer. Before I could see to that, he said I must give an agent a petrol slip. Then he reminded me that Agrippa was still waiting for the deliveries to be made. Is it possible for one person to do all that at the same time? I've only got two hands after all; I'm not an octopus.'

'Well, I don't know, Mrs Stein. I really don't know,' answered Mrs Kuhn with a sigh.

Then it was one of those quiet days again. Adam sat yawning on the

stairs looking out towards the door. I was surprised that it took so long for the white women to start talking. Suddenly Mrs Stein burst out laughing.

'Why are you laughing, Mrs Stein?' asked Mrs Kuhn.

'It's these letters, Mrs Kuhn. Some of these natives can really write the funniest things. This one writes "I will pay my acount next week Saturday I have no money today because death took place I am going take some Body out of Muntuary Yours faithfully Jonas." Just like that! There's no address, no surname. How are we to know who's that? Then this one here just keeps on writing letters in reply to ours. He just writes and writes but sends no money. I've got all his letters attached to the ledger card. Listen to the first one:

"First of All I am leting you know that the end of
February I am prepared to come pay my account for
the Radio wich I fail to pay on th 1 of january I
am well prepared to pay fast entill I get finish
with my account. that is All Sir. James Sithole,
110 mimosa Rd Northcliff No 2."

And the second letter reads;

"I am very pleased to Received your account wich you
have send it to me and I know that I am Responseble
because I fail to pay my account for 2 months and
thise is all Ready the 3 month and I am well prepared
to pay you the end of thise month to avoid the di-
sppoint ment wich I did it allso I will come and
apologise to you because I know that thise is very
bad Record against the law. from James Sithole."

But instead of paying, he writes now the third letter. Listen, Mrs Kuhn.'

Although Mrs Stein was reading the letters to Mrs Kuhn, all the other members of the staff were now listening. Donald had stopped repairing radios upstairs and was sitting on the stairs next to Adam, listening. Instead of laughing at the mistakes the women were pointing out, he seemed to get annoyed. He kept remarking under his breath how little they knew themselves. We listened;

' "From today my new addresse is no 360 mimosa Rd Northcliff No 2 I left at 110 Mimosa Rd on the 2 of October I am now Bilongs to MR Mayers his full name is Joseph and his full addresse is No 360 mimosa Rd Northcliff," ' read Mrs Stein.

'What do you think of that Mrs Kuhn?' said Mrs Stein. 'He says nothing about the money he still owes. All he wants us to know is that he now "bilongs" to Mr Joseph Mayers. How do you like that?'

Mrs Kuhn answered;

'You must send someone out to go and repossess the radio, that's all. If he can't pay, then he must not listen to the radio. We don't want to know that he is receiving the letters and where he is. All we want is the money. Tell him, Mrs Stein.'

'But Mrs Kuhn, this one must be framed. It is simply priceless. Listen to this;

"Dear Sir,

Yours dated ly may . . . is to hand as dated above, with thanks.

In this note; in bold letters (LAST CHANCE); FINAL WARNING are written sir.

Personally sir, I wish to thank you for this letter, it is a very kind letter to me, the words in this note showed me that you do feel for me your faithful customer.

I wish to say once sir, thank you. May I say to you sir, I am done by WILLIAM Your collector, Seeing that he did not turn up to collect as usual, I wrote him a note and left it in his house door post box, calling him to call and collect.

Still WILLIAM did not turn up. I have even not received, statements from your acc office sir. I am really one of those customers who never want his account to lack a behind.

Please warn your AGENT WILLIAM to call at once to collect my fees. I can not give the money to any one else accept to him. His a-ction by failing to collect as arranged, puts a bad mark against my name to your fairm.

My name is an example to big firms sir, like for example, John Orrs, Russels etc, etc, from where I Possess Certificates of good customer.

I wish to keep my name up even to this your shop, to be able to buy from you even in any future sir or even to recommend my next friend or relative to you sir.

Please do not hand over my acc. to any of your lawyers; I do agree with you, in saying: Handing over such, will just cause every thing uneasy to me and even unpleasant for me and my family sir.

Kindly send William to call for collecting at his earliest, Tell him, I am very unhappy because by not collecting his fairms money, he makes my name bad to you sir.

My Legal Advisors will not like this. I am ready with the moneyevery second week of every month, he knows that, yet he fails to collect.

Note:- Here WILLIAM comes in: I then told him all what I say to you in my letter in reply to you sir. I asked him to report to you sir with pleasure and to thank you.

Thank you sir once more,

GoodBye, Your Custormer,

Nicodemus."

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'I think he must be working for lawyers, Mrs Stein,' said Mrs Kuhn shaking with laughter. 'He seems to like talking a lot and showing off, don't you think so? Shame.' she added helplessly.

Both women continued laughing so they did not hear Donald remark:

'They make me sick. Can't they find other ways of amusing themselves rather than by using the customers' letters? They can't even speak good English themselves but they see faults in others.'

It was nearly lunch time. Donald was standing at the top of the stairs doing nothing. He stood motionless, with both hands in his trouser pockets clicking coins. He seemed oblivious of his surroundings. He did not even seem to notice Peter Kahn, the other white mechanic who was crouching next to him with a screw-driver in his left hand.

'Adam,' called Peter.

'Yes Baas Peter,' Adam answered.

'Here's your screw-driver. All right, don't come up. Just stand there, I'll throw it. Catch!'

Adam came nearer, moving quickly.

Adam, like everybody else, black and white, liked Peter Kahn.

'He is not like the other one. He always greets you and smiles,' the blacks would say, comparing Peter to Lennie.

Like Mr Bloch, he passed jokes now again. Donald liked him too. He used to remark that Peter was easier to get along with because he did not have anything to worry about except passing his examinations and going to open his own business. He said, 'What's he got to worry about; his father is a Jew who owns a block of flats in the centre of town and has a big business. What else can such a man's son want?'

All this came back into my mind as I looked up at Peter Kahn crouching next to Donald and smiling down at Adam. He was holding the screw-driver and swinging it back and forth like a pendulum, without letting it go. Adam raised both arms with the palms ready to catch the tool. He was grinning widely. 'So it is talking and playing time,' I thought as I mechanically turned the handle of the addressograph printing machine with which I was addressing statements.

'Catch!' Peter Kahn repeated. Then tugging Donald's trousers with his right hand and smiling, he said; 'Look, Donny, just like my dog. Look at his teeth. Just like the Dracula!'

Donald stood still, indifferent. He just clicked his tongue in disgust. Peter tried to make him smile. He tugged the leg of his trousers again, but without success.

'Ag, that one's a fool,' said Donald, referring to Adam.

Peter let the screw-driver fall and stood up. Adam caught it. Peter moved away towards the door. 'He is running away from Donald again,' I said to myself. I also used to feel like running away from the Coloured mechanic whenever he was in one of his moods. He had a way of bringing out the bleakest side of our lives as workers. He said bitterly of Adam;

'He makes me sick. Him and Lennie are so stupid. They should be working underground in the salt mines, digging for salt with shovels.'

'Why do you include Adam,' I asked. 'He is not a mechanic.'

'He is also a fool. I hate him. You know, he could make a lot of dough for himself and yet he sits in one place. *Twenty-six years,* and he still earns seven pounds a week! He's old and finished now. With an empty stomach he keeps guard over another man's food and he leaves it untouched. Why doesn't he pay himself with those goods?'

'Ag, stop moaning, man,' called Peter. 'I've told you before, the boss is too stingy. He just loves money. You can take anything from him, his daughter and even his wife, if you like. But you must never touch his money!'

Peter Kahn left, but Donald continued unsmiling;

'I'm getting sick of this place more and more everyday. If Bloch doesn't give me an increase this week, you'll see. I'll just stay home and I won't come to work. The repairs will pile up and he'll be forced to call me back, but I'll only do that on *my* terms. I did that once before four years ago. I just stayed away for three weeks doing odd jobs and repairs for people at home. The boss came to my house personally and begged me to come back to work.'

'And did he give you an increase?' I asked.

'Yes. But that was years ago. My expenses are more now. My children are growing up and I need more money. You can't stand in one place, can you?'

Donald went on and on complaining. It became more and more depressing. I felt like running away faster than Peter Kahn had.

'Now look at that fool, Lennie,' said Donald. 'You know he has passed matric. Can you believe that? And he can't even spell *aerial*. Have you heard him speak English? It's pathetic, man.'

'Well, the English-speaking parents complain in the papers that the most First Classes come from the Afrikaans schools,' I remarked.

'And *they* are only fit for the police force so they can chase poor blacks around day and night for passes!'

After a silence Donald continued, still talking about Lennie:

'Most of the time when a job is needed urgently, he calls me to help him. But he earns fifty-six rands and I only earn twenty-four rands, with my fifteen years' experience. And I've got a family to support and he's a mere boy. I can't stand it any more.'

All the time I was hoping that he would go out to lunch like the others. But it became quite evident that he would not be going after all. He complained that he did not have money to buy lunch with, and it was pointless going out only to bask in the sun. He preferred to be with me and speak about our predicament. He remarked that I seemed to be very happy with what I was earning. That remark made me uneasy and I wanted to correct the wrong impression he had. I said;

'I have often thought about leaving too, Donald.'

'Why? Money?'

'No,' I said. 'I'm not happy here because I'm between two fires. My own people on the one hand and the white staff on the other.'

'What do you mean?'

'Well, it's enough that I'm having so much trouble with the African customers. One can understand their attitudes. Obviously they are suspicious of anyone in a position such as mine. They think I'm just bent on squeezing money out of them to swell the coffers of my white boss. I can understand, too, why the men are usually offended when I ask to see their pass-books. They are sensitive about that. They feel they are being subjected to unnecessary scrutiny. They can't stand that sort of thing, especially from a mere woman.'

'I see,' said Donald.

'But what I can't stand,' I continued, 'is *their* attitude.' I pointed to the women on the other side.

'They just can't live and let live. They want to push me out because they think I am here to compete with them. If only they could accept that I'm here only to do my work and earn my living.'

'And the boss, what do you think about him?'

'He's all right, I think. But half the time he does not know what is happening. And he relies almost entirely on the reports he gets from those two white women.'

'But he, too, can be quite nasty sometimes. Like that day he said that you *need not* have a look at the papers of that customer who came here with that big American car.'

'Which one?' I asked, not remembering.

'That one who wanted to have a radio fitted into his car. That one with the spotlessly white shirt who had his coat slung over his shoulder and was playing big, moving up and down in the passage here brandishing a big bunch of keys and trying to impress everybody, man.'

'Oh you mean Bembe. The one who had a deposit of one hundred rands? Hah! And that was the last time we saw him. He just disappeared without a trace. You see, the boss could not resist the temptation of accepting that big cash deposit. He just could not give the customer the money back. So he had the expensive car radio installed even when he knew that the man's particulars were not satisfactory.'

'But why did the boss say that it was not necessary for you to see the customer's papers? You *always* inspect the black customers' documents.'

'When I pointed that out to the boss he told me not to bother because he had taken the registration number of the car; that he had inquired from the garage where the customer bought the car and had been informed that the car had been paid for fully in less than six months. I remember the boss saying loudly to his sister after the customer had left, "But I wonder where he got all that money to pay off such an expensive car within that short time?" Mrs Kuhn replied: "Maybe *they* gave it to him." The boss understood then and remarked laughing;

"Then maybe he stole it, Lieda. You remember that Dad always used to say that an informer is worse than a thief. Do you remember, Lieda?" His sister nodded, smiling.'

'So he was a police informer,' said Donald.

'Yes. The boss wrote it in himself on the card later.

We went on talking about the customers and the staff but all the time I had a notion that there was something else on Donald's mind. Suddenly he said, changing the subject;

'Muriel, in a position such as yours where you have access to all documents and records, you could make a fortune for yourself.'

He looked sincere and kept his voice low.

'How?' I asked.

'I know of many Coloured customers who are tired of paying and paying and paying and who would be only too happy to have the records of their accounts destroyed. They would offer you at least half of the balance of their accounts if you helped them. All you would have to do is to pull out the ledger card of that customer and destroy it. If the cards were destroyed they would never know.'

'They *would* know because we don't only use the ledger cards as a record: there is a register kept of all the accounts and the ledger cards are checked against the register from time to time.'

I lied. In fact I had long noticed that probably due to lack of staff there was no register kept at Metropolitan. I merely wanted to discourage Donald from pursuing the matter further.

'Apart from that,' I said, 'there are also the invoices we make when the goods are sent out.'

'You can also destroy those just by tearing them out.'

'But they are in numerical order and any number missing would be conspicuous.'

'Even if they *did* find that an invoice was missing, they would not be able to prove beyond all doubt that *you* did it. There are four of you plus the boss who have access to the records. It could be one of the whites, couldn't it? They also steal. Don't you read in the papers about secretaries, managers and other whites who are charged with fraud and other crimes involving money?'

'Yes I do. But I don't want to do the same thing. I wouldn't like to appear in court on such charges. Besides, I would have to engage a lawyer to defend me. And where do you think I would get the money from?'

'How do you think people become rich? Do you think you will achieve anything sitting here at that lousy desk and being underpaid? Never! You'll sit holding that pen there until you bend double with age. You must wake up, man.'

'I'm not the brave type, Donald. And can't you see that if any black customers' records were to disappear I would be the first person to be suspected because of the colour of my skin?'

'But they would not be certain. And once Mrs Stein was found out misappropriating funds. Haven't you noticed that she very rarely relieves the cashier? They don't trust her near the till. So they could never rule out the possibility that she may have removed the records.'

I sat silent, tired of arguing with Donald. But he had an alternative.

'If you think that won't work, we could think of another arrangement, something that would really pay us, and *fast* for that matter.

'Like what, Donald?'

'Like, for instance, we get hold of an important-looking customer, a Coloured or Indian one. Let's say he wants to buy an expensive bedroom-suite worth about six hundred rands but he's only got two hundred rands . . .'

'Yes?'

'So we tell him to hand over sixty rands deposit but to give *us* the other hundred and forty. He could produce a false identity card. It could even be that of a dead person. You know, the boss never looks at the photos, he leaves it to you. If your customer claimed to be a business-man, say a tailor, the boss would believe him and trust him. His cash deposit would be okay. Then you take down false particulars, that is, false personal references and their addresses, also false business references. You know that they can't get anything from the identity cards Coloureds and Indians carry because they are like the ones carried by whites. So there'd be no risk there . . . Then . . .'

'Then what?'

'The customer gives a temporary address. After Aggrey delivers the goods, the customer removes them to another unknown address. We would arrange with the customer to come and pay his monthly instal-ments regularly for two or three months. In that way Mrs. Stein who's so observant would see that the customer always pays regularly in person. So when he stops paying they won't be in a hurry to go and hunt him out. When they did decide to look for him, nobody would know any-thing of such a person. Our customer would gain because he would get an expensive bedroom suite for about a quarter of the price, and you and I would share our 'earnings', and (Donald summed it up in tsotsi-taal) ons rwa die Jood – we swindle the Jew.'

He spoke with the confidence of an expert schemer.

I did not know what to say. I tried to think of obvious flaws, but no objections came to mind.

'Why should we wait? I could bring in a customer this very week, man.'

I was cornered. I had to think of a way out of this. I decided to pro-crastinate. I said; 'I think the best time to begin is when Mrs Stein is not here. I understand she is going on holiday soon.'

I lied. I don't know what made me think of that. It just came out.

'It will be the first time she goes on holiday since I've known her. If she does go, even if only for a month, we'll all breathe more freely. This shop will be rid of a menace. Right. We'll wait till then.'

Donald walked off in a better mood. In fact he went over to Gants, bought two cold-drinks and offered me one.

The day might have ended as quietly as it had begun if it had not been for one incident which left all of us roaring with laughter and which remained a joke for as long as I was at Metropolitan Radio.

Mr Bloch and Lennie arrived from town just as I was tidying my desk and everybody was about to go home. Lennie quickly rushed up to the workshop and came down with his coat slung over his fore-arm and carrying a comic in his other hand. He went on to the other side of the steel bars and stood staring at the boss who had now occupied the chair near the till. Mr Bloch eventually looked up, the way people do who are being stared at, and asked;

'Yes, Lennie?'

'Mr Bloch I would like to sub some money.'

'How much?'

'Ten Rand.'

'Ten *Rand*! Why so much money?'

Everybody was looking at them and listening. Peter and Donald who were then coming down the stairs also listened and exchanged glances.

'I need it,' Lennie answered.

'For what?' the boss asked, frowning.

'I want to go and get married by special licence.'

'What?'

Mr Bloch exploded into a fit of laughter. He said;

'Well, that's the best I've heard in years!'

He looked at the white women. By now almost everyone was laughing. But not Mrs Kuhn who looked irritated. Mr Bloch looked back at the mechanic and asked;

'You haven't got five pounds to pay for a marriage licence, but you want to take a wife?'

Donald was laughing the loudest. Instead of leaving, he stood near me and laughed, looking at Lennie who pointedly ignored his stares. As he followed me down the passage, Donald said in Afrikaans;

'Didn't I tell you, Muriel, he's really stupid. He's not marrying for love. All he wants is the money left him by his father who died while he was employed on the railways. One of the conditions under which he gets the money is that he must be twenty-one and married. He only turned twenty-one last month, and the next thing is he wants to grab the money. That's a Boer for you! He hasn't got an ounce of brain in his skull. He'll squander all that money in no time and go begging again.'

10

After being absent from work for six days, I experienced an unusual feeling of relief as I approached the shop. It was as if I was going back to where I really belonged.

Adam grinned happily in that friendly way of his, showing nearly all his nicotine-stained teeth when he saw me pass near the window (which he was dusting from inside). He tapped lightly on the pane with the greasy yellow duster.

Inside I could see the store-manager standing and speaking to the boss, who was facing away from the door. He looked up at me as I stepped on the threshold. He must have said something to Mr Bloch because at that moment the boss turned quickly round and began waving at me impatiently. The expression on his face was like that of a man seeing an apparition.

'Wait, Muriel, just stand there! Don't come in!'

I stood still, confused, as he shouted and waved at me. I did not know what to say. Then he asked, still shouting;

'Why are you here? You . . . you . . . y-y-you suffer from small pox, don't you, or what? Oh, it's your baby or something, isn't it?

I tried to shout back an explanation but he just shouted me down, saying something about small-pox and stammering. I tried in vain to explain. Adam stood gaping, his eyes wide open in amazement, looking at the boss and then at me.

'Au, Muriel! What's wrong? The boss is so frightened!'

'You must go home, Muriel. You must go home,' called the boss, waving me away. 'You must understand, Muriel, I am very sorry, but for the sake of all of us . . . it's not safe, it's not safe. I need you here, but you must go . . .'

The store-manager was also trying to say something to the trembling Mr Bloch, so I waited a little. Mr Bloch looked at him then suddenly dashed towards the switchboard. I turned to go, but then the boss started waving at me again, this time indicating that I must stand still. All the time he looked as if he was seeing a leper. He said;

'Wait, wait, Muriel. I'll ring Doctor Morris and find out if it's safe to have you here.'

The boss dialled the number rapidly and nervously. It must have been engaged because he dialled again and again. He put the receiver to his ear and asked me, shouting even louder; 'It's small-pox, isn't it?'

I shouted back;

'No, Mr Bloch, it's not *small*-pox. It's *chicken*-pox she's got!'

The line was still engaged. The boss dialled again never taking his eyes off me.

'What's chicken-pox? Isn't that infectious?'

I stood there motionless and disappointed. My thoughts went back. I had left home in such urgency as if I was being pushed from behind by an invisible hand. I had been in a dilemma. I had spent six days at home. The first three had not been so bad, but as time went on I became increasingly restless. I had found the days to be too long even though I had read when I was not attending to my child. I had kept on thinking of my work. It was the first week of the month and I knew that there would be many customers coming in. It became more and more difficult for me to concentrate. I continued to read but I did not know what I was reading about. It was as if I was lost in a desert, especially when my little Moleboheng was asleep. The location can be so desolate during the day! I had intended to stay with my baby for at least a week, but I felt my absence from work for *so* long would inconvenience the office staff which was already short.

Then I could not bear the thought any longer. When the child showed speedy signs of recovery and the dark scabs on her back and chest were falling off, I decided to leave her in the care of a sympathetic friend, the rare type God always sends you when you are in dire need of help. I went back to Metropolitan Radio.

Now I stood at the door regretting every minute of my impatience and all the hours of unrewarded anxiety. Had I known that Mr Bloch could manage without me I would have stayed at home. I would have calmly read all the books I had always wished I could find time to read. I felt like kicking myself.

It seemed Mr Bloch could not get through to the doctor's number. He shouted;

'Muriel just go somewhere. Go to "Crackers" (a supermarket where we used to do our grocery shopping during lunch-time). Go and do some shopping while I try to get Dr Morris on the line, and come back later.'

What a welcome!

I began to feel a little amused. I remembered how I had heard the whites remarking about how blacks suffer from very many types of diseases; that even the slightest physical contact with them can be very dangerous as most of them have unhygienic habits and are carriers of many infectious diseases. But avoiding physical contact with blacks won't immunise the whites. Can't they see that the only way to ensure that the air that *they* breathe and the food that *they* eat will not be contaminated by blacks is to raise the standard of living of blacks and give them adequate education? I wondered what the use was of living in fear.

'I sincerely hope that Mr Bloch *never* gets through to Dr Morris. I'll go back home and do my reading in peace,' I said to myself.

I was hardly five minutes in the supermarket when Johannes rushed in panting. From where I was I could see him looking about and rushing

all over the place, almost running, scanning the stalls. His wandering eyes stopped when they spotted me. I had guessed correctly and was not surprised when he came running towards me. He gasped;

'Muriel, come quickly! The boss says you must come. Now! He wants you. There are customers waiting!'

I followed Johannes out through the narrow passage. We squeezed our bodies against those of the customers in the queue. The cashier as well as the customers looked at us with astonishment. They must have thought we were a pair of lunatics. At the door Adam and the boss were standing and arguing.

'I told you to get more money from that boy who bought the 3-band Supersonic 'Clipper', Adam. What's wrong with you?'

Adam replied, spreading his arms out;

'He tell me he gotè no money to eetè, Baas. What I can do? Ah come, Muriel, come.'

Adam beckoned to me. I looked at Mr Bloch.

'All right, Muriel. The doctor says it's not serious. Sit down there now and attend to those customers. They have thirty rands deposit and want an 'Ellis de Luxe' coal stove.'

It was colder in the shop than outside, but Adam already had the heater on for me. He stood smiling holding the back of the chair I was about to occupy. And Johannes ushered me in as if I were the Queen of England.

'I have already dusted your desk and chair,' said Adam. Then lowering his voice, he added, 'Europeans can be *so* stupid. They are too afraid of disease. What is disease after all? One would think they do not die. What's the use, they all still die like us, don't they?'

'Just give her your pass book, my brother,' said Adam to the waiting customer. The waiting man took it out of his back trouser pocket, looked at it and handed it to me reluctantly. Then coming in on our conversation, he said;

'And *we* do everything for them. Even in their homes. It is *our* womenfolk who nurse their babies and give them food.'

We all laughed softly. I took the book and opened it. As I did so, particles of what looked like black dust dropped from it onto the desk. I tried very hard to suppress any signs of surprise. I remembered that in loyalty to the firm customers must be encouraged to buy, and at all costs. If I showed any signs of disgust the customer might just decide that he was not buying after all. Besides, he had not yet given Adam the thirty rands he said he had.

As I flapped the hard cover over I choked. A strong pungent smell emanated from the book and I felt my nose itching and burning. I started sneezing and the book fell out of my hands on the desk and emitted more 'dust'. The tingling was hot and unbearable. I held my palms over my nostrils and continued to sneeze until I felt dizzy. I had to get up and go to the kitchen for some water.

When I returned to my desk Adam quickly and thoughtfully came to my rescue by taking the pass book and holding it away from me so that I could read the particulars without causing more embarrassment. The customer apologised and blamed his back trouser pocket, claiming that it perhaps had remnants of tobacco particles in it. His explanation was hard to believe.

Afterwards another customer approached me and said;

'You work nicely here, my sister. Like a white person. You must be very happy in such a place.'

'Yes,' I said demurely.

'And look at the heater burning next to you, and telephone, and the writing machine . . .'

I started getting that 'white-master's-well-fed-dog-feeling', which Mangaliso Sobukwe used to tell us about.

'The little jobs they did not want to give us at first are being done by *us* these days,' continued the customer, obviously proud.

'Yes,' I said, feeling like screaming. I was glad when the customer left and Adam came and sat on the chair next to my desk. He took out a piece of cigarette stump from his shirt pocket, patted his trouser pockets, presumably searching for matches which he could not find. He put the brown end of the stump between his thick wet lips and kept it there. He looked about and reached for a blank Hire Purchase Agreement form on my desk and, without asking, tore a piece from it.

'What are you doing, Adam? You are wasting!'

I said unconciously. 'Ag never mind. Our Baas is too rich. But listen, there is something I want to advise you about, Miriam.'

He paused, holding the piece of torn paper against the glowing bars of the heater, and when it flamed he lighted the stump between his lips.

'You see, my child, I know you have gone to school and learnt much and perhaps you think you know more than I do about life . . .'

Just then Mrs Kuhn's voice called from the other side;

'Adam, come here, quick!'

I was rather sorry for the interruption.

'Give me that typewriter there. No, not that, the typewriter on Mrs Stein's desk man! Oh Adam, you're really getting old. Look at him, Mrs Stein, he's giving me that adding machine instead of the typewriter.'

Mrs Stein only nodded her head and kept on adding some figures loudly in Afrikaans;

'. . . vyf, elf, agtien, een honderd, agt-en-twintig rand tien sent.'

She always added figures in Afrikaans. Then she said;

'He's getting older and more stupid by the day.'

'Ag he can hardly even stand on his feet any more,' said Mrs Kuhn. 'It's the bunions on his feet. Hey, Adam,' she called, 'what happened to those bunions, those *corns*, Adam, are they finished now?'

Adam was not listening. He ignored them completely. The women

might just as well have been speaking to a wall. He moved away from them and came slouching towards me.

'Adam, why don't you answer?' asked Mrs Kuhn. Both white women laughed.

'Why don't you say something, Adam?' I asked him.

He replied in the vernacular;

'These things are mad. Do you ever answer a lunatic's questions? But I have other things to think about. *You* listen to me, Muriel. You have acquired much of the knowledge of the white man's way of life, but I can see that you are, in fact, ignorant. And you are weak, my child. You must ask your husband to speak to his parents to get you a good African witchdoctor to strengthen you against evil spirits. These spirits can be dangerous.'

He paused for a while. He was stern and spoke with the typical virility of a man of his age. I listened curiously.

'Look what happened this morning when a customer came to you with a pass that had been *worked* on. You must be very careful. It can happen that a man whose aim may be to *get* you, can come here and cast a spell over you so powerful that you can actually leave your house and your husband and children and go running after him.'

I laughed. Adam was not amused. He went on seriously.

'For instance, this very illness of your child which kept you away from work for so long. That should *not* have happened. If you had taken the child to *our* doctors it would have been better. It would have saved you a lot of time away from your work and the terrible disgrace which you suffered this morning when you tried to enter through that door. You must get someone to work on you. Do you remember how I used to be in pain, how my arm used to be sore from the neck right down to my fingers and how it used to hang sluggishly and useless so that I could not even move the furniture? Do you remember how even the boss used to call a white doctor to examine me in the shop here and how many times that doctor came to give me injections? Did all that help? Never. Finally I decided to go and see one of our own witch-doctors, and here I am today all fit and strong . . .'

'I can kick myself!'

Mrs Kuhn's voice shrill and loud interrupted our talk.

'I keep on striking the wrong keys. I just can't concentrate with Adam's voice over there. Muriel, Adam's talking too much. Just chase him away!'

'He was telling me about his arm, Mrs Kuhn,' I explained.

'But his arm's better. He doesn't complain about the pains any more.'

'He says it's because he went to a witch-doctor, Mrs Kuhn, when the white doctors couldn't cure him. He said I should go there too and take my baby.'

'Oh, Adam talks a lot of nonsense,' said Mrs Kuhn.

'Isé not nonsons Missus, Look!' said Adam.

He went over to the other side and pulled his khaki coat-sleeve right up to show the line of black marks and incisions which were left by the witch-doctor's sharp blade.

'Look, Missus, look,' he said going nearer.

'Oh Adam, go away! Why can't you tell your girl-friend or wife to wash your coat and iron it! It looks terrible.'

Adam's face assumed that hard impenetrable mask of indifference once again. He adjusted his coat sleeve and walked away.

I looked at Adam as he moved away. Somehow I was thankful that he was going towards the long linoleum, and not coming to compel me to answer the question he had asked me as it might have disappointed him. He had imparted part of his extensive knowledge to me, a lot of which was still remaining inside that head of his. He slowly slouched back to his post, the soles of his unlaced worn shoes hardly leaving the surface of the floor, but rubbing over it with every step. He gave me one more knowing look and shook his head slowly, perhaps regretting my apparent state of utter ignorance and stubbornness. He sat, sullen, facing the door, his eyes staring, his lips partially parted. He sat dead still, big and rugged like the sphinx, as if he was part of the furniture, stiff and static.

It was Friday. For the workers this was pay day. The blacks poured into the city by their hundreds of thousands; 'boys' and 'girls' of every description. Their white masters and white mistresses were waiting for them.

One could never mistake this day for another. Even if I had been unconscious for weeks and had recovered consciousness on this day, I would have been able to tell without the slightest hesitation that it was Friday. Just by looking around and observing the movements of the people, their gait and gestures; by the tones of their voices, I would know. There was more enthusiasm and excitement. The atmosphere was loaded with expectation.

The pay packet is a strange force. Just the prospect alone of receiving it, irrespective of its size and the value of its contents, has an intoxicating effect on the recipient.

At Metropolitan Radio Johannes was already sweeping the front pavement of the shop when I arrived. He was humming a tune and sweeping. The dirty dusting cloth hanging out of the pocket of his soiled khaki overall flapped as he moved diligently and with a marked spring in his step.

A European entered the shop behind me and followed me up the passage. He had a pink face and an untidy mop of very white hair. He walked with a stoop and a slight limp. He must be a beggar, I thought.

I greeted Mr Bloch who was standing on the other side of the counter. He looked at the man behind me and asked indignantly;

'What do you want?'

'Spare me something . . . to buy food.' the man said.

'What food? To eat or to drink?'

'To eat.'

'Not to go and buy a bottle of beer at the bar?'

'No.'

'All right. Stand there,' Mr Bloch said, putting his hand into his trouser pocket and taking out a twenty-cent piece. He called Adam.

'Adam, go and buy a loaf of bread and a pint of milk.'

'He's disappointed,' mumbled Mrs Kuhn, 'He thought you were going to give him the money so he could go straight to the bar.'

At nine o'clock Lambert, as usual, brought the time sheets for the whites and blacks to the store. He put them on Mrs Stein's desk, looked around and asked me softly;

'Where's Mrs Stein?'

'I don't know. She hasn't come in.'

'She'd better hurry up. We want our pay early today,' he said.

'Larry, if Mrs Stein doesn't come in today who'll do the wages?' asked Mrs Kuhn.

Mr Bloch shrugged his shoulders and replied, walking away;

'In that case *you* have to do it, Lieda. Who else do you think can?'

Mrs Kuhn looked at me.

'You see, Muriel? You must never work for relatives. They always expect too much from you. He doesn't think I also get tired.'

Lennie's footsteps distracted our attention. He was stamping heavily on the plank floor of the attic, which was less than three feet above our heads, his footsteps sounding like those of a cow on stampede.

'Lennie, man, please, man, walk like a person not like a horse, for goodness' sake man!' Mr Bloch shouted.

Lennie laughed. He seemed also excited with the pay-day good feeling. He descended the stairs, but met Adam looking serious.

'What's wrong, Adam?'

'Baas Lennie, dis custom is kros. He say portabol still no gugu and he pay ten rands las week when you finish repair.'

The customer looked really cross. I could see her speaking and gesticulating, looking from Adam to Lennie. She addressed Adam very harshly but changed and spoke politely when addressing the white mechanic. Adam called me;

'Muriel, please come over here and help us.'

They were standing round a portable radio, a four-band Omega, which rested on the desk over several layers of clean pieces of cloth in which it had been wrapped, like a beloved infant who was again brought to the doctor for medical attention and whose mother was standing by, worried by its painful relapse.

Lennie looked bored and impatient. He was turning the knobs and pressing the buttons on the radio.

'Master, listen. This radio doesn't speak Zulu after five o'clock,' said the customer.

'But *there's* Zulu,' he said, turning to me. 'Muriel please explain to her. Maybe it was the battery. It was weak. There. I've put in a new battery.'.

The woman gabbled to me in the vernacular.

'She says it's not the tone. She says after five o'clock every evening the radio just stops playing,' I interpreted.

'What's wrong? Is it bewitched?' asked Adam.

'Yes. You bewitched it here. You want me to come and pay more money. You fix it up half!'

'Where does she stay?' asked Lennie, thinking that if she stayed too far from the nearest F.M. tower, the distance might affect the reception.

'Here. Here. In Berrario. Just here. On the hip-joint of a louse,' said the woman to Adam and me.

'That shouldn't make any difference to the reception,' said Lennie. He turned and left, climbing the stairs to the workshop, stamping and whistling. Adam turned to the customer.

'Look, my sister, speak the truth and shame the devil. Speak the truth like a dying person. Your battery was an old one. We have given you a new battery and the thing already plays better. Go now please!'

The customer wrapped up the portable radio furiously but carefully in the cloths. Cursing and threatening Adam she left the shop reluctantly. Mr Bloch, who had been struggling on the telephone, called to me;

'Muriel, please take that receiver on your desk. It will take hours for me trying to get this person's name alone. It sounds like gogga to me.'

He put his receiver down, grumbling;

'I'm tell you, these people should not speak on the phone, man. If you ask for a name, they give you a number as if it's a convict. You see, they do not think like us. What does she want? What is her name, Muriel?'

'Her name is Regina Rorwana, Mr Bloch,' I said.

'Now why does she say *Gogga?* I'm sure she said Gogga to me.'

'No Mr Bloch. The 'R' is pronounced like the 'G' in Afrikaans, something like the 'R' in 'Radebe',' I tried to explain to him.

'She wants us to send an agent to collect twenty rand, the balance on the portable. She's leaving for the Transkei.'

'If we hadn't been able to understand her, she'd have left for the Transkei with the twenty rand in her pocket!' he grumbled. 'Honestly . . . these people . . .'

I went back to my desk on the other side thinking about the furious customer with the portable radio. I knew that some Africans thought that the dealers from whom they buy radios have the power to make their sets play or stop and that they are always able to exercise this power no matter how far away the dealer is from the customer. Often an African customer would come in to pay his instalment and after doing so he would ask the boss to 'make' his set play as he had now paid up his arrears.

Mr Bloch took advantage of these beliefs, and on several occasions I had heard him threaten a slow customer by saying; 'If you do not pay properly your radio will get cross. It will stop playing.'

I had hardly been sitting for fifteen minutes when Mr Bloch called me.

'Muriel, just see to this customer. Explain to her about the Hire Purchase price.'

'But Master,' she said: 'why is the *increase* so much?'

'Oh for goodness' sake, man, I told you. It's not *increase*, it's *interest*. Look, man, if I borrow money from the bank I can't expect them to borrow me for nothing!'

The boss moved away. The woman stood looking at me. All that talk about borrowing money from the bank made no sense to her. I tried to explain;

'You see, instead of paying spot cash for the stove, the boss lets you have it now. For helping you like that, you have to pay him a little more money on top,' I said.

'You say *little*! It's so much. Eighty pounds! When shall I finish it? I haven't even got a husband and they've already taken away my old stove.'

She looked as if she were going to cry. I pitied her and tried to show her that it wasn't as bad as it seemed. I said;

'Just go on paying a little bit each month. Three pounds, three pounds every month... in two years you'll have finished.'

She looked at me as if I was a traitor. She went away without saying goodbye.

We were now very busy. Mrs Stein had not come to work. After I would finish fixing up one customer, Mr Bloch would bring me another. This time the customer, Albanus Ntshingila, clutched our 'green letter' which called for immediate payment of his arrears which amounted to R236,70 and threatened him with court action. Albanus Ntshingila was protesting hotly that he had no arrears; his son had been paying the account for him regularly. He stood there looking at me challengingly as I searched for his ledger card, muttering *Ntshingila, Ntshingila* to myself. Mr Bloch was saying;

'See Albanus, all our balances are done by the machine, and the machine cannot go wrong. It says you have a big balance outstanding. Anyway, where are your receipts?'

'They are with my son.'

'Did your son ever show you the receipts?'

'What do you think, that my son is a liar?'

Mr Bloch then decided to stop arguing with the customer.

'All right then, Albanus, you stand there and wait. Muriel will find your card and we shall see.'

I was still hunting and the customer was still standing there. My mind was at a standstill. When I could not find the card among the Ntsh-lot, I had gone right through the N's and there were approximately one

hundred of them, but without success. I cautiously asked the customer to allow me to see his pass-book so that I could check the spelling, but the name in the pass-book and the name on the 'green letter' were the same. Then I went through the T's just in case someone had omitted the initial letter N as sometimes happened. Then Mrs Kuhn came to help me and went through the N's again while I went through the N's in the European's ledger cards in case the card had been misfiled.

'Mrs Stein has hidden this card purposely,' growled Mrs Kuhn. 'She's evil, that woman. For instance, she *smokes* and hides the fact that she does.'

'But why does she hide it, Mrs. Kuhn. If she were an African woman I could understand because in our society it's still looked upon as bad behaviour if a woman smokes.'

Mrs Kuhn shrugged.

I started praying, 'Oh God, please let me find this card, please let me find it.' Suddenly I had a brainwave. Who said prayers were never answered?

'Haven't you got another name, your father's perhaps or something?' I asked Albanus.

He looked at me as though I were mad.

'My father's name was Kubheka. But we don't use it often.'

I immediately looked under the Ku's and there I found the card. Next to ALBANUS NTSHINGILA the name KUBHEKA was added in pencil.

'Ah,' said Albanus, 'Now I see, now I see. My son said he would pay for my goods while I was in hospital. He has used the Isibongo and not the surname used by his father. Ah, ah.'

Mrs Stein must have seen the name Kubheka on the son's pass-book and added it in pencil on the ledger card. Then she, in my opinion, misfiled the card.

I was exhausted. I felt as if I had run a marathon race. But I was not allowed to relax.

'Wait a minute,' said Mr Bloch. 'Look here, your son has not actually paid anything. He came in six months ago and *promised* to pay. But he hasn't paid. Muriel, explain to this customer that *he* signed the H.P. so I expect *him* to pay, not his son or uncle or mother or wife or anything like that. I've got nothing to do with all of them and I don't want a lot of talk, talk, talk. I want money. That's all. Tell him.'

The telephone rang and Mr Bloch went to answer it. It was from the other branch in town. Mr Bloch yelled into the receiver;

'What's that? What? Who is it, a *soggen*? Oh well with a *soggen* you can go as high as you want to. Up to 37 percent you can charge... which bedroom suite does he want? The Marquise with the triple rectangular mirrors on the dressing-table? Will they be able to pay the instalment...'

Johannes was standing at the entrance to the kitchen listening. He came over to me and whispered:

'The boss says that where do they get all that money when they are kaffirs. That's what the word *soggen* means, a black person like you and me.'

Johannes moved away mumbling, keeping his eye on the wage book which Mrs Kuhn had in front of her. Mrs Kuhn must have felt his stare because she looked up.

'What are you looking at me for, Johannes? You get no money today. Why did you sub so much money?'

'What can I do, Missus, I got childrens.'

Aggrey passed towards the kitchen. His eyes were also fixed on Mrs Kuhn, who looked up at him and asked;

'Agrippa, you were also absent on Monday again. Where were you?'

'I was busy, Missus.'

'You only brought two repossessions on Tuesday. Why did two things take you the whole day?'

'What, Missus? Two repossessions and *deliveries*!'

Mrs Kuhn looked and said nothing. It was useless. Agrippa always got away with it. As long as he brought the goods back he could do anything.

More customers came to pay, and waited in a queue impatiently twisting bank-notes in their hands. Johannes looked at the customers and then at me and shook his head;

'My God, this man makes money. If I were him, with so much money coming to me everyday, I would eat so much that I wouldn't be able to breathe when I go to bed at night.'

I laughed.

It was now about 12.45 p.m. and the boss would soon go out to lunch. He subbed R5 from the till and then called Adam.

'Adam, where are you? Where is he? He's never here when I want him. Adam!'

As Adam appeared, he said to him:

'Adam, just watch the door. Nothing must walk out of this shop hey!'

'Yes baas.'

'Oh I'm boiling!' Mrs Kuhn remarked.

She gasped for air.

'But what is it, Mrs Kuhn? It's quite nice and cool!'

'It's the change of life,' she said wiping her forehead and pushing back her hair; 'You'll also get it, you'll see.'

She moaned softly to herself;

'How does he expect me to do the wages, make out the cheques, sit and watch the staff, all at the same time? I can't take this. He must get more staff. *Reliable* staff, that's all.'

It was quiet for a while. Adam left his place at the door where he had been dreamily sitting and staring and went towards the kitchen and the *whites only* lavatory. Just then a European woman walked in and asked

for a small portable radio. Mrs Kuhn stood up, went to the shelves and produced one in a leather case.

'What's the price?' the customer asked.

'Adam!' Mrs Kuhn called. 'Damn it, where *is* he?'

'Yes Missus?' Adam answered from the lavatory.

'Come here.'

'Waité bité Missus I am coming,' Adam shouted back but I could hear that he was still busy on the lavatory. Then he hurriedly appeared, not bothering to wash his hands. He gave the price of the radio but the woman only smiled and left. I said to Adam in the vernacular;

'Adam, why did you go into that toilet without even shutting the door?'

'Because I must hurry back and watch the shop door. If anything gets stolen, I am always to blame. They pull it off from my pay.'

'But why didn't you shut the door, Adam. The ladies ... everybody could hear.'

'What ladies? I don't care about them. I am not allowed to leave the shop. What must I do? Urinate back into my bladder? So I use their toilet and I don't care!'

After 2 p.m. the boss came in with money bags containing money for the wages. He plonked them down in front of Mrs Kuhn who immediately started counting and putting sums into the wage envelopes.

The boss was in a good mood now. He sat on a desk and jollied the customers who came in to buy or pay. One African asked the price of a small radio which stood in the window.

'Six pounds, nineteen, and six. Do you want one?' said Mr Bloch.

'Does it catch everything?' asked the customer.

'Yes you catch everything – English station, Afrikaans station, even Police station, you catch,' said Mr Bloch, smiling and looking at the customer who laughed loudly.

A very tall African customer came into pay. Mr Bloch immediately greeted him with;

'Molo, Fitshan', you come pay?'

'Yes, I've come to pay, but I am not short. You are so short yet you call me "short one".'

Mr Bloch laughed, took the receipt book the customer was holding and looked at it.

'What's your name?' he said.

'Let's see. You say Daniel. Daniel who? Daniel Satan?'

'Sethabela, not Satan,' the customer said, offended.

'Oh haikona satan?'

Everybody laughed.

I felt tired. I had not gone out for lunch. A few minutes outside in the yard would not matter, I thought, and went out.

Although the back yard was cramped, the grass was green and seemed beautiful. I stood leaning against the wall for awhile thinking that I had even heard a bird chirp. I would have enjoyed the bit of breeze and the

sunshine a little longer had it not been for the Portuguese or Greek or Italian kids whose families occupied the cheap flats above our shop's next-door. They were, as usual, badly behaved, and they kept throwing stones at me and laughing. Then Ben, the yard and flat-cleaner, came along singing loudly.

'Hei, voetsek, you!' he shouted at the kids and picked up stones to throw at them. They scattered laughing and running in all directions. They stood a safe distance away, still laughing and jeering, others sticking their pink tongues out and making eyes at us. Ben looked at me and said in vernacular;

'Muriel, why didn't you drive away those dirty white animals?'

'Ben stop cursing and throwing stones at those kids,' I said. 'One of these days you'll lose your job and that valuable room of yours.'

'Why should I?'

'Their fathers will either kill you or throw you into the street,' I answered.

'Not when some of their fathers are my best customers. They are my brothers-in-law at night, when the lights are gone.'

When I returned to the shop the boss himself was at the till writing out receipts. Johannes was standing on the other side of the steel railings without his khaki overcoat. In one hand he held his kierie with his hat propped over the knob. It meant that it was nearly four-thirty in the afternoon and time for him to go home. He left an hour earlier on Fridays as he lived far away from Johannesburg. He was moaning and grumbling.

'Tlisa chelete Morena,' he said. (Bring the money my Lord)

He stood with his palm open, ready to receive. The boss must have guessed what he wanted. He said;

'What money, Johannes? There's no money for you. You subbed all your money during the week.'

'Ou Baas,' Johannes said, slowly withdrawing his hand but never taking his eyes off the boss.

'Shop', Adam shouted from the other end of the shop, meaning white customers (or what he thought was white) had entered. Mr Bloch immediately left the till and went to the customer, ignoring Johannes who began throwing his hands about, wielding his kierie in disgust.

'Dogs, dogs,' he cursed. 'They can keep their money!'

'Can I help you?' the boss asked the white gentleman.

'Yes. I want to buy a portable radio for a child. She'll be six on Sunday.'

The boss went to the showcase from whence he brought a small 2-band portable in a leather case. He switched it on and it started playing.

'This should do for a child of six. It's got a medium wave-band and one short wave-band,' he said showing it to the gentleman.

'Has it got F.M?'

'I can give you one, but the price is more than double, and it's really not worth it.'

'Yes, but it's meant for a birthday present . . .'

'But you don't actually need F.M. F.M. is for the muntus.'

Lambert, who was standing nearby with the other 'boys' waiting for his pay, said, surly;

'Yes, the muntus must pay heavily for their indoctrination.'

The gentleman took the two-band portable and paid for it. The boss had seemed a bit embarrassed. He turned to his sister and said;

'Lieda, why is Lambert and the others here?'

'They're waiting for their pay.'

'Well pay him quickly and let him go. He thinks he's a politician.'

Mrs Kuhn handed Mr Bloch the pay envelopes. As he gave Lambert's envelope to him Mr Bloch asked;

'Lambert, when are you going to shave off that terrible beard of yours? Can't you afford to buy a razor blade?'

Lambert replied smiling;

'I'll shave it off when our leaders come back from Robben Island!'

Agrippa and his boys were waiting. The boss signalled to them to come nearer. They marched slowly along the narrow passage in a long single-file procession towards the counter, their faces solemn, like communicants. The long-awaited moment had at last arrived. They were now going to receive remuneration for their labour. Mr Bloch handed them their pay envelopes one by one.

'There, Chimp,' he said to John Msiza.

John Msiza was nick-named John the Chimp by the white staff because of his extraordinary, thick lips and to differentiate him from Long John, the tall hefty Zulu who never smiled.

John Msiza took his pay from the boss with both hands cupped.

'There Madala,' the boss said to Aaron, looking old because of his bald head.

'There Makuluskop,' he said to Daniel. I could never guess why he had nicknamed him Big Head because his head looked normal to me.

'There Agrippa. Now listen, don't let those boys of yours scratch the goods they deliver hey? Don't take the goods to the shebeens. Deliver them to the customers.'

Agrippa just looked at the boss and smiled. Then he looked at me and said; 'Good night, my sister.'

'Good night, Agrippa.'

It was Friday evening. The speeding multitudes had thinned down. Most had gone home, taking with them the valuable pay envelope. It was time for the office staff to go home too. I had finished clearing my desk and I took my handbag.

'Good night, Mr Bloch,' I said.

'Good night, Muriel.'

Halfway down the passage I met a customer who had dashed in hurriedly. He ran up the passage. I was not surprised to hear Mr Bloch call me back, just as I was about to open the door and leave.

'Just come back, Muriel, please.'

I turned back.

'Just write out a card for this customer.'

'What is your name?' I asked the customer.

'Return,'

I thought I had not heard properly, so I repeated;

'What, Return?'

'Yes, Return.'

I looked at the boss and again at the customer and we all laughed. I thought it was too funny. The boss remarked, still laughing.

'So you return from the door to Return.'

Eventually I left, hoping that I would not have to return again. I followed Return along the passage towards the door, and the boss remained seated, arms folded. Mr Bloch's day started when he opened the doors at eight in the morning and ended when we all left him sitting there, at the till, facing the door.

11

Mrs Stein was worried. She was worried and tired. She had no servant. The woman who had been working for her a long time had been arrested for being without a permit to work in Johannesburg. So she had been endorsed out. There were thousands of servants available, but most of those willing to work in the poorer suburbs were from the outside districts, the Homelands. If you were bent on using cheap labour and did not mind the risk of paying a heavy fine when you were found out, you could easily find a drudge from the country.

'I could call back my previous girl, the one I had before this last one,' mused Mrs Stein. 'She lives in Johannesburg and she's got a permit... but, you know Mrs Kuhn, she had got so sulky and was very cheeky. She was my best servant, though, as far as cleanliness was concerned.'

Mrs Stein sighed.

'Oh I'm so tired... My husband said I should write to that cheeky girl and ask her to come back...'

Mrs Kuhn intruded:

'I wouldn't take a girl back after I'd discharged her. She'd always think I couldn't do without her.'

A day or two later an African woman stood at the counter with her receipt book ready. Mrs Kuhn took it and looked at it.

'I see you last paid three months ago. Why?'

'I did not come to pay because I had no money. I had no work. I am looking for work.'

Mrs Stein looked up. She asked the customer.

'Can you do sleep-out work?'

'Yes, Missus.'

'Where do you stay?'

'In Fordsburg, Missus.'

'With your husband or boy-friend?'

'Yes, Missus.'

'Can you be at Triomf every morning at seven?'

'Where is Trio, Missus?'

'*Triomf, Triomf*. Near Newlands. Just after you pass Westdene...'

Mrs Stein went on, pointing and directing. But the girl's face was blank. Mrs Stein tried harder.

'You know that Main road when you come from Brixton? That Main Road passes from Westdene to Triomf, before you get to Newlands.'

The girl shook her head slowly.

'Ko Sophia,' I said.

The girl looked from Mrs Stein to me and back at her. Suddenly understanding, she said:

'Oh, Sophia. You should say Sophiatown, Missus. I know Sophiatown very well. My Uncle lived there long ago for a long time.'

The girl had got herself a job and it looked as if Mrs Stein had got herself a clean-looking servant, although I knew it would not be for long, as usual...

Sophiatown. That beloved Sophiatown. *Our* Sophiatown. As students we used to refer to it proudly as "the centre of the metropolis". And who could dispute it? The most talented African men and women from all walks of life – in spite of the hardships they had to encounter – came from Sophiatown. The best musicians, scholars, educationists, singers, artists, doctors, lawyers, clergymen. There are a few things for which most of the Johannesburg Africans will never forgive the Nationalists. Amongst them is the removal of Sophiatown.

I had many happy as well as sad memories of Sophiatown. I had always planned to go back and take a look at it some time. I had been told that it was transformed into a township for the lower income-group whites. My visit there, was, however, quite unplanned and accidental.

Robert, the black salesman whom Mr Bloch did not trust entirely, used to visit the homes of his customers during the day and take their orders. He helped them fill in 'Particulars Forms' and sign the Hire Purchase Agreements, which he then brought back to the office. I was then given the job of driving with another black salesman, Henry, during the afternoons and on some evenings and sometimes on Sunday mornings to check and see whether Robert's sales were genuine or not. I was also to collect money for deposits and to issue receipts. I can't say I enjoyed venturing into a jungle like Soweto in the evenings and over week-ends, and leaving my home and children for nearly twenty-four hours a day, but it meant more money for me and I needed it.

One afternoon as I was about to go out with Henry, he said to me:

'It looks like we'll have to take Mrs Stein to Sophiatown first, Muriel. I heard her ask Mr Bloch if she could have a lift with us.'

'How will all three of us fit into the small front seat, Henry?' I asked. 'I hope you're not thinking of letting me sit outside on that open carrier!'

'No,of course I'm not. If she doesn't want to wait for her husband because he'll be a bit late and she's too lazy to walk to the bus-stop after work, then she must just accept what I offer her.'

Mrs Stein came. I stood apart to see what would happen. She motioned to me to go in first saying that she would be the first one to be dropped off so she might just as well sit next to the door.

As we drove along Henry said to me in the vernacular:

'Muriel, can you see what I see?'

'What?'

'That the lady with us keeps her face turned out to the left almost sticking out through the window all the time?'

'Yes, I see it.'

'I think she is trying very hard not to breathe the air inside the van with us. She wants to breathe the *free* air outside. But look, there are hundreds more like you and me outside this van. If she doesn't want to breathe the same air with the kaffirs, she'll have to carry her own air about with her like those people who sink into the bottom of the oceans.'

We both laughed.

The van moved down Main Road from Westdene, past First Gate in Western Native Township, then past Toby Street, the first street as you enter Sophiatown. It was moving through the old familiar places. I felt like reaching out and touching them. The van turned right, into Tucker Street, Sophiatown. Some way up the street the van stopped and Mrs Stein said:

'This is where I stay, Muriel.'

I was not listening, I was thinking. Just a few yards further up, I was led out of my uncle's home to the African Methodist Episcopal Church as a young bride, happy and full of hopes for the future.

I asked Henry to pick me up later on. I alighted and walked up to the corner of Victoria Road and Good Street. I moved slowly over the rocks and broken bricks towards the spot where I had knelt on my wedding day, facing the altar and wall behind the pulpit. The wall still stood, only partially destroyed, with the engraved letters on it vivid and legible below the painted crucifix. They read: GOD OUR FATHER – CHRIST OUR REDEEMER – MAN OUR BROTHER.

As if in open ridicule, a declaration of hope and redemption in the midst of ruin and chaos.

I thought of that week when, all efforts to resist being removed having failed, the women's section of the now banned African National Congress decided that on the Sunday before the day of the removal, all women and children would hold a prayer meeting on the "Freedom Square". . . . They knelt there, praying to our forefathers, to the gods of Africa. They sang freedom songs of hope, surrounded as expected by policemen while those in plain clothes took notes. I looked at the place where the tears of the African women and children fell and soaked into the soil. I do not think they will ever dry. They, the whites, have built their Triomf on top of them. Whether they have triumphed or not, time alone will tell.

The next day, Sophiatown was virtually under a siege. The residents of Sophiatown were removed under police escort. All the pavements were lined with heavily armed police and soldiers. There was practically no resistance. How could there be? Father Huddleston and the African leaders were removed to the nearby Newlands Police Station.

When the residents had been removed, the bull-dozers moved in like tanks, destroying, smashing, razing, reducing everything to ruin. All around was dust, heaps of dirty bricks, soot and rubble...

Henry called me back from the past:

'Muriel, what do you think you are doing? How long do you think you'll stand there and admire the beautiful European houses?'

I returned to the van. But a rich contralto voice, followed by a tenor and a bass, repeating a haunting, mournful song, still echoed in my ears:

Mabayek'umhlaba Wethu . . .
Thina Sizwe . . .
Thina Siwesinsundu . . .
Sikalela
Sikalela Izwe Iethu
Elathathwa . . .
Elathathwa Ngabamhlophe . . .
Mabayeke . . . Mabayekumhlaba Wethu . . .

Let them leave our land . . .
We the Black Nation . . .
We weep for our country
Which was taken by the white ones . . .
Let them leave our land alone!

'What do they call this place now?' asked Henry; 'Trim?'

'Triomf, Henry. That means *triumph* in English.'

'What the hell,' said Henry. 'What triumph? All those black cockroaches, bed-bugs and lice they have built their beautiful houses on . . . where is all that pride of theirs? All those nice gardens of theirs where they have planted lawns and flowers are fertilised by the urine and stools of the black children who used to run all over naked, neglected and starving, while their mothers cared for their white kids. All those filthy buckets from the latrines the children used to empty into the pavements and streets on New Year's Day – where's all their white pride?'

Henry cursed and swore and worked himself into such a state that his whole body was shaking. He fumbled impatiently in his pocket with his left hand for a cigarette, his right hand holding the steering wheel. He found one and put it between his wet lips. He lighted it, puffing and fuming. Suddenly he burst into a dreadful fit of coughing, rocking violently until the sweat came running down his forehead and temples.

'Why don't you stop smoking?' I said. 'You know that your chest is not so good. What about that spot on your lung? Has it healed?'

Henry did not reply.

12

One Monday just before lunch, Mrs Kuhn said to no-one in particular;

'I must say I prefer to do the entering than to sit at the till and write out receipts. But I wish we filed the cards according to the customers' first names. They are easier to spell than those terrible surnames. It's the *hunting* for the cards that I can't stand!'

'But they have such funny first names,' said Mrs Stein.

Mrs Kuhn smiled.

'Yes, names like Lorry and Spitfire . . . or Capetown, Lovey, Beauty, Naughty-boy . . . those you can always spell easily.'

'But some of them make you laugh,' said Mrs Stein. 'Imagine naming your child Ostrich or Sprikaan or Oor. I mean Sprikaan means locust and Oor means Ear . . . I mean, really!'

It was funny and everybody could not help laughing. Mrs Stein asked me from the other side;

'Muriel, but why do the natives like to give their children such funny names? We have Oneboy, Spirit . . .'

'I don't know why, Mrs Stein. I suppose they just take a fancy to a word and then they name their child that. Oneboy could mean that the parents had a number of girls one after another, and then they got a boy.'

Donald was standing near the heater at the bottom of the stairs next to my desk listening to the conversation. Mrs Kuhn sniggered;

'But just think of Caramel Toffee . . .'

'And Neverdie. We had a Neverdie, too,' said Mrs Stein.

'Yes, and a Looseboy!'

'So I think we have had everything – sweets, spirits, animals, insects and fruits.'

'Fruits?' asked Mrs Kuhn.

'Yes, we had a Banana.'

'Of course. Banana. He is always coming to pay with his employer. The two are inseparable.'

'And what about the other one I saw the other day. I don't know what language it is – Ayisiyu, or something. Muriel, what's that now?' asked Mrs Stein.

'Oh yes. That must be 'I see you', hey Muriel?' said Mrs Kuhn.

They all laughed.

'No, Mrs Kuhn,' I said. 'You see I asked that customer what her name meant and she said that it was actually the initials 'I.C.U.' Her father used to be an official of an organisation called Industrial Commercial Workers' Union at the time she was born. She says the clerks at the pass-office did not understand what she said when they made her pass, so they just wrote *Ayisiyu*.'

'So you could name a child UNO,' said Donald.

'Or TATA,' I said.

'What's that mean?' asked Donald.

'The Transvaal African Teachers' Association. I.C.U. was the first African Trade Union movement, formed in about 1918 by a man called Kadalie, I think.'

'You know the one I could never stop laughing at,' said Mrs Stein, 'was the one called Willem Draaghoender. I could never attend to him. I used to laugh so much. And what's more, he used to live in Kak Street, Newclare. Is there such a street there, Donald?'

'Yes, there is, Mrs Stein.

In the thick of it, when everybody was enjoying himself laughing at all the funny names, the postman walked in carrying a very big bag slung over his shoulder. He removed the heavy laces of the bag from around his shoulder and put it down near the secondhand radiograms. He went to the counter and started sorting the letters. He smiled amicably, tilting his brown cap slightly – a sign of respect for the white lady. He said;

'Good afternoon, Madam, the post is a little late today. We are very short-staffed at our branch.'

'Don't tell me you also have the same problem we have here.'

Although he was a Coloured man, the white women always used to speak to him politely.

'Are you bringing us a lot of registered post?'

'Yes, lots and lots of it, Madam.'

When Mrs Kuhn had finished signing for all the registered letters, the postman opened his cumbersome bag, containing parcels of different sizes. He also looked at some of them, putting each one on the radiogram and apparently sorting them out.

'Adam, there are customers at the door,' said Donald.

Then he winked at the postman who slung his heavy bag over his shoulder. Donald climbed the stairs.

After a time Donald came down the stairs, smiling and throwing the ball of twine into the air and catching it. He said;

'Now she can have her twine back. It has done its work.'

He deposited the roll on the counter. I had not taken too much notice when he had borrowed it earlier that day. Now I did notice how cheerful he looked. He went out whistling a tune happily. He came back soon after with a cold drink and a sandwich, stood next to the heater and started eating.

'One thing about this place,' he said, 'is that although the boss is stingy *daar is daarem brood hier.*'

He smiled and gulped down the cold drink.

'Donald, what do you mean by that?' I said.

'The Government won't do anything to help me, so I make my own . . . what do you call them? . . . my own fringe benefits?'

'I still don't understand you, Donald.'

He spoke softly.

'The postman and I have a little deal on . .

'Deal?'

'Yes.'

'But you never went near that postman, Donald. What could he have done for you?'

'He went out of here carrying in his bag, four lovely portable radios and a chassis, all neatly wrapped up in a parcel of brown paper and twine addressed to an imaginary recipient. And to think that all of it was done easily here . . . under your eyes . . .'

'And . . .?'

'And he and I split the proceeds. Clever hey?'

13

Mrs Stein looked through the steel bars into the unusually beautiful black face of an African woman who was busy taking out a receipt book from her bag.

'What do you want, Nanny?'

The African woman looked up.

'I am not your Nanny. Your Nanny is looking after your kids at your house.'

'But I don't know your name.'

'You don't have to know my name in order to speak to me. I don't know yours either, but you can't allow me to call you Nanny, can you?'

'Oh, well I'm very sorry . . .'

The cashier sighed and raised her eyebrows and turned slightly to the other whites who sat, almost restrained, looking down at their work. After the cashier had finished writing out the receipt, the customer grabbed the book and put it into her bag. On her way out she met Adam and asked him;

'Why do you people write ugly letters to customers even when we let you know that we cannot pay, and ask you to give us a chance?'

'Did you receive a letter, my sister?' Adam asked, looking innocent.

'Yes.'

Adam shrugged his shoulders and gave her way as she passed.

'I'm telling you!' said Mrs Stein. 'I can become so mad when they become like that. Try to be nice to them and they give you a slap in the face.'

'She thinks she knows too much now that she's got lipstick on her face,' said Mrs Kuhn.

By the time the next query customer stood at the counter and gazed with her black face through the bars, the white women had agreed that they were sick and tired of *cheeky natives.*

Ethel Sibanda offered her receipt book to Mrs Stein. It showed that she had last paid three months prior to that date. Mrs Stein stood up sharply from her chair and went to the Inside Sales Tray. But she could not find the card. She asked the customer curtly;

'Did you buy from the shop or outside?'

'Outside.'

'By who?'

The customer stammered. She could not remember the salesman's name but she tried to describe him. Mrs Stein looked down at the card again. She said to me,

'This girl hasn't paid since she bought the stove. That receipt must be the cash receipt for the deposit. Tell her to wait for Mr Bloch.'

I was feeling guilty. In the previous week, I had taken over from Mrs Stein the credit control managements. I had been told to continue sending out letters of demand from where she had left off. I had sent out hundreds of them, from the N's to the Z's. I had forged ahead, tottering uncertainly. For those customers who I thought should receive a letter, I had been faced with the difficult role of deciding *what* letter to send. There were five different varieties before we got to the more demanding and more threatening "Green" letter and the "Personal Summons". The boss had said to me,

'Just send them letters, Muriel; send them letters. Where a customer has been sent a ten-day letter and has not paid, send a personal summons or a green letter – anything!' Of course the boss knew that he could issue such instructions only in the case of black customers.

Being the letter-writer was the one duty I feared most. I had seen how the customers came in furiously demanding to see the credit control manager *in person*! And I had heard them storm out of the shop cursing and threatening. I hated to think what would happen to me and my poor family out there in that Soweto where taking life means nothing if it were ever known that I was responsible for the letters!

The complaining customers were wisely told that the Credit Control Department offices were in town. But that did not make me feel less atrocious. I used to have spasms in my stomach through fright.

There was a muffling of tones amongst a growing group of waiting customers as Mr Bloch walked in. He took a small portable radio from the glass showcase and gave it to the man with whom he had just arrived. The boss looked around smiling and still listening to the gentleman, who was presumably summing up their talk;

'Yes, Larry. They're lucky their fathers were born before them. If they were born before their fathers, there wouldn't be all that. One son bought a *Mustang,* imported it from America the other day – a fabulous thing. The other is moving in a huge Jag. They're secure. Their children, their children's children will be secure for generations to come. That's the thing about money. You must just remember to choose the right parents!'

The boss was walking with the traveller, whom I recognized as the one from Kenbow Manufacturers, slowly towards the door when the telephone rang. He hesitated, looked back, and then proceeded along the passage. Mrs Stein called;

'It's for you, Mr Bloch.'

'Who it it?'

'It's Mr Paul Skinner, your lawyer.'

'Who?'

The cashier must have remembered that the boss's hearing was floundering of late. She shouted more loudly;

'Mr Paul Skinner, Mr Bloch.'

'Not Paul Kruger?' the boss shouted back, smiling. The traveller laughed, patted him on the shoulder and said;

'All right, Larry, I'll be seeing you. Thanks for that present for my daughter.'

The boss pulled a chair close to the switchboard. Speaking to his lawyers about his farms might take a long time. He just forgot that there were waiting customers, especially when they were black;

'Yes . . . yes . . . And you know vhot? The land transactions have paid me more than I worked for in forty years. They are worth far more than this furniture-selling business here. Ag man, you never see the money! It's all tied up in the books and stock . . . but the value of land never goes down, it always rises . . . It always pays you in the end if you vait. In fact, the longer you vait, the more it pays you. The Swaziland one? . . . It's about three thousand acres. One thousand agricultural and two thousand mountainous . . . There's very good soil with plenty of water all the year round . . . natural fountains all over. Three hundred acres of planted gum trees ready for cutting . . . Who vants it? Vhot? A soggen (black)? Vhere can he get all that money from? . . . N-no man . . . I vant eighty thousand rands for that farm. N-no-o . . . vhot he offers I can get from selling the trees only and I'll still have the farm . . . Vhot you think? Should I sell? Vhot do you think this independence will mean? Should I take my money and back out? . . . Man I think the soggens there are even friendlier than these here . . . if you ask me. O.K. . . . you just keep trying . . . we shall see.'

Mr Bloch looked around him uneasily. Too many were waiting for him.

But as soon as he replaced the receiver, another call came in. He moaned but answered the call.

'Vhat, vhat? Who? Ag, Muriel, just find out vhot this boy wants man. He sounds like he is crying.'

It was the old story.

It was old Simon Tlebere's voice which sounded feeble and indistinct. He wanted to know why we had sent him a letter. His card showed that he had the habit of skipping in between payments. Also, that instead of paying the agreed instalment of nine rands per week he was paying five rands. I had sent him a *Final* warning letter. I asked Simon Tlebere to hold on, and explained these details to the boss. I was still doing that softly when Mrs Stein piped up;

'Who is it Muriel? Simon Tlebere?'

'Yes, Mrs Stein.'

'Did you send him a letter?'

'Yes, a *Final* warning. I noticed that he had not been sent a letter and that he had arrears.'

'You should not have sent him a letter.'

'Why?' the boss asked her.

'Because *you* allowed him to pay half the instalment, Mr Bloch. Don't you remember that grey-haired boy who came with a letter from the hospital to say that he has T.B.?'

'Ah yes, now I remember. All right, Muriel, tell him it's all right. Tell him the letter was sent by mistake.'

Only Mrs Stein could remember the arrangement between the boss and the customer. She had not bothered to make a note of it on the card. She had not thought it necessary to do so since she could keep in "in her head". But how was I to know what was in the woman's head? I was just lucky that Simon Tlebere had not come to the shop personally with the letter.

Rebecca Nkosi had nudged her way impatiently through the other customers who had been waiting longer. She looked like an amazon, a big bully. She was standing, dominating the whole scene, with her voluminous bosom and holding bank-notes ostentatiously in her hand. If it had not been for those notes, someone might have told her to stand back and wait her turn.

'Who's who now here?' the boss asked, looking at the many black faces through the bars. He noticed the money in Rebecca's hand and asked;

'What does she want?'

'She wants to know how much you are going to charge for the repair of her radiogram. The invoice has not been sent yet, but she already wants to pay. But Ethel Sibanda there came long ago, Mr Bloch. Attend to her first.'

Ethel Sibanda produced from somewhere under her breasts a crumpled statement, which she put on the counter in front of the boss. Mr Bloch looked at the paper without touching it. He said;

'That's yours, not mine. Why are you giving it to me? Keep it in between your breasts, it's quite safe there.'

The customers laughed.

'The agent told me to wait and not pay till I get letter, master. I wait. I wait. Now I get this letter. It say you are behind the areas. Twenty rands. Why? Who say I owe money?'

'You have arrears of twenty rands, *arrears*. That agent told you lies if he *did* tell you that you must wait and wait and not pay for three months.'

'Who hired that agent, me or you?'

'I did, but . . .'

'Well, why do you hire somebody you don't trust? *He* must pay the *areas*, not me!'

'I don't think you want the stove,' said Mr Bloch. 'You can go and cook outside in the street in a paraffin tin. I'll take back my stove and you can come and pick up your old one. It's in the yard; not even worth ten shillings. I want money, not talk, talk, talk!'

Rebecca Nkosi, standing next to Ethel and looking askance at her, fanned her sweaty brow with the bank-notes impatiently. Rolling her big eyeballs from Ethel to the boss, nodding in approval of his firmness. She said: 'Yes baas, you right. Money talk, Kukulumimali! Money talk!'

I put Rebecca's old card next to Mr Bloch. It showed a credit balance of twenty rands. He looked at it in silence for a minute.

'All right Rebecca, you can pay your five rands and go. I can see it's becoming too hot for you here. Now who's next? Here, put Rebecca's card back, Muriel.'

I stood horrified. The telephone rang. Mr Bloch complained;

'That telephone just can't stop ringing. It's terrible, man.'

Mrs Stein answered it and looked at me. She said;

'Muriel, it's for you. A trunk call from . . . I don't know where . . . an African name. Go and pick up that receiver on your desk, quick!'

A trunk call for me? It must be my mother, I thought, as I dashed to the other side. I picked up the receiver, my heart pounding like a huge hammer. I was indeed Mmè's voice. I could never mistake it for anybody's. I was overjoyed. Her voice sounded so near even though she was six hundred miles away. I felt an overwhelming desire to extend my hand and touch her.

'Muriel, you are well? And the children?'

'Mmè, Mmè, how good . . .'

'Are you still wasting your time in that shop, my daughter?'

'I must earn a living, Mmè!'

'It seems all the education I worked hard for to give you has meant nothing.'

'No, no . . .'

'I would sooner have you selling cakes than sitting in there and asking for people's passes, There is no hope for you there. You will never be able to do anything for yourself . . .'

My mother's voice echoed in my ears long after I had replaced the receiver and sat unmoving, oblivious to the varying sounds all around me. Her voice was like the voice of my own conscience.

To Mmè, this country had gone from bad to worse. When Lesotho had finally been granted independence, she had decided to go and settle there permanently. It had been for her like fleeing from Egypt to Canaan. Lesotho's self-government she saw as some kind of redemption.

Mmè's hopeless lack of interest whenever people spoke of the politics of the Republic of South Africa troubled me. She would snap irritably, 'Yes, yes, I know all about it – the meetings, the strikes, which always end in the shooting of innocent people, the bannings, the banishments – I know all about it. How many times have I told you how hard we used to try, even as far back as the nineteen-twenties?'

Then when she had asked that question, she would stare blankly into space, and I would know that she had let a shutter descend over her ears. The fact that Lesotho was only a small fraction of the vast black continent mattered little to Mmè. She could not see that the destiny of the one million Basotho would always be linked with that of the teeming millions of voiceless, helpless people surrounding them, that no protective moat could ever be built around Lesotho. It was pointless to try and speak to Mmè. All she wanted to do was to redeem her own.

I was left restless and frustrated. Mmè was right. What prospects was the future holding for me anyway? One thing was certain. I would have to leave. To go on working at Metropolitan Radio was torture. One moment it was fun to be alive, the next was intolerable. Everytime I was forced to be loyal to the firm, I would get those cramps deep down in my entrails. Every time I asked for a customer's pass-book, I would feel like a policeman who, in this country, was the symbol of oppression. I would continue to feel like a traitor, part of a conspiracy, a machinery deliberately designed to crush the soul of a people.

I *could* go on working there as long as I wanted to, I knew, but I would have to give my best and receive very little in return. My presence would have to be felt but never recognised. I would have to remain static, junior, for the rest of my working years, irrespective of my experience and my proficiency. A shock-absorber, ready to be used on demand. I would literally have to trample on my conscience; I would have to gobble it up, as we say in our language. Everytime a black customer paid more than he was supposed to, I would have to keep quiet in loyalty to the firm.

How long I had been sitting there, I do not know. It could have been a matter of a few minutes. But when I woke up from my reverie, it was as if I had been away from the shop for hours. Mr Bloch was still busy with his customers. There was one more who maintained that he had been cheated into agreeing to purchase goods. He was looking at the boss through the steel bars and saying;

'Why is it so much?'

'Because there is interest. That interest covers you for two years. I know you people. Sometimes you come in to say that you are out of work. Or you sick. Or you just take a little more time to pay.'

The customer ground his teeth;

'One of these days those boys of yours will die!'

'Why do you speak like that?'

'They mustn't come and humbug us. Why don't they tell us all this before we buy? You give us things which kill us.'

The customer was incensed. He now realised that he had accepted a Trojan horse into his home. Adam, in his loyalty to the firm, spoke up;

'My friend, stop fighting. Listen to me. Those agents are just like a man making love to a young lady. Everything is made to look rosy . . . he promises anything . . . they . . .'

I wondered why Adam never realised that by saying that he was actually aggravating the situation, that he was admitting that the customer *was* in fact cheated. Yet he always said it. I am certain that had he said it in English, the boss would have shut him up. Anyway, the customers always felt even more offended and the whites on the other side could never understand because the argument between Adam and the customers would be carried on in vernacular. This particular customer reacted sharply. He nearly pushed Adam away. He shouted;

'Don't talk to me about girls and making love. You are of the old type who are scared of Europeans. I am not scared of them!'

He turned to Mr Bloch, switching from Zulu to English;

'You want only *your* children to be healthy and fat and ours to be lean. I've dealt with you Jews for a long time. I know you!'

'Your stove is still in the yard. If you don't want my stove I can come and pick it up and I'll return your old one.'

'I don't want to see your dirty boys in my house again. I don't want collectors. I'll come and pay myself here if I do decide to keep that thing at all!'

'Everyone of them is a politician, man. You've never seen anything like that, man. Anyway, that's the only way to make them pay. You stop writing and they sit down and don't pay.'

He later asked me to make a note on the customer's card that the account must be watched. I wrote on the card WATCH THIS A/C in bold letters.

14

Jonas replaced Johannes as "tea-boy" when Johannes left. Adam recommended Jonas because he, like Adam, was a Rhodesian, and Mrs Kuhn encouraged the boss to engage Jonas because, she maintained, such foreign boys were known to be "good". They were not tsotsis like the Johannesburg-born ones who were untrustworthy, cheeky, and in the bad habit of always asking for more money.

Over six years before Jonas's pass had been confiscated and he had been endorsed out of the Republic. At the time, he had been given seventy-two hours to leave. But he had remained and had since been evading the police. Of course he had become jumpy. He was a man in fear, living on borrowed time. Indeed he had lived in that state of anxiety for so long that the fear of arrest had become an obsession. He was aware that a slight twist of luck against him might mean his serving a prison term, after which he would be summarily removed under police escort and deposited at the nearest point in his "native" land.

Who could blame Jonas for being jumpy. He viewed every strange white man with suspicion. He was always expecting to be asked, "Waar is jou pas?" On several occasions when he saw what seemed to be an officious looking European walk in, he would call me to the kitchen and ask me, "Did that white man ask who works here? Is he a detective?" I would laugh it off as if it were amusing when it was in fact pathetic – a man to have to live like that for so many years!

Jonas could never look at anyone straight in the face, particularly if he was a white person. Once Mrs Stein asked me, 'Muriel, why does that Jonas look away or at the floor when one speaks to him? Is it because he's being respectful? It couldn't mean that he's a skelm, could it?' I answered that I didn't think he was a skelm. When the woman wondered why he was so shifty I felt like saying, 'Why shouldn't he be? You too would be like that if you were in his boots, wouldn't you?'

Yet amongst the African workers all around the vicinity of Metropolitan Radio, Jonas was revered, in the same way as the witch-doctors in the olden days were respected, because they were said to wield superhuman powers. Jonas was almost feared because he was a witch-doctor. This art, Adam claimed, Jonas had inherited from his father, who had been a formidable, highly-successful and popular medicine-man in Rhodesia. The Africans consulted Jonas who helped them time and again with their ailments and other problems. They attributed his astonishing success in evading the long arm of the Nationalist law to his highly effective drugs which, they believed, made him invisible whenever he was confronted by a policeman or "police-boy" during pass raids.

At Metropolitan Radio, Jonas earned himself even greater honour by

the manner in which he was directly responsible for saving Agrippa from certain dismissal many times – especially the last time.

Things looked really bad. The atmosphere at Metropolitan Radio was tense. The boss was in a bad mood. For the third day now Agrippa had not reported for work, with the truck and all.

'Adam!' the boss shouted.

'Yes, Baas,' Adam answered from somewhere near the door.

'Where is he? Oh he's still standing there with the feather-duster. Oh man, that bloke! I tell you he's *ower* the wall; he's too old, man. Takes two portables to the window and stays there with them!'

On his way, as he came towards the counter, the boss was passed by Mrs Stein who was rushing out to the Chemist.

'Where's *she* off to now, Lieda?'

'Chemist,' Mrs Kuhn replied, looking impatient.

'Honestly! There's always something. Either Chemist or Crackers or something. Always. The machine is standing still, the accounts are not out, invoices are not completed, customers haven't received letters for two months now. Honestly, man, I can't take it! What about the shortage Lieda? Has she found the missing ten rands?'

The two then proceeded to speak in Yiddish. I could not hear what was being said but I could guess that the discussion was about 'geld' and about Mrs Stein, who was not present. The boss switched over to English;

'And where's Agrippa? That one is a waste of time. He's a criminal. Twice I had to pay fines to release him from gaol, arrested for reckless driving; three times he was led out of here in handcuffs for ignoring summonses and the deliveries had to be delayed for days. And then he has the nerve to stay away with my truck and lorry-boys for four days! I tell you, I'd like to kick him from here to . . . to . . . to Jerusalem, man!'

Mrs Kuhn who had not taken the boss seriously and who had been adding up figures in her books replied without looking up;

'Well I told you, Larry, get more staff, *reliable* staff!'

She mopped her forehead;

'Oh, I'm boiling. Adam, come, come and switch on the fans, quickly!'

She had stopped listening to her brother.

Later I asked Mrs Kuhn;

'Where's Mrs Stein, Mrs Kuhn?'

'Where do you think? Gone to pay her lights account of course. Everytime she waits for her lights to get cut off first before she pays. I'd be ashamed. She's not. No shame at all. And she smokes, but hides it from us. Why? It's no sin to smoke. It shows you what kind of person she is. And now the boss expects *me* to sit and do the invoices for her. Why can't she pay her lights account in time? You see . . . that's the mentality of an Afrikaner. And I tell you, Muriel, you must never work for relations. They always expect you to do more work. They expect more and more out of you.' Late in the afternoon Agrippa arrived with the 'boys' and the truck loaded to capacity with repossessed goods.

'Agrippa, you've been away *four* days, with my truck and my boys. Saturday, Sunday, Monday and now Tuesday. *Four* days. Go and load off those goods at the store and come back and give me the keys. I don't want to see you!'

'Why do you count Saturday and today, Baas? I'm here today. Saturday I went away to make deliveries at two o'clock and I only finished Sunday, Baas. Yesterday I was doing repossess. You know sometimes I wait until they go to work and then I get a chance to go in their house and take the goods. You think is easy to get the goods, Baas?'

Mr Bloch was looking at the fully-loaded truck thinking. He went out to where it was parked and checked the mileage. He came back fuming, his eyes blood-shot and his flaccid dewlap sweaty. He bellowed;

'He must have been to Swaziland or driving up and down to all the shebeens in the locations all these days with my truck. He's done enough mileage to travel to . . . to . . . to the moon, man!'

Agrippa was worried now.

When things looked really bad, as if he had "had it" he used to consult Jonas to help him ward off the evil spirits which had gone into the boss. Jonas, the others said, used to give him a piece of stick to chew, saying;

'Now go and speak to the boss, or just stand near him and look at him. Go!'

'I'm definitely dismissing him,' the boss muttered to himself as he checked the crumpled, greasy, dirty, and sometimes blood-stained copies of delivery notes which Agrippa had given him. He kept straightening them out and murmuring to himself.

Like everyone else, I had grown to accept it that Mr Bloch would never sack Agrippa. I remembered the many times that this sort of scene had been enacted and still Agrippa had continued to work at Metropolitan Radio. Nobody sympathised with Agrippa, neither white nor black members of staff. Almost all the blacks would look on helplessly at the struggling Mr Bloch and remark;

'But this is too much, man. This Agrippa is now too spiteful.'

Yet Mr Bloch had the patience I never thought any white person could have with a black.

The whole thing would always end the same way. The white staff would be once more be disappointed, disgusted and disillusioned. The boss just could *not* be trusted. He was not a man of his word, especially in his dealings with the black staff, they said. He was weak and unpredictable. Lieda would remember how her brother had failed to kick out Abram, the salesman who had once actually implied that she was a thief. Mrs Stein would recall bitterly the Hudson affair – when that African salesman had claimed that she was stupid and that she had better go back to school. She recollected sadly how she had spent hours and hours

crying and could not sleep at night, how for hours and hours she had felt nauseated and was unable to eat.

The whole thing always ended with Agrippa – conscious of the hostility of the white women – boasting, wielding the truck key in his hand and claiming that he being Mlambo's son and having Swazi royal blood in his veins and being expert at his work it could never be otherwise. He would always keep his job. For is it not true that human beings the whole world over will always respect a hardworking man?

I remembered how often Mr Bloch, driven by anger would ring the employment agency to send him a *reliable* driver, and would actually arrange that the new one come and report for work the next day. When the driver did report and the moment of final decision came, the boss would find all sorts of excuses to postpone the decisive signing of the new man's pass book. Then obviously in a conflict the boss would again ask the new fellow to come the next day so that the old driver could finish up his work (whatever that meant), and that would be that!

Why did the boss behave like this, I wondered. Was it the effect of Jonas's drugs? Or was it really the repossessions?

Like most Jews, Mr Bloch was a very conservative person. It was typical of the Jews, my mother once told me, that when you have worked for them faithfully for a long time, and they are used to you, they will cling to you like a baby holds on to its mother. They are always chary of taking new servants. I was inclined to believe what my mother told me. Here was a man who was aware that he was losing a lot of money because of an irresponsible driver, but who could not discharge him.

Yet Agrippa could hardly be considered a faithful worker. Could it be the repossessions – the bringing back of goods from bad customers to lie in the store.

Did the fact that his goods were back in his storerooms give the boss *so* much satisfaction that even if Agrippa brought them back in a deplorable state, most of the time infested with vermin of every description – cockroaches, bedbugs – he was contented? Repossessing the goods was sometimes an incentive to the customers to pay the arrears and get the goods back, yes. But then, in the process of delivering, getting them back and re-delivering them the goods were damaged by the grudging lorry-boys who felt they were being made to sweat and work hard for nothing. When their persistent begging for more money went unheeded they were left with no way of negotiating for better wages. So they took their frustration out on the boss's goods. "He does not *pay* us", they would say, cursing badly and throwing the furniture on or off the trucks.

Indeed the furniture would be re-delivered to the customers in such a state that they would not mind whether it were repossessed again. They could always go and place another deposit at a better shop where their goods were handled with greater care, they would say. And the repossessed furniture sometimes lay in the store in pieces. It would cost the boss more money to be re-conditioned so that it could be sold as second-hand

goods. In the whole unbusinesslike retrogression caused by the same load of goods continually in transit either from vendor to purchaser or vice versa, the only one who stood to gain was the truck driver because he insisted on being paid for every repossession.

'I am definitely dismissing him,' the boss was muttering. 'He has had his chips. I'm finished with him. I'm going to take my keys and kick him right out!'

The white women smiled, looking at each other and shaking their heads.

There were urgent deliveries to be made. Besides in the meantime Ponty had rang from the other shop in town. He had been paid a big cash deposit on a good sale of suites for dining-room, bedroom and sitting room by a Coloured family from Alexandra Township. A trade-in had also to be picked up right away, otherwise there was the risk of the customer's deciding to go and buy elsewhere. Customers can be very impatient when they have paid a cash deposit. They expect prompt service. Ponty rang a second time. The boss was in a dilemma. Only Agrippa could penetrate the notorious, gangster-dominated township where any stranger walked the streets in fear.

After consulting Jonas, Agrippa went and stood on the other side of the steel rails over the counter, looking at the boss and chewing the 'stick'.

'Don't hang around me, Agrippa. Go and get your boys and collect this trade-in from Alexandra Township today.'

'I want petrol, Baas.'

'And you drank all my petrol in four days!'

Agrippa smiled, throwing his head back boastfully. He had once more done it. He said;

'Please Baas, please don't waste my time. Alexander is rough. I must not be there late at night.'

'Give him a petrol slip there please, Mrs Stein,' the boss said as he moved out. Agrippa took the slip and followed the boss down the passage towards the door.

'What did I tell you Mrs Kuhn?' the disappointed Mrs Stein asked.

That's Metropolitan Radio!

15

Apart from the occasions when he would unexpectedly say to me; 'Muriel, haven't you got twenty-cents to lend me?' Lennie, the white mechanic, rarely ever spoke to me. In fact I could count the times when he did.

The first time was in the Hino van when he was taking me and a new lorry-boy to the pass office for registration. That was nearly five months after I had joined Metropolitan Radio. Along the way he had asked me;

'Muriel, tell me, what are you?'

'What do you mean, *what am I*?'

'Are you not a teacher, or something?'

'No, I am not a teacher.'

'What are you then?'

'I am just myself, just a person. I am . . . nothing. Why do you ask?'

Lennie looked at me curiously and looked ahead. The next occasion was just after the late Robert Kennedy had paid a visit to the Republic. I had borrowed the pamphlet which was printed during his visit and was reading it. Lennie saw me reading just as he was about to ascend the stairs on his way to the workshop. He stopped abruptly and asked me, looking at the booklet;

'Why are you reading that? Are you a communist?'

'What is a communist?' I asked him.

He did not reply, and again it ended just there.

The next time he spoke to me was when he asked me to take over the account he had of a set of encyclopaedias, which I refused to do because, as I told him, they were too expensive for me.

Soon after, one day he was standing at the edge of the workshop floor, just above me, looking towards the door and doing nothing. A group of African mineworkers had just walked into the shop. Lennie stood there looking at them. He called to me;

'Muriel, do you see that green cap that boy there is wearing?'

I looked up and saw the cap. It was made of a green, colourful material. It had flaps to cover the ears and a rather protracted front brim. I looked at the white mechanic wondering what he would say about the cap. He said;

'Do you know what cap that is? Do you know where it comes from?'

'No, I don't know where it comes from. Why do you ask me?'

He called to the man wearing the cap by whistling at him. When the man doubtfully and reluctantly left the group and walked nearer, Lennie said to me;

'Ask him. Just ask him where he gets that cap from. You'll hear.'

Still perplexed and not very enthusiastic, I pointed at the cap on the man's head and asked him in Fanagalo where he bought it. He removed the cap, looked at it and said;

'This? I did not buy it.'

'Where did you get it from?'

'Angola,' the man answered.

Lennie smiled and said;

'You see, I knew. It's the caps used by the terrorists in Angola and Mozambique!'

Then suddenly, one Friday afternoon, Lennie came down the stairs carrying a number of comics and magazines and deposited them on my desk, saying;

'Here, Muriel, you can have these.'

'Thanks,' I said. 'But why . . .'

'Because I'm leaving. They will have to look for another mechanic on Monday.'

'Why are you leaving?'

'Oh man, I'm sick of this man . . . I've finished my contract . . . I'm a qualified radio mechanic and I can start my own business or work at a better place. Man, I'm sick of it. Repairs come in and when you want spares he tells you to wait . . . that you want to waste money . . . and then the sets lie up there undone. When the customers come for them and they don't get them he wants to know why they are not ready . . . He tells me I'm stupid and moans in front of the customers. I'm sick and tired. When I walk out at five-thirty the tool-box will be in my hand and I won't come and work here again . . .'

At exactly five-twenty-seven, Lennie descended the stairs: In his hand he was carrying his tool-box as he had said he would. The boss was already occupying his usual position next to the till and facing the door. As Lennie came down the passage, Mr Bloch asked, frowning:

'What are you carrying in that box, Lennie?'

'It's my tool-box.'

Lennie continued walking, not looking back.

The boss shouted;

'Why are you taking it with you?'

'Because it's mine!' Lennie shouted back as he went through the front doors. Mrs Stein, who was then removing her jersey from the "whites only" coathanger, looked at Mr Bloch and said;

'I don't think you'll ever see him again, Mr Bloch.'

But before she could say anything more, Mr Bloch interrupted;

'I don't care! I don't *want* to see him either; he can go. He's not even much of a mechanic, anyway. I'm only sorry that I did not look to see what he's got in that tool-box of his. I don't *want* him. He's too stupid. Even Willy, the Coloured at the store, is better than him. I've got Willy.'

16

It was a typical early January morning. There were no customers coming into the shop. No wonder the boss had chosen this post-Christmas period for leaving Metropolitan Radio behind and going away on holiday.

Adam sat facing the door at his post, well out of sight of the white women. He was facing the door, but was unseeing, because from where I sat I could see that he was dozing. He too was sleepy and tired like the rest of us. Why is there no public holiday after New Year's Day? There should be one really, just as there is Boxing Day after Christmas Day.

I sat looking at the new Calendar. It was only the second day in January and I was already counting the endless number of days to payday. The month hung there, unashamedly long and merciless. After the Christmas Day and New Year's Day expenses there were still the children's uniforms, school fees, bus and train fares, food, rent, etc., etc. I was thinking: even if I were to spend the minimum amount of fifty cents per day (if you can imagine such a possibility) I would still not manage with what was left of my husband's salary and my own.

I was feeling particularly despondent that morning – thoughts of money or the lack of it always induce that in me. Yet I was about to cast a bombshell. And what precipitated it all was the action of Little William of all people.

Even since I had been persuaded to give up thoughts of leaving Metropolitan Radio, I had been drifting along, not quite resigned to the fact. Although I had accepted the offer and had decided to stay on, I knew in the depths of my heart that sooner or later I would *have* to go. It was only a matter of time before that feeling of restlessness, of guilt over my moral laxity would come back again.

None of my co-workers on the other side of the steel bars seemed to be preoccupied over daily expenses. They showed no anxiety. On the contrary, they were speaking of the joys of living, of going away or coming back from holiday. Mrs Stein was relating again how she had enjoyed her last holiday in Durban. It was South Beach this and South Beach that! The tan on her neck, bare arms and shoulders still showed in testimony. Mrs Kuhn was carrying on about the marvellous holiday the boss and his wife were having.

Only the lonesome, ever-faithful, so-called 'Little' William could be working on the second day in January, a day on which no other salesman would even think of coming in to the shop, never mind working. And the rest of us black staff sat yawning and nodding. But Little William walked in smiling, as usual, carrying in one hand a portable radiogram and in the other two portable radios

'Happy, happy, happy, everybody!' he sang, smiling and looking

round. Nobody took any notice of him nor did the whites respond to his well-wishing. In the Republic of South Africa it is considered bad behaviour on the part of whites to treat a black like a fellow human being. It is frowned upon by other whites.

Little William was not particularly offended by the fact that his well-wishing was totally ignored by the white staff. He put the radios on the floor next to me and went to fetch the service book from the counter. After he had finished writing out cards for the radios, he came smiling towards me. He said;

'Happy New Year, my sister. And I have here a present for you which I know will make you very happy.'

'The same to you William. And what is the present?'

Little William glanced around like a thief.

'Where's Adam?' he asked.

'Adam is behind the linos,' I said. 'What's all the mystery about?'

'Nobody must hear what we are going to talk about. It's lucky that those whites are busy yapping. Listen . . . there is someone who wants to steal you from Metropolitan. He says he'll offer you forty, even fifty pounds a month if you come and work for him. The boss would never want to lose you, I know. But then, if another employer offers you more money, you can't refuse, can you? We all got to live . . .'

I just looked at William but said nothing.

'Muriel, you don't seem to understand. Why are you indifferent? I would jump sky-high if I were you to get such luck. I am saying to you that *this* European at *this* place wants to offer you a lot of money. He wants to employ you as a general office clerk at his garage. Can't you see what that means?'

I took the card from William and looked at it. It was the second card I had been given that morning. Earlier, Jonas, our tea-boy, had thrown a card at me but I had only glanced indifferently at the trite message on it. On it was written:

Even though the day holds out no hope of happiness
Don't despise it or despair for you can never guess
What it may unfold before the sunset dies away.
Greet with glad thanksgiving the beginning of each day.

Patience Strong

This, more realistic card, bore a name and telephone number.

'Who is this man? How does he know that I work here? And what does he know about the kind of work I do?' I asked somewhat pessimistically.

'This white man has been to this place several times to collect his cheque. He says he thinks you are quite capable of doing any type of work in his office. He also says that he knows that the boss is stingy and he is sure you are being underpaid.'

'But who is he?'

'There is his name on the card. We have all our scooter repairs done at his garage. He said that I must give you the card and ask you to telephone him any time when you have the chance.'

At tea-time I went over to Gant's Tea-Room and dialled the number on the card. A jarring, loud male voice answered. The gentleman spoke with an unmistakably foreign accent;

'Continental Scooter Repairs, good morning.'

'Is that Mr Saladino?' I asked.

'No. Would you like to speak to him? He's in the workshop.'

'Yes, please.'

'All right. Just hang on.'

I waited. After a few minutes, Mr Saladino came to the phone.

'Hello. Who's speaking?'

'It's Muriel, from Metropolitan . . . I . . .'

'Oh yes, Muriel. I told William to tell you to ring me. Can you come and work for me?'

'Yes,' I said suddenly deciding, 'Yes, I can. When do you want me to start?'

'Even now you can start. You see, my brother here has been doing the office work and now he has to go home to Italy in two weeks time. Now I'll have to get someone. When can you come over? Can you come early tomorrow morning and see where we are and what we do so that you can start as soon as possible?'

'Yes. But I'm still employed by Metropolitan Radio. I'll have to give two week's notice before I can leave. It's the law.'

'Yes, I know. But you can come in every morning for an hour so my brother can show you the work.'

I remembered Continental Scooters Repairs. They were situated in Doornfontein. I also remembered how Mrs Kuhn had once accused them on the telephone of being money-suckers. On one occasion, after a heated conversation with one of the staff there, she said;

'These immigrants can steal the gold out of your teeth!'

Time and again she questioned them on the exhorbitant sums of money she said they were charging for repairs. Whenever she made out cheques at the end of the month I would hear her complaining that these immigrants were as poor as church mice when they came to the Republic, but that they became rich overnight.

It looked as if I had a good job, and I agreed to go to Doornfontein every morning for an hour before I started work at Metropolitan.

A couple of months previously Mr Bloch had taken on some temporary office help in the form of a Mrs Ludorf, who, somehow, had just stayed on, there always being something or other for her to do. Now she came and sat next to me, a good distance from Mrs Stein and Mrs Kuhn.

Recently Mrs Ludorf had come to be friendly towards me in a propitiating sort of way. When she had first arrived at Metropolitan she had

had the disconcerting habit of staring fixedly at me and the sight of my black face caused her to remember the "nanny" she employed. This would set her off relating to the other white women some incidents illustrating the "nanny's" ignorance and stupidity. Once, loudly, she commented on my vital statistics and on the mealie-pap diet we "natives" were in the habit of devouring in great quantities.

Her remarkable, voluble insensitivity got me down. One day I told her to keep her remarks to herself. She seemed most astonished but thereafter went out of her way to recapture my goodwill. She gossiped rather too frankly about all the other whites.

I knew what was coming when Mrs Ludorf moved her chair nearer to mine and started speaking softly. She said;

'So you want to leave Metropolitan soon hey?'

'Yes.'

'You've got yourself a good job? Where is it?'

'Doornfontein.'

'But I don't believe Mr Bloch will let you go when he comes back from holiday. I think he'll bargain with you – make offers, you know.'

'I don't think he will.'

'Why?'

'Because he cannot offer me more money.'

'Why not?'

'Mrs Stein told me that if he does, she'll demand far more.'

'Did she really say that?'

'Yes she did, and point blank. Mrs Stein is always very frank with me. She never attempts to cover up any feelings she has towards me with nice, meaningless words. I respect her for that.'

'Oh she's jealous. And she hasn't even got what you've got. I believe you've been to a university.'

'Where did you get *that* from?'

'She's a swine. I mean she's already getting nearly three times what you get. How much did the boss give you for Christmas bonus?'

'Nothing. He gave me a present.'

'What?'

'A travelling rug.'

'What, a lousy blanket! After all these years! That's a shame. And you know what he gave them?'

'I don't want to know, Mrs Ludorf . . .'

'Oh Mr Bloch will be sorry if you go,' she interposed quickly, sweetly.

'Anyway, Mr Bloch can't stop me from taking a better-paying job,' I said shortly, trying to terminate the conversation.

'Where does your husband work?'

'Braamfontein.'

'What does he do?'

'It's a clerical job. Almost the same kind of work as we do here. He keeps records for a College. I believe he is also a kind of personnel

manager, for the black staff, I mean.'

'That's a good job. How long has he been with them?'

'Ever since he left school. Over fifteen years now.'

'He must be Managing Director by now, like Adam. Adam is the Managing Director here, isn't he?' she said laughing and chortling.

I tried to laugh but only managed a grim smile.

It was a week since I had been going each morning to Continental Scooter Repairs to become acclimatised to my new work. The work had been easy and I had had no trouble in learning it, so it became unnecessary for me to continue reporting each morning before I went in to Metropolitan. But I had kept in touch with my prospective employer. On the 30th January, a day before I was to leave Metropolitan, I went down to Gants to telephone Mr Saladino. The last time I had heard from him he had reported to the Labour and Industrial Offices that it was his intention to employ a black worker in his office and the inspector had informed him that he would call at the garage to see if conditions of work there were suitable.

In a state of subdued excitement and hope I put the five cent piece in the slot and waited for someone to answer the telephone. It was Mr Saladino himself.

'Hello, is that Muriel?'

'Yes, Mr Saladino. Did the inspector come?'

'Yes, two came. And I am very, very disappointed.'

'Why?' I asked huskily. My heart began throbbing high up in my chest.

'Because they tell me now I must build another toilet, you know. They say we can't use the same toilet because you are a non-white.'

'But I can use the same toilet as the other black workers use – the garage workers . . .'

'No, no, no. If they know I have a non-white girl here working for me, and I don't have a separate toilet for her, they will charge me.'

'But I don't have a separate toilet here at Metropolitan . . . Mr Bloch has never been charged.'

'Ah, ah, but he is a Jew. These Jews they bribe the Boers. So they can do what they like. But you don't know what they do to us immigrants . . . they want to get us out of business . . .'

I was confounded. I could not think. I asked with a shaking voice;

'Now what are we going to do.'

'Well . . . I don't know . . . I would have to call in a builder to see whether we can build a toilet. And I will have to build a separate office for you. They said I could not use the same office as you. I told them, I told them I was in the workshop most of the time and not in the office. But the law . . .'

'But I have *never* had my own office in my life,' I wailed.

'I told you, Muriel. Your boss is a Jew. And they also said I must build a change-room for you.'

'What is a change-room?' I asked.

'Ah, Muriel, you see, it is impossible. If they come in and find me sitting with you . . . you know . . . they'll start trouble . . . you know . . . you understand, don't you?'

'Yes, I understand, Mr Saladino.'

'I am sorry Muriel, honestly I am sorry,' he was saying when I put the phone down.

It is impossible for me to describe the emotional turmoil I was in when I walked back to Metropolitan. I moved like a mechanical thing. I felt horrified yet benumbed.

I walked towards Metropolitan confused. I crossed the road like a robot with no presence of mind at all against the red light. The next moment I was standing dead still in the middle of the road. From some distant place came the shrill screaming voice of a woman, and in a split second a car squeaked to a jerky stop next to me, missing my tremulous, numb form by inches.

I sat at my desk staring in front of me, easily able to ignore the stares and whispered remarks of my fellow workers. Then I decided.

I took a blank sheet of paper from my desk and scribbled my resignation letter. My hand did not tremble, nor did I hesitate. I decided to write the letter in my own handwriting instead of typing it. So far I had only given verbal notice. My hand just glided over the pad. I looked at the letter before I put it into the envelope. I remembered the previous resignation letters I had thought of writing. My handwriting had never looked so beautiful before. I had finally decided to free myself of the shackles which had bound not only my hands but also my soul.

When I took my bag and said to the boss, 'Good night, Mr Bloch,' for the last time, I did not know what the future held in store for me. I did not care. I did not have any regrets. All I knew was that I could not continue to be part of the web which had been woven to entangle a people whom I loved and am part of. I did not know where I was going from there but I did know that I would never place myself in a position again in which I had to ask for pass books or in which I would have to be "loyal" to a firm at the cost of robbing my own people. My conscience would be clear.

And I added, as I looked into Mr Bloch's eyes;

'Thanks for everything.'

THE END.

Miriam Masoli Tlali was born in Doornfontein, Johannesburg, and educated at St Cyprian's Anglican School and Madibane High School in Western Native Township, alongside Sophiatown. These places no longer exist as a result of the massive removals of Africans from Johannesburg in the 1950s.

Ms Tlali was admitted to the University of the Witwatersrand shortly before the government closed the "open" universities to black students. Continuing her studies at Roma, in Lesotho, she was finally forced, through increasingly difficult financial problems, to leave university.

After returning to Johannesburg and learning typing and book-keeping, Ms Tlali worked as a clerk and typist in the city. It was her experiences during this period that gave rise to this book.

At present, she works from her home in Soweto. She is married, with two children.

MURIEL AT METROPOLITAN is Ms Tlali's first book and it represents something of a milestone in the publishing of black writing in South Africa.

FROM THE FOREWORD BY SHEILA ROBERTS

"Muriel's story is never strident in hatred or resentment against those who have turned her, in Fanon's words, into 'an object in the midst of other objects'. There is even at times a latent warmth in her attitude towards those 'on the other side', a warmth which she knows they will never allow to develop . . . this story should enlighten, surprise, and even delight readers, both black and white . . . ."

ISBN 0 86975 045 3