



A NOVEL

JENNY HOBBS

The
Miracle
of
Crocodile
Flats

an affectionate
satire



UMUZI

THE MIRACLE
of
CROCODILE
FLATS

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For Madeleine, Jane-Anne, Karen and Sophie
a wry tale of our motherland

‘It is a miracle people are looking for. And they want it right
here, not in the next life.’

STEPHEN JUBWE, ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF SOCIOLOGY AND
ANTHROPOLOGY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MONROVIA,

TIME, 3 APRIL 1989

SOME YEARS AGO WHEN THE OLD SOUTH AFRICA had been voted into oblivion and the new was struggling to find its balance, when train and bus journeys were common and cellphones rare, a schoolgirl living in a platteland community saw a vision.

It was a controversial sighting with extraordinary consequences.

Pilgrims, tourists and the curious flocked there in ever rising numbers. Journalists and photographers gathered like bluebottle flies at a whiff of meat. Illustrated features were syndicated around the globe. The Catholic Church sent an investigator and a mother superior, then back-pedalled after Rome intervened and dogma began to supersede faith. Pundits wrote essays and took part in earnest TV documentaries about religious ecstasy versus the neurological explanation for hallucinations. Inspirational books were published by experts skilled at making a fast buck. Inevitably, a movie was made in glorious Technicolor with a cast of thousands.

The rainbow nation was back in the world news, wearing a halo.

But in the avalanche of words and images and financial deals, the plain truth was somehow lost. Here is the real story of the miracle of Crocodile Flats and the people whose good common sense turned a vision into a marvel.

Once upon a time there was a run-down farming dorp that had lost its self-respect and mushroomed at the edges into a festering informal settlement ...

MA-JESU

WHEN SWEETNESS MOLOI CLAIMED TO HAVE SEEN THE Virgin Mary on her way home from school, people in Crocodile Flats were not surprised. Since ancestors' spirits are known to remain near their graves, Catholics could expect the occasional encounter with Ma-Jesu.

Nobody had an inkling that the event would change their lives forever.

Sweetness was a sturdy fourteen with the awkward grace of a young heifer. Her slow-burning smile reminded old men of roast pumpkin and beaming harvest moons. Young men with baser ideas were discouraged by the powerful right hook learnt from her father, who supported her determination to pass matric without distractions.

That year she was in Grade 7B, the 'B' meaning the afternoon session at school. Classes began at twelve-thirty and ended when the setting sun burrowed into the dust haze over the Van der Linde farm, trailing scarves of red cloud.

It was a long walk home along the dirt road. She was hungry, having eaten only a small bowl of phuthu for breakfast and a feeding-scheme peanut butter sandwich for lunch. She wondered if her mother would bring home enough meat for a stew from her afternoon pitch at the bus and taxi terminus where she sold offal: tripe, intestines, pigs' trotters and boiled sheep's heads called smileys – because their lips pulled back from their teeth when boiled. On a bad day for sales, the Molois ate whatever wouldn't last overnight. It was just as nourishing, Ma said, cooking it with chilli and curry powder.

On that particular Thursday, Sweetness had stayed late at school to work on a biology project with a new teacher, and her friends had not waited. As she jogged along the road that bordered the settlement to try and catch up with them, she saw a movement in a burnt-out hut that stood on a desolate rise. Tsietsi, for sure. Her younger brother loved to run ahead of her and hide, jumping out to give her a fright. But she was tired of pretending to be scared when he came flailing out of a hiding place, all sharp elbows and knees.

It was time to give him a fright of his own.

She propped her bag of school books against a rock and crept towards the hut through grey saltbush that made scribbles on her legs. There was a light inside. He must have found some matches – just like all boys, playing with fire. They think they can control the little spurts of flame, throwing them at each other and starting little fires of dry grass and sticks before stamping on them. Forgetting that sparks escape to blaze up in rotten thatch and flare through flimsy shacks as people grab what they can and run screaming. There had been a runaway fire like that in the shacks last year, fanned by a Kalahari wind. She would never forget the twisted bodies of three children in a huddle with their mother.

Shouting, ‘You know you mustn’t play with matches!’ she burst through the doorway, then faltered to a stop. There was no sign of Tsietsi. But someone else was there, a stranger dressed in a long blue robe that shimmered like the sky reflected in a puddle. Her smiling face glowed in the shadow of her hood as though candles had been lit behind it.

Sweetness stood gawping. What could such a lady be doing in this lonely burnt-out place? And how had she got here? There was no car nearby. In the heat and dust of the afternoon, to see someone so calm-looking was as good as being given an ice cream out of the trading store freezer.

Then Sweetness had another thought. Was she maybe someone from a mission, or a social worker? She held out her hands as though wanting to give. And her face, no longer young, looked kind.

Sweetness was about to ask the question out loud when the lady raised her right hand as if to stop her, then made the Sign of the Cross in two graceful movements. With a jolt of awe, Sweetness realised who she was.

The revelation explained everything: the glow, the grave smile, the feeling of kindness. Ma-Jesu was standing there, dressed in blue like the statue in the nuns' dining room where Mass was held on Sundays – only the sculptor had got one thing wrong. She was brown where the statue was palest pink.

Ma-Jesu didn't look anything like the blonde lady with the golden halo on the Bible cards the nuns handed out at Sunday school. Ma-Jesu's cheekbones were high, her lips full, her halo a glory of ebony curls where the hood slipped down when she moved. Ma-Jesu was African.

Sweetness felt her legs tremble and thought of Sister Immaculata scolding in a voice that sounded like nails grating down a blackboard, 'Show your respect, girl!' She fell to her knees in the ashy debris on the hut floor, dropping her face into her hands. How could she have stood there staring, a dusty barefoot schoolgirl in a gymslip so old that it was turning green, and so patched and darned that it looked as though it had veld sores? She began to cry, tears sliding in dark trails through her fingers.

'Weren't you scared it was a spook?' her friend Rejoice Ngobese asked later, her eyes as big as a bushbaby's.

'Oh no, I knew who she was, no mistake. I was just ashamed she's coming to that bad place,' Sweetness said.

She could never be sure what happened next. It was all mixed up in her mind: a sound of whispering fabric, a gentle hand stroking her cheek, a feeling of doves' wings stirring the air, and a wonderful smell like peach blossom and vanilla cupcakes still warm from the bakery oven. She crouched lower over her knees, sobbing yet longing to open her fingers a crack and peep through to see if Ma-Jesu was still standing nearby.

She could not say afterwards how long she crouched, but the lady had gone when she looked up. There were only the smoke-blackened mud walls of the hut and a grid of charred roof poles against the sunset sky.

Disappointed, she stood up brushing the dirt off her knees and lifted her arm to dry her tears on the sleeve of her school shirt. Had she imagined it all? Was this just another of her vivid daydreams, like the ones where she turned into Oprah or became a film star more famous and funny than Whoopi Goldberg?

I guess so, she conceded. Ma-Jesu would never come to a schoolgirl

from the shacks. Least of all to someone who had sinned twice that week, taking ten cents from the rent tin for sweets and coveting Rejoice's new platform shoes with an envy that cut like knives. She walked towards the place where the lady had been standing, half convinced nothing had happened, yet looking for signs that the ash had been disturbed.

There were none: no footprints, no scuff marks. It had been a mirage on a hot afternoon, like the fading memory of her father who worked far away on a mine. Since a letter from the mining company months ago telling of an accident, he had not written or sent money home. Now their mother struggled to pay even for food.

Sweetness turned to leave – and all around her was the smell of peach blossom and warm vanilla cupcakes. With a certainty stronger than she had ever felt before, she knew Ma-Jesu had been there. Sure-sure.

For a wild moment she wanted to sing and dance and shout the glad tidings all at the same time: Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Like Father Liam and the nuns sang on Easter morning.

But it was getting late. She hurried back to her bag of books by the road, tucked it under her arm and began to run home in the gathering darkness.

CROCODILE FLATS

IT WAS THE THIRD WEEK IN OCTOBER – SUICIDE MONTH – and the rains still hadn't come. After six years of drought, the grassy plain with Crocodile Flats at its centre had turned into a dust bowl. The river was a series of stagnant pools, its banks eroded to dongas, the crocodiles long gone. The pioneers who'd laagered their ox-wagons here to start farming had shot them, along with the protesting tribespeople whose land they occupied.

The non-protesters had been allowed to live and serve their new masters until an outbreak of diphtheria felled most of them, leaving the pioneers short of labour but in command of a fertile region half the size of the Nile Delta. They pegged and registered tracts of land measured by the distance a man could ride for one day on horseback, supervised the digging of a network of irrigation furrows and began to farm with the abundant leiwater, spans of oxen and hand ploughs.

A hundred and fifty years later, all that had changed. Bisecting the plain was a gravel road stretching from one horizon to the other like a flattened strip of sulphur, tarred for a short distance in the middle where it ran through what had once been a farming village seven miles from the nearest town. Now it was a cluster of run-down buildings bordered by an informal settlement that housed the growing town's overflow.

The ageing tarmac was potholed and ragged at the edges where the bitumen melted on hot days. Village history had been preserved in that warm ooze, Chief Mohlalipula observed, poking dents in it with his stick as he walked to the corner café for snuff. Horseshoe nails were embedded

with wheel nuts, tickeys overlaid by beer-can rings, flattened Zambuk lids garnished with used condoms.

‘Our young men spend their seed in rubber socks,’ he’d grumble to his wife, Sis’ Diliza, when he got home. ‘It makes them weak.’

Most days, she’d laugh and tell him to be grateful that at least the users weren’t spreading their viruses too. But when he’d lingered in Queenie’s shebeen, she’d grouse, ‘You can talk. Your old slug can’t even lift its nose any more.’

‘Suka, woman.’

But the country’s new Constitution had gone to her head and she would not keep quiet. She wanted to have her say in everything, claiming it as her democratic right. It drove him mad.

She’d carry on, ‘Did you bring home the onions I asked for?’

‘No. A chief doesn’t stoop to—’

‘Women’s work? You’re out of date, husband. We’re equals now. We must pull together.’

He would have to go back for the onions if he wanted supper. Sis’ Diliza, resolute as a trek wagon next to his age-rickety Cape cart, was a registered nursing sister and knew how to wield authority. His dignity was under daily assault.

The strip of tarmac had wide gravel verges that were busy all day with comings and goings. At the edges of the village it ran past sad houses with tin roofs and little stoeps and neglected gardens where mostly old white people lived: pensioners who had fled the cities hoping to live on a shoestring, and descendants of the pioneers who were too poor to flee to the cities.

Packing ever closer to the fences east of these gardens were the shacks of the informal settlement. The shack dwellers and old white people tried to ignore each other, but envy and scorn made a volatile mixture that erupted in flares of hostility. The houses to the west of the road had their view over the Van der Linde farm interrupted by a three-metre-high diamond-mesh fence bristling with coils of razor wire. Swart Barend van der Linde was taking no damn chances with land grabs.

The village centred on a row of shops: a scruffy corner café with a fish and chip fryer and a bakery oven, a trading store, a butchery, a defunct

garage and the Beijing (painted over Bombay) Bazaar. Its display window had peeling red SALE! SALE! SALE! stickers framing a collage of slithery fabrics, net curtains, plastic flowers, enamel teapots, fake fur blankets, hair accessories, cheap toys, surgical pink bras, fluorescent T-shirts and hi-top tackies. Under the counter, available to sufferers from ailments doctors couldn't cure – often in the love department – were phials of Chinese herbal remedies and covert powders ground from animal parts. Including horns.

'My stock is undeniably eclectic,' boasted Girlie Ming, the village's sole optimist and a devourer of dictionaries.

Across the tarmac was a stretch of open ground ringed by arthritic pepper trees where wagons had been outspanned in the old days. Now the buses and taxis running to and from town used it as a terminus. All day, wheels skidded to a stop on the gravel next to women vendors with small pyramids of tomatoes and onions and yellow apples, cowed chickens with their legs tied together, and lumps of meat darkening in the heat. In the late afternoon, braziers glowed under roasting mealies and large pots bubbling with phuthu, chakalaka and fatcakes for hungry workers on their way home.

The vendors were the eyes and ears of Crocodile Flats. From his cobbler's sewing machine on the veranda of the trading store opposite, Vigilance the shoe mender purveyed the village news. He would be the first to spread the word about the unusual Madonna.

Standing apart from the row of shops at the south end was the Outspan Hotel & Bottle Store, in its glory days a popular stop for travelling motorists, though now in terminal decline. Benjamin Feinbaum, the manager, was beside himself with worry. If the hotel went, the village would degenerate into a disaster area – as was he: a shy, ill-at-ease, thirty-year-old failure. His mother moaned that he had no enterprise and his father had passed away grieving that his only son was a klutz. There were days when Benjamin was sure he could have pleased his parents if only they hadn't pushed him so hard. For example, buying him a pie franchise that folded within months, then sending him to manage his uncle's going-to-seed hotel, which made him feel even more inadequate. Most days, he was ready to give up. Again.

Crocodile Flats could be described in two words: Dead Endsville.

But there were minor consolations. The shacks were served by a lively network of spaza shops, shebeens and itinerant dealers trundling their goods in liberated supermarket trolleys. The weather was temperate, the kids were mostly in school and there was no actual starvation.

Government services were also available in the klinker-brick building opposite the hotel, which housed a police station, a post office and branch offices of Child Welfare and the Department of Home Affairs. Every morning the South African flag and the blue Police flag were broken out by the station commander, Captain Godwin Ngobese, and hauled up the official flagpoles by a constable, where they hung in a show of brave colours until the tea lady took them down before she went home. Captain Ngobese had been in Crocodile Flats for two months, a new broom determined to sweep clean. He intended to run an orderly district and was not daunted by the problems he had discovered: lackadaisical staff in the charge office, slack routine, unsolved cases, chaotic piles of unfiled folders and whiffs of bribery. He had seen and dealt with far worse.

Past the Outspan Hotel and the government building, the tarmac petered out when it reached the bridge over the former Crocodile River, now dwindled to pools of green algae in the sand. Where fishermen had once cast for barbel, boys from the settlement now played soccer and scraped roads for their wire cars, sometimes watched by the man called Mad Zizwe sitting under a thorn tree with his dogs.

If ever a village needed a miracle, it was this one.

RUNNING THE GOOD NEWS

PEARLED WITH SWEAT, SWEETNESS RAN UP A NARROW alley past ramshackle partitions of rusty corrugated iron, hammered-flat paraffin tins, packing cases, advertising signs, chicken wire, splintery plywood and fertiliser bags. She was too intent on telling her story to register the stench of urine where home-going beer drinkers had stopped to relieve themselves, or the feral mustiness of rodents. Rat bites were a common hazard for shack babies; a terrified wail in the night would send a whole family scrambling for a torch and knobkerries.

Halfway up the alley, Ma Sicelo's spaza shop was open for business. A dangling electric bulb lit shelves holding rows of tins (baked beans, jam, golden syrup, pilchards in tomato sauce, condensed milk), packets of mealiemeal, samp, beans, sugar, tea, Omo, candles and cigarettes, small bottles of 'fish oil', atchar and vinegar, big bottles of cooldrink, Jik and paraffin. On the topmost shelf, out of reach of light-fingered customers, was a pyramid of Lion matchboxes.

Lily Sicelo, her daughter, sat next to the enamel bowl of hard-boiled eggs on the counter, a plank laid across cement blocks.

'Weh-Lily,' Sweetness called, slowing down. The glorious vision of Ma-Jesu was fizzing inside her like shaken-up warm Coke bursting to get out.

Lily looked up from a handful of coins with a gummy grin.

'Weh-Thweetie,' she called back. 'You coming in?'

After her pinkness and blonde hair and eyelashes, Lily's tongue was the next thing you noticed.

Sweetness hesitated. Was Lily the right person to be told first? Her mother kept her inside during the day for fear of sun damage, and away from school because of the children who taunted her. ‘Whitey! iBhunu!’ they mocked, making a game of pinching her. So Lily couldn’t read or write, though she understood all the labels and could count out change to the last cent. But she was also Correct Baptised and they didn’t respect the Holy Mother, according to the nuns. The amazing news would be wasted on Lily.

‘Maybe tomorrow.’ Sweetness ran on.

At the childminder’s gate a knot of weary parents had come to collect their children after work. Further up the alley, Queenie was singing as she set out plastic chairs and tables in her tarpaulin-covered yard. She ran a good shebeen – decent liquor, tasty snacks and drunks thrown out – though the kwaito and mbaqanga music pumping from boom boxes every night was a sore trial to her neighbours.

‘My customers want the township buzz,’ she’d shrug when they complained. ‘It’s business.’

‘Hayi bo! Not so late. We can’t sleep,’ people grumbled.

‘I’ll be relocating to town one of these fine days,’ she’d hint through lips as red and glossy as the maraschino cherries on toothpicks she dropped into her cocktails. But Queenie’s Place roared on. The closest and most deafened neighbours threatened to report her to Captain Ngobese, who had already banned all complementary visits by policemen.

‘That umfiki is compromising black solidarity,’ Queenie hissed to anyone who would listen. ‘Cops need to relax.’

The captain was adamant, the restricted cops were furious and the shebeen-goers sceptical. ‘Don’t worry. He’ll change his tune.’

It hadn’t happened. Captain Ngobese had been top student at the Police College in Pretoria, and was also a descendant of one of Shaka’s warriors: a big man with powerful shoulders who shook hands with a grip that meant business. Already the junior cops in his new command were calling him ‘Inhlwathi’, the python. He had snake eyes that watched you without blinking, they said.

In the meantime, Queenie presided over her ghetto blasters in skin-

tight sequins and a cleavage that made men dizzy. Sweetness was forbidden to talk to her, but as she ran past her yard she slowed down. Queenie could be heard on Sundays belting out hymns as she swept up the Saturday-night debris. Would she be the right person to tell? She'd spread the word quickest.

At that moment she dumped a chair and screeched like a hadedah at Mad Zizwe, 'Vuma, moegoe!'

Strong as a trek ox, Mad Zizwe, a silent man who slept with an old kitbag in derelict places, fetched and carried to feed his three lean hunting dogs. Hiding, people said – though questions were not asked in the settlement, where everyone had their secrets. Because his mind had been on the dogs' training, Queenie's raucous shriek made him drop the case of empty quarts he was carrying, to an explosion of glass and yelled curses.

Sweetness broke into a run again. Ma-Jesu's name would be sullied by that hot cherry mouth. Her mother must, of course, be the one to hear first. Was she home yet? Most evenings she stayed at the bus and taxi terminus until it grew too dark for buyers to see her wares. Then she brought back what was left and put it in the meat safe with its wire-and-charcoal walls that had to be kept wet to stay cool inside. Even then the offal didn't last longer than two days before it had to be sold or forced down.

But they were lucky to have meat at all, Sweetness reminded herself as she hurried on. She was lucky to have her mother and Gogo, who told intricate stories about the ancestors, though she was so frail now that she seldom stirred from her nest of old grey blankets.

In fact, Sweetness thought, she must be the luckiest person in the whole of South Africa. She had been chosen to witness a marvel.

Dr Egon Ulrich, who ran the Marie Stopes clinic, had no truck with those who believed in marvels, or anything smacking of fantasy. Reverend-baiting was his favourite pastime and nun-baiting came a close second, though he could be the soul of kindness to desperate women.

All day, feet shuffled in his bare-board waiting room as sick babies whimpered on their mothers' backs and bewildered grannies sat comforting their dying young. Leading off the waiting room was the hutch

where he consulted under shelves of pharmaceutical samples and only-just-expired medicines donated by the charity that paid him to dispense them along with condoms, birth-control pills and Depo-Provera injections.

Between patients, he concocted insults to keep himself mentally chipper, and they worked like malignant charms. He called the Reverend Ambrose Dauncey 'Fatso', knowing he was vain about his gaunt Anglican profile, and goaded a visiting Buddhist guru to stamp his sandals. 'All hail, Mein Führer!' with a straight-arm salute had a good run with Pastor Nazaret Harmse of the Strictly Transformed Church, who now went to extreme lengths to avoid him, sneaking into gaps between the shacks where his black suits gathered cobwebs.

It was an ongoing war against the forces of heaven. Even the peaceful Quakers had been moved to chide him for blaspheming outside their meeting house during silent prayers about the AIDS crisis. 'What's the point if they keep on fucking without protection? They need condoms!' he had shouted through a window.

The only holy men he dared not taunt were visiting imams and Father Liam O'Laoghaire, whom nobody messed with.

Waging his lone battles against rampant bacteria and viruses and any form of hope beyond the end of a needle, Dr Ulrich, veteran of a dozen nasty little wars since Biafra, cursed his solitary way to hell. He had a black heart, people said, and called him Dr Ugh. But they still went to the Marie Stopes clinic when they were ill or injured or needed abortions. Apart from Sister Dineo, who had done a first-aid course, and Sis' Diliza, who assisted him, Dr Ugh was all they had between the fortnightly visits of the government mobile clinic.

His only friend in the village was Girlie Ming, who had him over for chess on Friday evenings in her office behind the Beijing Bazaar. She had won the shop off another gambler in his last desperate game of poker before he stepped in front of a train, and thought she was getting a cash cow. But he hadn't told her that Crocodile Flats was dying, and the feng shui expert she had called in hadn't picked up anything inauspicious. Now she was trapped in this dump with her mother, missing the sharp minds and

deep wallets of Joburg, though ever hopeful of good fortune just around the corner. Though the villagers called her Mrs Ming, she had never bothered with a husband, and at fifty-plus she was a plump little seal in satin slippers with thinning black hair combed across her scalp.

A grizzled strandwolf's mane shadowed her opponent's face as he bent over the chessboard. They played for money and by two extra rules: Dr Ulrich would not use foul language in Old Mrs Ming's hearing and Girlie would stay off religion.

'Fair enough,' she conceded when he insisted.

'Bloody right,' growled Dr Ulrich.

'Watch it. Mommy's next door.'

'Bloody relates to my occupation. In both senses of the word.' There was a devious smile under the sardonic parabola of his moustache.

'Just this once, then.'

He had a trick up his sleeve, she was sure, but she had a plan too. Their rivalry was unrelenting.

THE SECOND SIGN

GREG INGRAM SAT GLARING AT THE KEYBOARD OF A computer that had seized up, yet again. What loony impulse had made him and Cassie leave Joburg for this squalid community on the edge of nowhere?

‘We made the decision without checking anything,’ he muttered. ‘It was so damn stupid.’

When Cassie fell pregnant she’d said it was time to go green, downsize to the country and lead a self-sufficient life. In a rush of environmental zeal they’d sold their flat, trawled the Internet, found a substantial house for sale in a platteland village, resigned from their jobs and driven there in a second-hand double-cab bakkie swapped for their car.

Moronic Move Number One. The so-called village was a huddle of old buildings surrounded by shacks. The estate agent’s cunningly angled photographs had not shown the rusting corrugated-iron roof, wall cracks you could stick your fist in, or the coal stove. The wiring had decayed. Antique fuses blew. At night they could hear the tiny nibbling of termites in the woodwork. Cobwebs hung in trailing curtains. Fungi bloomed in dingy corners. Squadrons of hyperactive rats scampered in the roof, their runways defined by pee stains on the flaccid ceilings and oily paw-trails up the walls.

But Cassie and Greg had burnt all their boats by the time they saw the place: the deals were done, their savings swallowed by the down payment and they had no other resources. Her parents were dead and his were state pensioners, unable to help. Making valiant jokes to conceal their

dismay, they cleaned up the appalling kitchen and two of the rooms, and moved in.

He'd bought a second-hand but powerful computer, planning to set up a website from which he would sell the innovative suite of personal-accounting software he intended to write. Moronic Move Number Two. ADSL wasn't available in Crocodile Flats and the computer was cranky. Clusters of its brain cells died every time the power failed.

While the program was being written, they counted on living off the land. Her flair for growing herbs and creating unusual jams, jellies and preserves for restaurants and delis would bring in enough to buy essentials. A friend designed beautiful stick-on labels. *From Cassandra's Kitchen* they read in chic chilli-red italics, with space to hand-write the contents.

Moronic Move Number Three. The garden was a stony desert, the water supply fitful. The tender leaves of the potted herbs they had brought were decimated by insects. Apart from shacks, few things flourished in Crocodile Flats besides occasional lemon and peach trees. And babies. The elegant blonde gourmet cook he'd married with such pride and hope had turned into a blimp who lay around all day looking as though she'd pop if you poked her.

Poked! I should be so lucky. He let out a savage bark of laughter. Their once rollicking sex life had been postponed until further notice.

'Gre-eg?' she called from the bedroom. 'Are you okay?'

'No. I need a fag. This section isn't panning out.'

'You promised you'd stop. For the baby's sake.'

'I haven't *started*. I just said I need one.'

There was a long silence, then she said from the doorway, 'I'll go and buy some. The café doesn't close till six.'

When he turned she was waddling towards him on swollen ankles. She had torn the sleeves off one of his old work shirts and wore it unbuttoned with her navel sticking out like a navigating device. Half-moons of sweat yellowed the armholes. Her hair was a hank of plumber's twine. He wondered what the hell he'd ever seen in her.

She whinged, 'Gre-eg? Want me to go?'

‘Not like that.’ He swivelled back to the keyboard on the old office chair that sent a long groan up his spine every time he moved.

She went on whinging, ‘Please don’t turn away from me. It’s not my fault this place is so awful.’

‘It is your fault! You were the one who decided we should downsize,’ he blazed at her reflection on the screen.

‘That’s not fair.’ She came up behind him and wrapped her lardy arms round him. ‘We both agreed it was a good idea.’

‘We were mad in the head.’ He shrugged her away saying, ‘Don’t clutch. It’s too damn hot. Get me a beer.’

She drew back and blinked away tears before answering. ‘I will if you ask me nicely. But it won’t be cold. The fridge has packed up, remember? I wrapped the beers in wet T-shirts at lunchtime and stood them on the windowsill to cool, but there isn’t even a breeze.’

‘You don’t have to tell *me*. I’m sweating like a pig.’

He looked like a pig too, with his upturned nose and cross little eyes and bristly hair. Greg had been a corporate success, plugged into the latest techno trends, which included a fancy cellphone that now lay unused. Cassie wondered what he’d say if he discovered that she’d been calling friends from the tickey box outside the post office. If things went on like this, she could leave on the Translux bus that stopped outside the café at midday and stay with one of them until the kid was born. Not long now. She didn’t want to think about afterwards.

‘Do I get my beer or not?’ he demanded.

‘Ask me nicely.’

With ill grace he got up and put his hands together in a mock praying position, leaning towards her. ‘*Please* will you get me a beer? Is that nice enough?’

As Father Liam walked past the house on his way to the Outspan – a refuge at the end of long days when he needed fortification to face the nuns – he was startled by the shadow tableau in a window: a man angled in prayer towards a heavily pregnant woman. At the same moment a donkey brayed in the settlement.

Maybe it’s a sign, he thought, stopping to cross himself before striding on. But heralding what? Christmas is still two months away.

Christmas was a hard time in Crocodile Flats: drunkenness, fights, smashed bottles, squandered bonuses, cowed children who would be lucky to get a used tennis ball from the Christmas Father.

In the New Year, Captain Ngobese and his squad would have to deal with the after-effects of the puzipula season, January till March, when even the sparse rain of recent years made the pula bushes blossom up on the koppies and the tough red fruit appeared, ominous as drops of blood. They were gathered in aprons and sacks by old women, ripened in sticky heaps shimmering with flies, then fermented for a week in forty-four-gallon drums with brown sugar and secret herbs (and sometimes drowned rats, which added extra zing). The brew scooped out in bubbling ladles had a kick like an enraged ostrich and a reputation that drew taxis laden with homeboys from the cities at weekends. Puzipula meant 'drink the rain' and it was glugged in monsoon volumes that led to a craving for meat and infinite sex.

On those nights, women stayed in their shacks until the drinkers had subsided into formidable hangovers and they were safe to move about again. Till the next batch was ready.

The vision reported by Sweetness would change all this. And more.

VANDERLINDEA

ROOI BAREND VAN DER LINDE'S BAKKIE SLID TO a halt in the alley that led to the row of garages behind the Outspan. He skulked towards the corner of the building and peered round to check up and down the tarmac road and its gravel verges. There were no familiar vehicles or white faces in sight, just full buses and taxis and people heading for their shacks in the growing dusk.

He hurried into the hotel lobby and through the swing doors to the bar, calling, 'Hey, Benny-boy! You got a cold Castle for me?'

Benjamin Feinbaum said in his mild way, 'You're in a hurry.'

'Damn sure. I'm supposed to go straight to pick up the post and back, Pa's orders. Plus the wife gives me stick if someone tells her I've been here. She's like the pastor about the demon drink. But a few beers never did a ou any harm, hey?'

He lowered his khaki rump onto a bar stool and turned to survey the room. The few black patrons had left and only hard-core rugby fans sat hunched over their brandies and Coke, watching replays on the TV in the corner. Nudging the glass tankard across the counter, Benjamin thanked God for small mercies.

'Jeez, I got a thirst on me.'

Benjamin watched the beer level plummet, mesmerised by the gulping Adam's apple until its owner thumped down the empty tankard. 'Jus' one more and I'm outa here.'

'That'll be eighteen bucks, plus eighteen for last time,' Benjamin warned. Rooi Barend had been platsak ever since Independence.

‘Daylight robbery.’ But he reached into the pocket of his shorts and fished out two twenty-rand notes, which he slapped on the counter, adding, ‘Keep the change. Big relief, man. It’s like the Dorsland Trek by our place.’

‘Thanks. Much appreciated.’

‘Don’t mensh, Benny-boy. Always pay my debts in the end, hey?’ Rooi Barend swept up the refilled tankard and after another series of mighty gulps, was gone with the swing doors banging behind him.

Two clans dominated Crocodile Flats: the amaPula, headed by Chief Mohlalipula, who owned the land to the east of the village, and the Van der Lindes, who owned the farm to the west and had been there longer than anyone else except the original inhabitants, now extinct.

The Van der Linde patriarchs were a breed of bulls alternating between pitch-black Nguni and the red-brown of an Afrikander. Rooi Barend’s father, Swart Barend, was a giant of a man with a foaming black beard, a legendary marksman who boasted that he could drop any beast with one shot. Until the day he winged a rhino that outran him, bellowing with rage, and repaid him with a savage thrust to the right buttock, leaving a crater like the Big Hole of Kimberley. Since then, walking had been painful and sitting down a martyrdom. His face bore the ravages of agony, as did his wife, Tannie Charmaine, four sons and two meek daughters.

Rooi Barend with his flaming hair and matching temperament was the only son cocky enough to stand up to him. One by one, the others were driven away, leaving their brother to inherit the farm, his mother and their sisters.

He took on the challenge by marrying a strapping boeremeisie who could handle the usual farm crises: breech births, bloating cattle, Newcastle disease, farmhands staggering up to the back door with wounds pouring blood. But he was not forewarned that Hester was pious and had a horror of sex. For health reasons, he was forced to resort to Queenie’s sultry niece, Salomie, in a back room of the motel where she worked, halfway to town where the gravel road dribbled onto the highway.

Then came Independence. The onset of democracy had been hard

enough to bear. Democracy in eleven official languages with black economic empowerment became a nightmare that the Van der Linde elders swore on their family Bible fully warranted secession. In tandem with like-minded families on adjoining farms, they decided to seal themselves off from the rest of South Africa.

Within weeks the land to the west of Crocodile Flats was purged of farm labourers and their families, declared a volkstaat and ringed with a lofty security fence and razor wire. Round-the-clock guards with R1 rifles liberated from commando armouries were stationed at the floodlit main gate between two converted silos, linked to more silos at intervals along the perimeter by runways swarming with killer boerbul.

The new volkstaat was proclaimed Vanderlinde. Swart Barend drew up a Constitution and designed a coat of arms (ox-wagons on a field vert, with crossed Mausers and ratels rampant). Tannie Charmaine ran up a flag on her electric Bernina that could do one hundred and twenty fancy stitches. Shotguns and side arms were checked and oiled, and ammunition replenished. All male citizens over twelve ran regular patrols inside the perimeter on a motley fleet of bicycles and buzzing Suzukis.

The womenfolk got busy making koeksisters, rusks, konfyt and pickles. Meat was ordered, cut up and packed for freezer storage: sides of beef, whole lambs, crates of mince and kilometres of boerewors. The farm storerooms were stocked with barrels of pickled pork and hung about with biltong and droëwors. There were trays of mebos and dried peaches; sacks of mealie meal, flour, peanuts, braai charcoal and fowlfood; tinned goods purchased in bulk from the Hyperama in town; packets of yeast, dried soups and water-purifying tablets; bottles of Mrs Ball's chutney, atchar, peri-peri and lemon cordial; medical supplies, including brandy, Van der Hum and a full range of Lennon's and other boer remedies; diesel generators, paraffin and gas lamps, candles and matches. Stores of hay and lucerne were checked and enough bales ordered to stock the sheds to capacity. Diesel and gas tanks were topped up and tons of anthracite trucked in. Reject gum and wattle poles were bought from sawmills and cut up into a mountain of firewood with chainsaws that growled non-stop for a week.

As they settled into siege mode and geared up to do battle, the Vanderlindeans hadn't had so much fun in years.

The only trouble was, everybody on the outside ignored them. No one tried to storm the gates or cut off the electricity. No court injunctions were served. Not even the newly integrated South African Army had tried to invade.

The anticlimax was beginning to tell on people's nerves.

Only Rooi Barend was allowed out for emergency supplies, to fetch the post and when certain stocks were running low. Swart Barend grew hoarse from giving orders all day. Tannie Charmaine was suffering with her indigestion. Hester hankered after Pastor Nazaret Harmse's sermons from the high pulpit in town; they didn't sound the same when he delivered them from a bale in the cow shed. Rooi Barend hankered after Salomie.

To add to the misery, the Crocodile Flats kids had invented a new game: they wrote insulting messages on bits of paper, wrapped them round stones, secured them with rubber bands and shot them with catties over the security fence, howling with scornful laughter. Some days it rained paper-wrapped stones in Vanderlinde. The perimeter patrols and killer boerbuls were kept fully occupied dodging them.

On the evening of the sighting of Ma-Jesu, Swart Barend's blood pressure was soaring to dangerous new heights, his daughters were snivelling with boredom, Hester was sweating over a giant pot of sousboontjies and Rooi Barend had a bad case of lover's balls.

SISTERS

‘WIN! WIN! THEY’RE AFTER ME!’ THE CRAZY OLD WOMAN fled in panic up her garden path, watched by a row of giggling shack kids with their fingers hooked through the rusting mesh fence.

‘Don’t tease the poor old missus, she’s magoela,’ their mothers chided, but of course they did.

The climax of the game came when the other one erupted from the house in an explosion of yowling cats and shook her fist at them, shouting, ‘Bugger off, you little pests!’ before shooing the crazy old woman inside. The cats would prowl for a long time with their fur on end while the kids hid behind the nearest shack for a reprise when she came out again.

Winifred and Dulcie Pybus lived next door to the Ingrams. Their old-age pensions covered only the rent, electricity and a monthly bag of cat food for their lodgers. The sisters would have starved had it not been for the grove of lemon trees in the garden. Their homemade lemon cordial was in big demand in the trading store, far cheaper than commercial cooldrinks because you needed only a teaspoonful to flavour a glass of water. Or gin. Or cane spirit.

Big, strong Winifred, gaunt as a mummy with her skin wizened against her bones, was in charge of watering the lemon trees and collecting and squeezing the fruit. She clumped about in gumboots and their late father’s johhpurs, making earth dams round the roots and maintaining the furrows that channelled grey water from the kitchen and bathroom. The furrows were often dry, as the sisters were intermittent washers and the parched soil