

# The Prophetess

by Njabulo S Ndebele

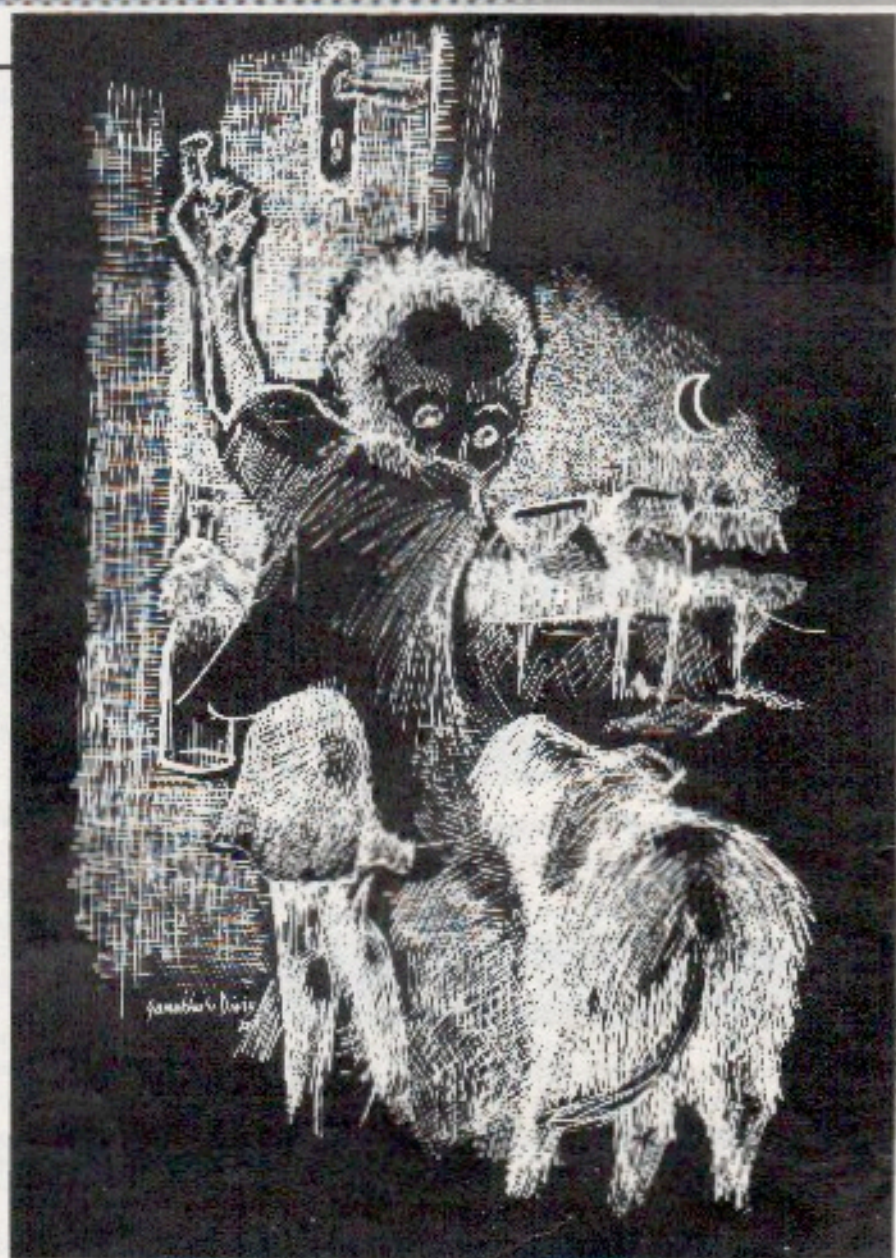
The boy knocked timidly on the door, while a big fluffy dog sniffed at his ankles. That dog made him uneasy; he was afraid of strange dogs. This made him anxious to go into the house as soon as possible. But there was no answer to his knock. Should he simply turn the door knob and get in? What would The Prophetess say? Would she curse him? He was not sure now which he feared more: was it The Prophetess or the dog? If he stood longer there at the door, the dog might sooner decide that he was up to some mischief after all. If he left, the dog might decide he was running away. And The Prophetess! What would she say when she eventually opened the door to find no one there? She might decide someone had been fooling, and would surely send lightning after the boy. But then, leaving would also bring the boy another problem: he would have to leave without the holy water that his sick mother had sent him for.

There was something strangely intriguing about The Prophetess and holy water. All that one was to do, the boy had so many times heard in the streets of the township, was fill a bottle with water and take it to The Prophetess. She would then lay her hands on the bottle and pray. And the water would be holy. And the water would have curing powers. That's what his mother had said too.

The boy knocked again, this time with more urgency. But he had to be careful not to annoy The Prophetess. It was getting darker and the dog continued to sniff at his ankles. The boy tightened his grip round the neck of the bottle he had just filled with water from the street tap on the other side of the street, just opposite The Prophetess' house. He would hit the dog with this bottle. What's more if the bottle broke, he would stab the dog with the sharp glass. But what would The Prophetess say? She would probably curse him. The boy knocked again, but this time he heard the faint voice of a woman:

'Kena!' the voice said.

The boy quickly turned the knob and pushed. The door did not yield. And the dog growled. The boy turned the knob again and pushed. This time the dog made a sharp bark, and the boy knocked frantically. Then he heard the bolt shoot back, and saw the door open to reveal darkness. Half of the



Illustrated by Gamakhulu Diniso

door seemed to have disappeared into the dark. The boy felt the fur of the dog brush past his leg as the dog hurried into the house with sudden alacrity.

'Voetsek!' the woman cursed suddenly.

The boy wondered whether the woman was The Prophetess. But as he was wondering, the dog brushed past him again, slowly this time. In spite of himself, the boy felt a pleasant, tickling sensation and a slight warmth where the fur of the dog had touched him. The warmth did not last, but the tickling sensation lingered, going up to the back of his neck and seeming to caress it. Then he shivered for an instant, and the sensation disappeared, shaken off in the

brief involuntary tremor.

'Dog stay out!' shouted the woman, and added, 'this is not at the white man's.'

The boy heard a slow shuffle of soft leather shoes receding into the dark room. The woman must be moving away from the door, the boy thought. He followed her into the house.

'Close the door,' ordered the woman who was still moving somewhere in the dark. But the boy had already done so.

Although it was getting dark outside, it was much lighter than in the room, and the fading day threw some of its waning light into the room. The curtains had not yet been drawn. Was it a last ditch effort to save candles? the boy



wondered. His mother had scolded him many times for lighting up before it was completely dark.

The boy looked instinctively towards the dull light coming in through the window. He was anxious, though, about where the woman was now, in the dark. Would she think he was afraid when she caught him looking out to the light? But the thick, dark, green leaves of vine outside, lapping lazily against the window, attracted and held him like a spell. There was no comfort in that light; it merely reminded the boy of his fear, only a few minutes ago, when he walked under that dark tunnel of vine which arched over the path from the gate to the door. He had dared not touch that vine and its countless velvety, black, and juicy grapes that hung temptingly within reach, or rested lusciously on forked branches. Silhouetted against the darkening summer sky, the bunches of grapes had each looked like a cluster of small balls narrowing down to a point like cones.

'Don't touch that vine!' was the warning almost everyone in Charleston township knew. It was said that the vine was all coated with thick, invisible glue. And that was how The Prophetess caught all those who stole out in the night to steal her grapes. And they would be glued there to the vine, and would be moaning for forgiveness throughout the cold night, until the morning, when The Prophetess would come out of the house with the first rays of the sun, raise her arms into the sky, and say: 'Away, away, sinful man; go, and sin no more!' Suddenly, the thief would be free, and would walk away feeling a great release that turned him into a new man. That vine; it was on the lips of everyone in the township every summer.

One day when the boy had played truant with two of his friends, and they were coming back from town by bus, some adults in the bus were arguing about The Prophetess' vine. The bus was so full that it was hard for anyone to move. The three truant friends, having given their seats to adults pressed against each other in a line, in the middle of the bus and could see most of the passengers.

'Not even a cow can tear away from that glue,' said a tall, dark man who had high cheekbones. His woollen hataclava hat was a careless heap on his head. His moustache, which had been finely rolled into two semi-circular horns, made him look fierce. And when he gesticulated with his tin lunch box, he looked fiercer still.

'My question is only one,' said a big woman whose big arms rested thickly

on a bundle of washing on her lap. 'Have you ever seen a person caught there? Just answer that one question.' She spoke with finality, and threw her defiant scepticism outside at the receding scene of men cycling home from work in single file. The bus moved so close to them that the boy had feared the men might get hit.

'I have heard of a silly chap that got caught!' declared a young man at the back of the bus. He was sitting with others on the long seat at the rear of the bus. They had all along been laughing and exchanging ribald jokes. The young man, with thick lips and red eyes, was applying, as he spoke, the final touches of saliva with his tongue, to a zol.

'When?' asked the big woman. 'Exactly when, I say? Who was that person?'

'These things really happen,' said a general chorus of women.

'That's what I know,' endorsed the man with the balaclava, and then added, 'You see, the problem with some women is that they will not listen; they have to oppose a man. They just have to.'

'What is that man saying now?' asked another woman. 'This matter started off very well, but this road you are now taking will get us lost.'

'That's what I'm saying too,' said the big woman adjusting her bundle of washing somewhat unnecessarily. She continued: 'A person shouldn't look this way or that, or take a corner here or there. Just face me straight; I asked a question.'

**It was said that the vine was all coated with thick invisible glue. And that was how The Prophetess caught all those who stole out in the night to steal her grapes.**

'These things really happen,' said the chorus again. 'That's it, good ladies, make your point; push very strongly,' shouted the young man at the back with mischief in his eyes. 'Love is having women like you,' he added much to the enjoyment of his friends. He was now smoking, and his zol looked so small between his thick fingers.

'Although you have no respect,'

said the big woman, 'I will let you know that this matter is no joke.'

'Of course this is not a joke!' shouted a new contributor. He spoke firmly and in English. His eyes seemed to burn with anger. He was young and immaculately dressed, his white shirt collar resting neatly on the collar of his jacket. A young nurse in her white uniform sat next to him. 'The mother there,' he continued, 'asks you very clearly whether you have ever seen a person caught by the supposed Prophetess' supposed trap. Have you?'

'She didn't say that, man,' said the young man at the back, passing the zol to one of his friends. She only asked when this person was caught and who it was.' The youths all laughed. There was a lot of smoke now at the back of the bus.

'My question was,' said the big woman turning her head to glare at the young man, 'have you ever seen a person caught there? That's all.' Then she looked outside. She seemed angry now.

'Don't be angry, mother,' said the young man at the back. There was more laughter at the back. 'I was only trying to understand,' he added.

'And that's our problem,' said the immaculately dressed man, addressing the bus. His voice was sure and strong. 'We laugh at everything; just stopping short of seriousness. Is it any wonder that the white man is still sitting on us? The mother there asked a very straightforward question, but she is answered vaguely about things happening. Then there is disrespectful laughter at the back there. The truth is you have no proof. None of you. Have you ever seen anybody caught by this Prophetess? Never. It's all superstition. And so much about this Prophetess also. Some of us are tired of her stories.'

There was a stunned silence in the bus. Only the heavy drone of an engine struggling with an overloaded bus could be heard. It was the man with the balaclava hat who broke the silence.

'Young man,' he said, 'by the look of things you must be a clever, educated person, but you just note one thing. The Prophetess might just be hearing all this, so don't be surprised when a bolt of lightning strikes you on a hot sunny day. And we shall be there at your funeral, young man, to say how you brought misfortune upon your head.'

Thus had the discussion ended. But the boy had remembered how every summer, bottles of all sizes filled with liquids of all kinds of colours would dangle from vines, peach, and apricot trees in many yards in the township. No



one dared steal fruit from those trees. Who wanted to be pleased, in shame, to a fruit tree. Strangely though, only The Prophetess' trees had no bottles hanging from their branches.

The boy turned his eyes away from the window focused into the dark room. His eyes had adjusted slowly to the darkness, and he saw the dark form of the woman shuffling away from him. She probably wore those slippers that had a fluff on top. Old women seem to love them. Then a white moving object came into focus. The woman wore a white doek on her head. The boy's eyes followed the doek. It took a right-angled turn—probably round the table. And then the dark form of the table came into focus. The doek stopped, and the boy heard the screech of a chair being pulled, and the doek descended somewhat and was still. There was silence in the room. The boy wondered what to do. Should he grope for a chair? Or should he squat on the floor respectfully? Should he greet or wait to be greeted? One never knew with The Prophetess. Why did his mother have to send him to this place? The fascinating stories about The Prophetess, to which the boy would add graphic details as if he had also met The Prophetess, were one thing; but being in her actual presence was another. The boy then became conscious of the smell of camphor. His mother always used camphor whenever she complained of pains in her joints. Was The Prophetess ill then? Did she pray for her own water? Suddenly, the boy felt at ease, as if the discovery that a prophetess could also feel pain somehow made her explainable.

'Lumela 'me,' he greeted. Then he cleared his throat.

'Ea ngoanaka,' she responded. After a little while she asked, 'Is there something you want, little man?'

It was a very thin voice. It would have been completely detached had it not been for a hint of finality in it. She breathed somewhat heavily. Then she coughed, cleared her throat, and coughed again. A mixture of rough discordant sounds filled the dark room as if everything was coming out of her insides, for she seemed to breathe out her cough from deep within her. And the boy wondered: if she coughed too long, what would happen? Would something come out? A lung? The boy saw the form of the woman clearly now: she had bent forward somewhat. Did anything come out of her onto the floor? The cough subsided. The woman sat up and her hands fumbled with something around her breasts. A white cloth emerged. She leaned forward again, cupped her hands and spat into the cloth. Then she stood up and

shuffled away into further darkness away from the boy. A door creaked, and the white doek disappeared. The boy wondered what to do because the prophetess had disappeared before he could say what he had come for. He waited.

More objects came into focus. Three white spots on the table emerged. They were placed diagonally across the table. Table mats. There was a small round black patch on the middle one. Because The Prophetess was not in the room, the boy was bold enough to move near the table and touch the mats. They were crocheted mats. The boy remembered the huge lacing that his mother had crocheted for the church altar. ALL SAINTS CHURCH was crocheted all over the lacing. There were a number of designs of chalices that carried The Blood of Our Lord.

Then the boy heard the sound of a match being struck. There were many attempts before it finally caught fire. Soon, the dull, orange light of a candle came into the living room, where the boy was, through a half closed door. More light flushed the living room as the woman came in carrying a candle. She looked round as if she wondered where to put the candle. Then she saw the ash tray on the middle mat, pulled it towards her, sat down and turned over the candle into the ash tray. Hot wax dropped onto the ash tray. Then The Prophetess turned the candle upright and pressed its bottom onto the wax. The candle held.

The Prophetess then peered through the light of the candle at the boy. Her thick lips protruded, pulling the wrinkled skin and caving in the cheeks to form a kind of lip circle. She seemed always ready to kiss. There was a line tattooed from the forehead to the ridge of a nose that separated small eyes that were half closed by huge, drooping eyelids. The white doek on her head was so huge that it made her face look even smaller. She wore a green dress and a starched green cape that had many white crosses embroidered on it. Behind her, leaning against the wall was a long bamboo cross.

The Prophetess stood up again, and shuffled towards the window which was now behind the boy. She closed the curtains and walked back to her chair. The boy saw another big cross embroidered on the back of her cape. Before she sat down she picked up the bamboo cross and held it in front of her.

'What did you say you wanted, little man?' she asked slowly.

'My mother sent me to ask for water,' said the boy putting the bottle of water on the table.

'To ask for water?' she asked with mild exclamation, looking up at the

bamboo cross. 'That is very strange. You came all the way from home to ask for water?'

'I mean,' said the boy, 'holy water'.

'Ahh!' exclaimed The Prophetess, 'you did not say what you meant, little man.' She coughed, just once.

'Sit down, little man,' she said, and continued. 'You see, you should learn to say what you mean. Words, little man, are a gift from the Almighty, the Eternal Wisdom. He gave us all a little pinch of his mind and called on us to think. That is why it is folly to misuse words or not to know how to use them well. Now, who is your mother?'

'My mother?' asked the boy, confused by the sudden transition. 'My mother is staff nurse Masebola.'

'Aa!' exclaimed The Prophetess. 'You are the son of the nurse? Does she have such a big man now?' She smiled a little and the lip circle opened. She smiled like a pretty woman who did not want to expose her cavities.

The boy relaxed somewhat, vaguely feeling safe because The Prophetess knew his mother. This made him look away from The Prophetess for a while, and he saw a huge mask on the wall opposite her. It was shining and black. It grinned all the time showing two canine teeth pointing upwards. About ten feet away at the far end of the wall was a picture of Jesus in which His chest was open, revealing His heart which had many shafts of light radiating from it.

'Your mother has a heart of gold, my son,' continued The Prophetess. 'You are very fortunate, indeed, to have such a parent. Remember, when she says, "my boy, take this message to that house", go, when she says, "my boy, let me send you to the shop", go, and when she says "my boy, pick up a book and read", pick up the book and read. In all this she is actually saying to you, learn and serve. Those two things, little man, are the greatest inheritance.'

Then The Prophetess looked up at the bamboo cross as if she saw something in it that the boy could not see. She seemed to lose her breath for a while. She coughed deeply again, after which she went silent, her cheeks moving as if she were chewing.

'Bring the bottle nearer,' she said finally. She put one hand on the bottle while with the other, she held the bamboo cross. Her eyes closed, she turned her face towards the ceiling. The boy saw that her face seemed to have contracted into an intense concentration in such a way that the wrinkles seemed to have become deep gorges. Then she began to speak.

'You will not know this hymn, boy, so listen. Always listen to new things.



Then try to create too. Just as I have learnt never to page through the dead leaves of hymn books.' And she began to sing.

*If the fish in a river  
boiled by the midday sun  
can wait for the cooling of evening,  
we too can wait  
in this wind frosted land  
the spring will come  
the spring will come.*

*If the reeds in winter  
can dry up and soon dead  
and then rise  
in the spring  
we too will survive the fire that is  
coming  
the fire that is coming  
we too will survive the fire that is  
coming.*

It was a long, slow song. Slowly, The Prophetess began to pray.

'God, The All-powerful! When called upon, You always listen. We direct our hearts and thoughts to You. How else could it be? There is so much evil in the world; so much emptiness in our hearts; so much debasement of the mind. But You, God of all Power, are the wind that sweeps away evil and fills our hearts and minds with renewed strength and hope. Remember Samson? Of course You do, O Lord. You created him, You, maker of all things. You brought him out of a barren woman's womb, and since then, we have known that out of the desert things will grow, and that what grows out of the barren wastes has a strength that can never be destroyed.'

**At the shops, the boy slowed down to manoeuvre through the crowds. He lifted the bottle to his chest and supported it from below with the other hand. He must hold on to that bottle. He was going to heal his mother. He tightened the bottle cap. Not a drop was to be lost. The boy passed the shops.**

Suddenly, the candle flame went down. The light seemed to have gone into retreat as the darkness loomed out, seemingly out of the very light itself, and hove down upon it, until there was a tiny blue flame on the table looking so vulnerable and so strong at the same time. The boy shuddered and felt the coldness of the floor going up his bare

feet.

Then out of the dark, came The Prophetess' laugh. It began as a giggle, the kind girls would make when the boy and his friends chased them down the street for a little kiss. The giggle broke into the kind of laughter that produced tears when one was very happy. There was a kind of strange pleasurable rhythm to it that gave the boy a momentary enjoyment of the dark, for soon, the laugh gave way to a long shriek. The boy wanted to rush out of the house. But something strong, yet intangible, held him fast to where he was. It was probably the shriek itself that had filled the dark room and now seemed to come out of the mask on the wall. The boy felt like throwing himself on the floor and there wriggle and roll like a snake until he became tired and fell into a long sleep at the end of which would be the kind of bliss the boy would feel when he was happy and his mother was happy and she embraced him, so closely.

But the giggle, the laugh, the shriek, all ended as abruptly as they had started as the darkness swiftly receded from the candle like the way ripples run away from where a stone has been thrown in the water. And there was light. On the wall, the mask smiled silently, and the heart of Jesus sent out yellow light.

'Lord, Lord, Lord,' said The Prophetess slowly in a quiet, surprisingly full voice which carried the same kind of contentment that had been in the voice of the boy's mother when one day he had come home from playing in the street, and she was sitting on the chair close to the kitchen door, just opposite the warm stove. And as soon as she saw him come in, she embraced him all the while saying, 'I've been so ill, for so long, but I've got you, You're my son, You're my son, You're my son.' And the boy had smelled the faint smell of camphor on her, and he too embraced her, holding her firmly although his arms could not go beyond his mother's armpits. He remembered how warm his hands had become in her armpits.

'Lord, Lord, Lord,' continued The Prophetess, 'have mercy on the desert in our hearts and in our thoughts. Have mercy. Bless this water; fill it with your power; and may it bring rebirth. Let she and whoever else will drink it, feel the flower of newness spring alive in them; let those who drink it, break the chains of despair; and may they realise that the wastes are really not barren, but that the east lands that stretch into the horizon is the measure of the seed in us.'

As The Prophetess stopped speaking, she slowly lowered the bamboo cross until it rested on the floor. The boy wondered if it was all over now. Should

he stand up and get the blessed water and leave? But The Prophetess soon gave him direction.

'Come here, my son,' she said, 'and kneel before me here.' The boy stood up and walked slowly towards The Prophetess. He knelt on the floor, his hands hanging at his sides. The Prophetess placed her hands on his head. They were warm, and the warmth seemed to go through his hair, penetrating deep through his scalp into the very centre of his head. Perhaps he thought, that was the soul of The Prophetess going into him. Wasn't it said that when The Prophetess placed her hand on one's head, she was seeing with her soul deep into you, that as a result, The Prophetess could never be deceived? And the boy wondered how his lungs looked to her. Did she see the water that he had drunk from the tap just across the street? Where was the water now? In the stomach? In the kidneys?

Then the hands of The Prophetess moved all over the boy's head, seeming to feel for something. They went down the neck. They seemed cooler now, and the coolness seemed to tickle the boy for his neck was colder than those hands. Now they covered his face, and he saw, just before he closed his eyes, the skin folds on the hands so close to his eyes that they looked like many mountains. Those hands smelled of blue soap and candle wax. But there was no smell of snuff. The boy wondered. Perhaps The Prophetess did not take snuff after all. But the boy's grandmother did, and her hands always smelled of snuff. Then The Prophetess spoke:

'My son,' she said, 'we are made of all that is in the world. Go, Go and heal your mother.' When she removed her hands from the boy's face, he felt his face grow cold, and there was a slight sensation of his skin shrinking. He rose from the floor, lifted the bottle with its snout and backed away from The Prophetess. He then turned and walked towards the door. As he closed it, he saw The Prophetess shuffling away to the bedroom carrying the candle with her. He wondered when she would return the ash-tray to the table. When he finally closed the door, the living room was dark, and there was light in the bedroom.

It was night outside. The boy stood on the veranda for a while, winking his eyes to adjust to the darkness. He wondered also about the dog. But it did not seem to be around. And there was that vine archway with its forbidden fruit and the multicoloured worms that always crawled all over the vine. As the boy walked under the tunnel of vine, he tensed his neck, lowering his head like people do when walking in the rain. He



was anticipating the reflex action of shaking off a falling worm. Those worms were disgustingly huge, he thought. And there was also something terrifying about their bright colours.

In the middle of the tunnel, the boy broke into a run and was out of the gate: free. He thought of his mother waiting for the holy water; and he broke into a sprint running west up Thipe street towards home. As he got to the end of the street, he heard the hum of the noise that came from the ever crowded 'Barber Shops' and the huge Beer Hall just behind those shops. After the brief retreat in the house of The Prophetess, the noise, the people, the shops, the street-lights, the buses and the taxis all seemed new. Yet, somehow, he wanted to avoid all contact with all this activity. If he turned right at the corner, he would have to go past the shops into the lit Moshoshane street and its Friday night crowds. If he went left he would have to go past the now dark, ghostly Bantu-Batho post office, and then down through the huge gum trees behind the Charleston Clinic, and then past the quiet golf course. The latter way would be faster, but too dark and dangerous for a mere boy, even with the spirit of The Prophetess in him. And were not dead bodies found there sometimes? The boy turned left.

At the shops, the boy slowed down to manoeuvre through the crowds. He lifted the bottle to his chest and supported it from below with the other hand. He must hold on to that bottle. He was going to heal his mother. He tightened the bottle cap. Not a drop was to be lost. The boy passed the shops.

Under a street lamp just a few feet from the gate into the Beer Hall was a gang of boys standing in a tight circle. The boy slowed down to an anxious stroll. Who were they? he wondered. He would have to run past them quickly. No, there would be no need. He recognized Timi and Bubus. They were with the rest of the gang from the boy's neighbourhood. Those were the bigger boys who were either in standard six or were already in secondary school or had jobs in town.

Timi recognized the boy.

'Ja, sonny boy,' greeted Timi. 'What's a peccaninny like you doing alone in the streets at night?'

'Heit, bra Timi,' said the boy, returning the greeting. 'Just from the shops, bra Timi,' he lied, not wanting to reveal his real mission. Somehow that would not have been appropriate.

'Come on, you!' yelled another member of the gang, glaring at Timi. It was Biza. Most of the times when the boy had seen Biza, the latter was intercepting a girl and talking to her. Sometimes the girl would laugh. Sometimes

**As soon as the boy's mother saw him come in, she embraced him all the while saying: 'I've been so ill; for so long; but I've got you. You're my son. You're my son. You're my son.' And the boy had smelled the faint smell of camphor on her, and he too embraced her...**

Biza would twist her arm until she 'agreed'. In broad daylight!

'You keep on denying,' continued Biza to Timi, 'and when I try to show you some proof you turn away to greet an ant.'

'Okay then,' said another, 'what proof do you have? Everybody knows that Sonto is a hard girl to get.'

'Come closer then,' said Biza, 'and I'll show you.' The boy was closed out of the circle as the gang closed in towards Biza, who was at the centre. The boy became curious and got closer. The wall was impenetrable, but he could clearly hear Biza.

'You see? You can all see. I've just come from that girl. Look! See? The liquid? See? When I touch it with my finger and then leave it, it follows like a spider's web.'

'Well, my man,' said someone, 'you can't deceive anybody with that. It's the usual trick. A fellow just blows his nose and then applies the mucus there, and then emerges out of the dark saying he has just had a girl.'

'Let's look again closely,' said another, 'before we decide one way or the other.' And the gang pressed closely again.

'You see? You see?' Biza kept saying. 'I think Biza has had that girl,' said someone.

'It's mucus man, and nothing else,' said another.

'But you know Biza's record in these matters, gents.'

'Another thing, how do we know it's Sonto and not some other girl. Where is it written on Biza's cigar that he has just had Sonto? Show me where it's written: "Sonto" there.'

'You're jealous you guys, that's your problem,' said Biza. Their circle went loose and there was just enough time for the boy to see Biza's penis disappear into his trousers. A thick little thing, thought the boy. It looked sad. It had first been squeezed in retreat against the fly like a concertina, before it finally disappeared. Then Biza, with a twitch of alarm across his face, saw the boy.

'What did you see, you?' screamed Biza. 'Fuck off!'

The boy took his heels wondering what Biza could have been doing with his penis under the street lamp. It was funny, whatever it was. It was silly too. Sinful. The boy was glad that he had got the holy water away from those boys and that none of them had touched the bottle.

And the teachers were right, thought the boy. Silliness was all those boys knew. And then they would go to school and fail test after test. Silliness and school did not go together.

The boy felt strangely superior. He had the power of The Prophetess in him. And he was going to pass that power on to his mother, thus healing her. Those boys were not healing their mothers. They just left their mothers alone at home. The boy increased his speed. He had to get home quickly. He turned right at the charge office and sped towards the clinic. He crossed the road that went to town and entered Mayaba Street. Mayaba Street was dark and the boy could not see. But he did not lower his speed. Home was near now, instinct would take him there. His eyes would adjust to the darkness as he raced along. He lowered the bottle from his chest and let it hang at the side from his hand, like a pendulum that was now moving. He looked up at the sky as if light would come from the stars high up to lead him home. But when he lowered his face, he saw something suddenly loom before him, and, almost simultaneously, he felt a dull, yet painful impact against his thigh. Then followed a dull explosion, and there was a grating of metal seeming to scoop up sand from the street. The boy did not remember how he fell, but on the ground, he lay clutching at his painful thigh. A few feet away, a man groaned and cursed:

'Blasted child!' he shouted. 'Shouldn't I kick you? Just running in the street as if you owned it. Shit of a child, you don't even pay tax. Fuck off home before I do more damage on you!' The man lifted his bicycle, and the boy saw him straightening the handles. And the man rode away.

The boy raised himself from the ground and began to limp home, conscious of nothing else but the pain in his thigh. But it was not long before he felt a jab of pain at the centre of his chest and felt his heart beating fast. And he became aware of the stabbing sensation of terror as he thought of the broken bottle and the spilt holy water and his mother waiting for him and the water that would help to cure her. What would his mother say? If only he had not stopped to see those silly boys he may not have been run over by a bicycle. Should he go back to The Prophetess?



## The Prophetess

No. There was the dog, there was the vine, there were the worms. There was The Prophetess herself. She would not let anyone who wasted her prayers get away without punishment. Would it be lightning? Would it be the fire of hell? What would it be? The boy limped home to face his mother. He would walk in to his doom. He would walk into his mother's bedroom, carrying no cure, and face the pain in her sad eyes.

But as the boy entered the yard of his home, he heard a sound of bottles coming from where Rex, his dog, had its kennel. Rex had jumped over the bottles, knocking some stones against the bottles in his rush to meet the boy. And the boy remembered the pile of bottles next to the kennel. He felt grateful as he embraced the dog. He selected a bottle from the heap. Calmly, as if he had known all the time what he would do in such a situation, the boy walked out the yard again towards the street tap on Mayaba Street. And there, almost mechanically, he cleaned the bottle, shaking it many times with clean water. Finally, he filled it with water and wiped its outside clean against his trousers. He retightened the cap, and

limped home.

As soon as he opened the door, he heard his mother's voice in the bedroom. It seemed a visitor had come while the boy was away.

'I'm telling you, Son,' his mother was saying, 'and take it from me, a trained nurse. Pills, medicines, and all those injections are not enough. I take herbs too, and think of the wonders of the universe as our people have always done. Son, is that you?'

'Yes, Ma,' said the boy who had just closed the door with a deliberate bang.

'And did you get the water?'

'Yes, Ma.'

'Good, I knew you would. Bring the water and two cups. MaShange is here.'

The boy's eyes misted with tears. His mother's trust in him: would he repay it with such dishonesty? He would have to be calm. He wiped his eyes with the back of his hand, and then put the bottle and two cups on a tray. He would have to walk straight. He would have to hide the pain in his thigh. He would have to smile at his mother. He would have to smile at the visitor.

And there was his mother! Her bed faced the passage, and he saw her as soon as he turned into the passage to go to the bedroom. She had propped herself up with many pillows. The boy

greeted the visitor and placed the tray on the dressing chest close to his mother's bed.

'I don't know what I would do without this boy,' said the boy's mother as she leaned on an elbow, lifting the bottle with the other hand, and turning the cap rather laboriously with the hand on whose elbow she was resting.

The boy returned to the kitchen and sat there listening to the voices in the bedroom. He watched the candle flame dancing before him and felt the warmth of the stove. What had The Prophetess seen in him? He wondered. Did she still feel him? Did she know what he had just done? Did holy water taste any differently from ordinary water? Would his mother notice the difference? Would he leave home and walk away if she did? Who would heal her then?

But clearly, he heard his mother.

'Oh, how I feel better, already!' she said.

'May the Lord's work be praised,' said MaShange.

And the boy felt the pain in his thigh. He had gotten up and walked. He had carried his burden.

And the boy smiled, thinking, it had worked.●