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sample translation

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Max Annas

The Wall

rororo

fiction

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Moses only wants to do one thing: to get home, out of the crippling heat, away from the godforsaken suburb where his old Toyota has just broken down. To get home to his girlfriend Sandi and a cold beer. The streets are empty, there's not a single human being to be seen. Moses hopes to find help in a nearby gated community. Over there, in the white world, everything is in order. But once inside it he feels more of an outsider than ever. And he makes a mistake...

At the same time, Nozipho and Thembi are creeping around inside the walls – making their living with burglary. What they can't know is that in the house they plan to break into next a far more serious crime has already been committed...

- Winner of the German Crime Fiction Prize 2017.



Press quotes

“Although the novel takes place in a very concretely described South Africa, because of its [thematic] constellation, it carries global relevance. In the end, it is about outside and inside, about inclusion and exclusion, about the devastating impact of racism in which there are only losers, about hysterical, ultimately uncontrollable violence as the presumed Ultima Ratio of fear and distrust of “the other.”

“The wall does not provide protection against the realities of the world. It merely produces more conflicts, more violence, more suffering. It becomes the overarching metaphor that is connected to concepts like “Fortress Europe,” border walls, and even Donald Trump’s Mexican wall project, without ever becoming overbearing in its association.” - Thomas Woertche, Deutschlandradio Kultur

“Max Annas has an impressive ability for packing clever plots into concentrated, riveting thrillers that don’t have a single extra gram of fat on their ribs.” - Ulrich Noller, WDR

“We are live as Annas tells his story in short, breathless sentences and rapidly changing perspectives in real time, all within 220 crisp pages. And this is not achieved at the cost of details or descriptions of the visual landscape or personal relationships. To the contrary... More this time than in his other novel, Annas has borrowed with relish from the great film stylists. The labyrinth motif and the "wrong man": taken from Hitchcock. The accidental doppelgaenger, the harmless crooks (the pair of thieves) who end up way over their heads in a situation in which a deep freezer plays a role, a lost suitcase full of money found by an extremely needy bystander, and the final death dance depicted in something like a time loop: Sam Peckinpah, Quentin Tarantino and the Coen Brothers are very clearly waving from behind the backdrop... You would not do any disservice to Max Annas' thriller if you could just as easily imagine it playing out in Dallas, Baton Rouge or St. Paul.”

Christiane Mueller-Lobeck, taz

Max Annas lived in South Africa, where he worked for a research project on South African jazz at the University of Fort Hare. He published several books on pop culture, politics and sports. His debut *The Farm* was awarded with the German Thriller Prize. He lives in Berlin.

sample translation by Rachel Hildebrandt

1

“White people are strange...”

“How?”

“Well...” The woman was wearing a faded brown smock covered with large yellow flowers, a light green t-shirt underneath. A dark green skirt peeked out from under the hem of the smock. Tennis shoes and short, black socks below. Her steps were short and quick. “They don’t know how to dress,” she said. A large artificial leather handbag dangled from her shoulder.

“That’s nothing new.” The man glanced down at the woman and bit back a grin. He was two heads taller than her and was wearing a charcoal-colored suit. “They’ve never had a clue about that. They’re all still farmers, at least in their heads. And you can tell that by just looking at them.” Thanks to his long legs, he looked as if he were purposely walking slowly.

“Farmers, yes, that’s what they look like,” the woman replied. She picked up her pace for a couple of steps, shortening the distance she was lagging behind.

“Man, it’s hot!” The man in the suit tugged a handkerchief out of his pants, and dabbed his forehead and cheeks. He wiped the back of his hands as well, before sticking the cloth back in his pocket. “What made you think about that?” He cocked the collar of his light blue shirt and straightened his black tie. He carried an oversized briefcase in his other hand.

The woman pulled her arm across her face. “The old man just now.”

“Where we parked the car? The one at the intersection?”

“Uh huh.” The woman shook her head. “The baggy shorts. The shirt hanging out.” She took a couple of long strides to keep from falling behind. “What a shirt! And socks with sandals?” The woman shook her head again. “I wouldn’t even go to bed looking like that.”

“You don’t wear anything to bed.”

The woman looked sternly at the man. “And did you see his eyes?”

“Except in the winter...” He grinned. “And no, just for a second. I didn’t want to stare. That would’ve just made him angrier.”

“Such nonsense. In a few days, he’ll be telling his friends about the two blacks who parked in front of his crappy house. That’s what makes me so mad. Really mad. I mean, what does he think is going to happen to him in the middle of the day? In the suburbs.”

“On the hottest day of the year.”

“Exactly. On the fucking hottest day of the year. He’s more likely to die from a heart attack than from a mugging anyway. Even if two blacks do park at his doorstep. I hope we can easily find that corner again where we left the car.”

“Sure, no problem. It’s not all that far from the entrance. Somebody’s coming.”

The woman fell back a couple of meters, her head now lowered as she walked. Suit lifted his head and studied the woman coming their way. Mid-30s, corporate clothes, a trim black suit and white blouse. Blonde hair, straight and to her shoulders. Realtor type.

“How are you?” asked the suit, nodding casually.

“Hi,” the realtor responded, hardly glancing at Suit and ignoring the woman in the smock. “It’s hot today,” she said before moving on.

The woman in the smock said nothing, her eyes still fixed on the ground. Once the realtor was a few meters away, she asked: “How far do we want to go?” All of the houses right here had two stories, and were built on similarly sized, though differently subdivided, properties. They all looked remarkably alike. Just like the one-story houses that shaped the streetscape up closer to the entrance.

“We’re almost at the end of the street. Can you see the wall back there?”

“Uh huh. What do you think the old man back there has?”

“The old man? Who stared at us? Pfff... No idea... A little jewelry, two or three generations of gold wedding rings. Cash, perhaps even a lot of it. He might be a collector, coins or something. That could be interesting, even though it’s always hard to get rid of stuff like that. If he has a gun, it won’t be anything we could get much for. And no phones that would interest us, no laptop. He definitely owns a CD player. That’s something you really can’t sell anymore these days.”

“You have a good eye.”

“It’s what I do professionally.”

“True.”

The two of them arrived at a T-intersection. They could see a tall wall running behind the yards in front of them. Behind it, the steady rush of a river. Barking from that direction. A masculine voice called to the dog. The man and the woman came to a stop.

“What do you think?” asked Suit. The gated community was ideal for their purposes. Tons of houses, yards not too large. To create a certain degree of privacy, walls of varying heights had been built all over the place. To create a visible screen against the neighbors and people who walked or drove past. However, none of the walls fully enclosed the properties. The yards were all freely accessible. And each of those spaces provided opportunities for brief concealment. As long as you knew where the cameras were.

“The two open windows,” the woman commented. “They’re out.”

“How do you know that?”

“The car that passed us a few minutes ago pulled out from here.”

“The couple?”

“Uh huh. But it was two men, I think.”

“Really? Well, that’s the good thing about the heat. They leave their windows open. Did they look as if they’d have something worth taking?”

“Could be. I’m not sure.”

“What else?”

“The mailbox with the three envelopes sticking out.”

“Definitely.”

“And then the little dog. The window’s shut, but the pane’s all smeared up. He’s waiting on his old lady. Old white lady.”

“The dog’s been left home alone, you think?”

“Yes. And you?”

“The lighting system.”

The woman shook her head. She hadn’t noticed it.

“The house with the greenery in front of the door,” the man remarked.

“Oh yeah.”

“The light just cut on. You can hardly see it. Somebody set the timer wrong.”

“But if they have a lighting system and timer, then there’s got to be an alarm.”

“Yes, could be. Probably so. What do you propose?”

“First, the dog. Then, the windows. We can see after that.”

Suit made a short grunt. “Speaking of dogs,” he commented, pointing in front of them. A gaunt, brown dog loped across the narrow street.

“Where did he come from?” the woman wondered.

“He could have come from anywhere. It’s a little like the township here. The dogs run around there, too.”

“Yes, but the security is tighter here than in the township.”

“Until now,” the man said. “Was tighter.”

“Need a push?” the professor asked.

“It’s okay,” Moses replied. “If I’m pointed downhill, it should start just fine. See you tomorrow.” As he released the brake, the old Toyota started rolling. He could still see the professor with his head of curly white hair in his rearview mirror. He waved and turned back around. Moses gave a quick honk inD parting, before cranking the motor. It choked a couple of times, but then turned over. Bad Kwaito was playing on the radio. The music broke off for a moment, before starting back up again. Something electronic this time.

Moses was always annoyed by huge houses. Most of the time, only a few people lived in them. Like Professor Brinsley and his wife. Two floors, countless rooms, spacious pool, lawn, garden. Fortunately, the prof didn’t have any dogs.

It had been a good idea to help Brinsley. His office was stuffed to the ceiling with books resting on shelves and in dusty piles. His contract with Fort Hare University had run out, and he would be flying out for the States next week to start a new job in Atlanta. And the books had to be relocated to his house. Temporary storage.

“Moses, could you use this?” he had asked over and over again. The Toyota’s trunk now contained two heavy boxes of books. And Brinsley had actually parted with C.L.R. James’ book about cricket. Unbelievable. His only copy.

A text chimed in. Moses pulled his phone out of his pocket.

“Are you on your way?”

“Yes!” he wrote back.

The next text was right on its heels. “What should we do?”

“Sex!” he typed, as his eyes darted from the display to the road. He swerved into the oncoming lane as he wrote that. Didn’t matter. The street was empty around noon.

Moses rolled down the passenger side window.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” the DJ shouted. “This is the hottest February in years. And today is the hottest day in the hottest February in years. I’m about to crawl into an ice bath. Call and tell me what you’re going to do to fight the heat in the Eastern Cape.” The radio once again cut out. When it returned, the music had switched to R&B. To the mall to buy prosecco. Then home to get out of these dirty clothes, shower, put on something nice appropriate for taking right back off again. And finally to Sandi’s. 40 minutes max. At her place at 1:00 on the dot.

The phone went off again. It was the battery this time. Pretty much empty. Oh well.

He was in the curve toward Abbotsford when the engine spluttered briefly. Come on, Moses thought. Just one more day. I’ll take you to the shop tomorrow. Guaranteed. I promise.

To the other side of Abbotsford, then across the Nahoon. Almost to Dorchester Heights. The engine died once more. Tomorrow, Moses thought. “Tomorrow!” he yelled. It started back up. “Come on!” he called. The car stalled once more. He was heading down a slight rise, and the car was still coasting. But it didn’t come back to life. Moses pumped the gas pedal.

The road leveled off, and his speed dropped. Moses let the car roll to a stop, making sure to get two of his tires off the pavement. Turned the key and heard... nothing. Pulled out the key, took a deep breath. Stuck it back into the ignition, turned. Silence.

One more time. Remove the key, try to think about something else, but what? Sex with Sandi. Then back in and turn. No response, not even a rattle. Nothing.

The clock. Twelve of the forty minutes were already gone. Moses got out. There were practically no shadows on the ground. The sun was at its zenith. The phone reminded him about the battery. Who should he call?

Khanyo. He knew cars.

“Yeah. Who’s this?”

“Moses. The Toyota’s dead.”

“And?”

“And I really need some help.”

“Nobody’s going to steal that thing. Where are you anyway? You sound so scared that I suspect you’re in Duncan Village with a couple of knife-wielding Tsotsis around you. Hahaha...”

Moses laughed, but only because Khanyo expected him to. “Hahaha. I’m in... right outside of Dorchester Heights. On the Abbotsford side. Some kind of intersection, where a road veers a little uphill to the left. I’m stuck, and I just don’t want to be here all that long. Listen, if you can come rescue me, I’ll have you over for dinner. I’ll cook, and I’ll fill you in on what Brinsley has told me about his successor.. Okay?”

No answer.

“Khanyo?” Moses looked at his phone. The screen was dark. Shit.

12:39. Nineteen of the forty minutes were gone. He may as well forget about sex with Sandi. What had Khanyo heard? Dorchester Heights? Had he at least gotten those two words? And if so - was he on his way?

Moses scanned the area. Suburbia. Upper middle class. Three meters of grass between road and wall, one-story houses, two-car garages, glass shards or electricity running along the wall to keep undesirable visitors out. Further down the road, a gate swung open, and a compact car drove out. Turned in his direction. The woman was 30, maybe a little older, shoulder-length brown hair. Housewife, he thought. On her way to the kindergarten.

What lousy luck. Car broken down and phone dead. And dressed the way he was. Ripped pants, covered in dust, oil on his t-shirt from the prof’s old Bakkie. Moses opened his trunk. Rummaged around the boxes and plastic bags. Where were the clothes he had wanted to give his sister? For the school in the Ciskei. Had he already passed them along?

He shut the trunk. Looked around again. Remembered something.

He knew the corner up there. But why?

The road heading uphill. The tall wall. The dead-end road. It all looked familiar. Moses walked slowly up the hill and tried to recall.

Last year. A couple of classmates. They had worked on something together. And the young white man had lived here. They had met at his house. What had his name been? Robbie?

No. Janie? No.

But something like that. Moses approached the gate in the wall. A large metal sign hanging next to the entrance read “The Pines.” Stylized trees stood rooted beside the letters. The metal gate was just starting to open, a car grill visible on the other side. Moses waited. Brand new. Large. Black. Moses didn’t know much about car companies, but he wanted something like that. Those cars wouldn’t break down on you, he thought.

The gate was open. The car drove out. Tinted windows. Passed him. The gate started to slowly swing shut. Moses took a few running steps and just barely forced himself through the narrow gap before the gated community was locked back down.

“They probably won’t be gone all that long,” Suit commented. “We should’ve started with this one.” His eyes traveled up the one-story house with attached garage. Wooden front door, window to the right, tilted open. Two to the left, one of which was also open.

“But the other house had the better location, Thembinkosi. And it was worth the trouble. It would have taken us too long if we’d done things in a different order.” The woman glanced around. “Too many sidewalks, too many eyes, that’s what you always say. Do you want to go in or not?”

“Yes, I do, Nozipho. We have only just begun to work.” He grinned at her.

“There’s probably not an alarm here, since it wouldn’t work to have the windows open otherwise.”

“How many cameras have you counted right around here?” Thembinkosi reached into his pants pocket and pulled out a small bundle of tools.

Nozipho extracted a hand mirror, held it up to her face, and turned slowly, looking in all directions. “I see four of them.”

“Me too. That’s about right. There won’t be many more than that anyway.”

Before Nozipho could even rummage her lipstick out of her bag, she heard the door open.

The metallic clang of the gate was still echoing in Moses' head, as he wondered if he had done the right thing. They all looked the same, these gated communities. Houses spaced evenly apart, curving or angular streets, walls on the distant horizon. But he really thought he remembered this place. The six streets that curved away in identical arcs from the wall at the entrance. The houses that were never located directly across from each other. A gently sloping site. To the right, beyond the outer wall, a hilly terrain, quite high at certain points. To the left, the road along which he had just come. Moses had a good visual memory. Yes, this was the gated community he had visited last year. But where did that classmate live? Danie? Or Janie after all? And what would be the best way for him to try find him?

Three of the streets started to his right, three to his left. All of them ran in similarly soft continuous curves to the left. The houses that could be seen from the entrance were all one-storied. He could see the two-storied ones starting much further back in enclave. And behind those flowed the river, if he recalled rightly. The Nahoon River, behind the back wall. He hadn't gone back that far last time. Or had he? But how far was that?

Remember, Moses said to himself. He walked a few meters to the left and stared down one of the streets. Then in the other direction. Decided to start with the rightmost street. Tackle this systematically. He'd remember when he saw the house.

How had they actually gotten here back then? Definitely not in his car. He hadn't owned one at that point. He had only saved up enough to buy the Toyota a few months ago. Had they taken Ross's car? And who else had been along? And why in the world was he asking himself these things in the first place?

Of course, because the whole picture would help to stimulate his memory. If he could recall the group, their faces, the car, then he would be able to more easily recognize the house they had visited. And the name would have to come back to him. Japie? The Boers have such weird names, Moses thought.

A symbolic stretch of wall along the street, a few meters of grass and garden, a half-cube with windows, attached garage. Trees that offered a little shade, but were only half-grown. An old Hyundai was sitting in the driveway, two flat tires. Nobody had driven it anywhere lately. The scent of grilled meat, from where? Laundry on a drying rack in the front yard. Who would be at home this time of day? The domestic workers, without a doubt. Who would be inside these walls this time of day? Everyone around here had jobs. And was Japie at home? Or Janie? What had he even looked like? Moses stopped and concentrated. Tall. Thin. Arrogant. Hairline already receding. Non-stop talker. Moses had immediately taken a disliking to him. Oh well. He would help him in any case.

A woman in a smock stood at a window. Ironing. Her back was turned to the window, as her massive arms moved slowly across the ironing board. She reached for a piece of cloth and wiped it across her face. The heat. And she was ironing as well. When she was done with the cloth, she turned around. Saw Moses. Was startled to see him just standing there and looking in the window.

He walked on without waving. Rubbed his hand over his sweaty forehead. He looked at his watch. Exactly 1:00. The plan had been to be kissing Sandi already by this point.

He approached a T-intersection. He had made it to the end of the first street. As he walked along, he became increasingly certain that his classmate did not live in one of the one-storied houses. Veering off to the right, another street continued in the exact same curve. Everything still on one level. Moses picked up his pace. Another T. The next street was straight, forking this time slightly toward the left. Running between two-storied houses now. The lots weren't all that large down this street either, the second floors extending over the two-car garages. Flowers were growing in the front yard of one of the houses on the left-hand side of the street. A small bed, every color imaginable. Moses had no idea what kind of flowers these were, but the fact that they were blooming brightly under the brutal sun reflected the amount of work that was being invested in them. He looked around. Who took care of the gardens here? Was there a crew for the entire gated community? Or did each house hire its own gardener? He had no idea how these people lived.

Moses came to a stop a few minutes later. He pivoted. There was the house. He remembered the mailbox. It was mounted on a wooden post next to the front door. The box was a small replica of a house, open on the one side. The wooden roof that extended beyond the two walls protected the opening from the rain. Moses took a few steps toward the house. Hesitated. Looked more closely. Wrong. This couldn't be it. A Kaizer Chiefs jersey was hanging in one of the upstairs windows. The Boers didn't watch soccer. Never ever.

And Japie or Janie or Danie was a typical Boer boy. He would have picked up on anything out of the ordinary. Moses shook his head. Kaizer Chiefs fan. Downright subversive. This wasn't the house.

He paused again at the next T, looking all around him. He had now covered most of the distance to the wall along the river, having walked the length of The Pines. Took a couple of steps down the next street before realizing that he had noticed something as he scanned the area. He looked back to the intersection. Lifted his eyes.

A small camera was mounted on one of the streetlamps.

Meli breathed in and out. He then inhaled the hot air one more time before turning on the lawn mower. The few blades of grass that were left for him to cut would make it hard for him to breathe for the rest of the day. But he really couldn't complain. He was a gardener by profession. A good gardener, at that.

The exhaust from the old mower puffed up a Woolworth's bag. It quickly floated up and hung for a second in the shimmering air. Meli engaged the brake without cutting off the mower, as he tried to catch the empty bag. It deftly eluded his first attempt, but he then jumped up and grabbed it.

He caught sight of a figure at the end of the street who was looking in his direction. A little scruffy, but not bad. Good posture. Head up. An Afro like some of the young people were wearing again these days. The figure gave a quick wave. Meli waved back.

Different than the two people he had seen a short while ago. At the other end of the street. He had instantly registered that the two of them were up to no good. The one in a suit, the other in a smock. Just like in one of those sitcoms that are always playing on TV. But was this his responsibility? The people here might not pick up on the situation, but then it was their own fault.

The figure had disappeared again.

"What is it, Meli?" Mrs. Viljoen. That voice. Even the question was an order. She managed to drown out the engine as well.

"Nothing, madam," he said just as loudly and clearly.

"Then you should get back to work."

"Right away, madam," he replied. He pulled his phone out of his pants pocket and looked at it. 1:05. In a little less than three hours, he would be done with work.

Thembinkosi quietly shut the door behind them.

“Everything okay with the lock?” Nozipho asked.

“Yep. Even if someone comes and unlock it, they won’t notice anything.”

The two of them stood at a window and gazed out. Established practice. To first make sure that nobody had noticed them. Then search the house. Usually, time was on their side.

A compact car drove past.

“I don’t like these clothes,” Nozipho remarked.

“But they’re helpful.”

“You really don’t think anybody saw through them?”

“Not at all.”

“I still don’t like the smock. I look like a cleaning lady.”

“That was the whole idea!”

“Uh huh... Do you remember the time we hired that white man?” Nozipho asked. “With the two of us as his servants?”

“Yeah. It was a good idea. It was just that that white didn’t fit the type.”

“How we bought him those new clothes?”

“Yes. He still managed to look like a homeless person.”

“He was a homeless person. But it was a good idea.”

“It was a fabulous idea.” Thembinkosi broke off. “But honestly, he didn’t really act like a white.”

“Why do you think that was?”

“What do you know about class differences?”

“Come on. Don’t start in on...”

“I think that was our mistake. We hired a poor white man.”

“But a rich one wouldn’t have done it.”

“Exactly. We should have analyzed the situation better. Our mistake.”

“Should we go ahead and start?”

Were there more cameras? Moses looked around. Not on this street. He retraced his steps a short ways. Nothing. A little further. Back to the T. This was the boundary between the one- and two-storied houses. Still nothing. Had he been seen before now? Maybe at the entrance? In the other direction, he saw the back of a man in overalls. Someone working in a garden, out in this heat. The man was too far away to hear him. He was just turning on the mower. Noise. The exhaust blew a plastic bag toward the street. The man brought the machine to a stop without shutting off the motor. Ran after the bag and caught it as it spun in the air. His eyes then fell on Moses. The man froze for a second, the bag in his hand. Moses waved. The man waved his empty hand in response and turned back to the garden. As he himself turned back around, Moses caught sight of the next camera. Only a few meters away. It was small, attached to yet another streetlamp. And it was pointed right at him. This made it two.

Somewhere a car started up. In second gear now, faster, the noise was drawing closer. The car was already in view, heading toward him. Moses hunched his shoulders and walked deeper into the subdivision, heading toward the wall at the river. Middle-class car now passed him, older white woman at the wheel. Keep on walking, searching. He had now made it to the last T. The street now ran right and left, parallel to the wall. The houses really did all look the same.

Systematic or by instinct? He should go to the right in order to check out the furthest back corner of the enclave. But he had a feeling that he should head in the other direction, if he wanted to find the house for which he was searching.

The lots along the wall were wider than the others he'd seen. There were lawn and gardens along the front and both sides of the houses. Who was watching the footage from the cameras? And how many people might actually be on site right now? He had already seen two, so there had to be more. He heard hammering coming from one of the houses along the wall. Across the street, a laundry basket was sitting outside the open front door. Sounds from the inside, some kind of rattling.

Moses kept walking.

There hadn't been a security shack at the entrance. Wherever the footage was being viewed, it probably wasn't being done on site here. Was anyone at all watching the footage? He had heard of fake cameras being hung up for appearance's sake. But weren't these a little too subtle for that? Much too small? Fakes were supposed to be larger and immediately noticeable.

The next intersection. The street to the left returned to the entrance, the one straight ahead followed the course of the wall. The Nahoon was much louder here. Not a large river, perhaps 20 meters across. Normally not very deep, especially now in the hottest part of the summer. A voice called out something. Beyond the wall. A fisherman maybe.

Wow. Moses stopped. He hadn't been wrong after all. Here was another mailbox that looked like a miniature house. Exactly like the other one. These were probably sold in some building supply store. He had remembered correctly.

And this was finally the house he'd been trying to find. He was completely sure this time. He remembered those funny red and green curtains. "Brought from Europe!" his classmate had exclaimed. He had probably even mentioned which country. Moses walked up to the door, quickly scanned the area around him, and pressed the doorbell. It produced a high-pitched tone that faded into a screech. The battery was pretty much gone. Moses waiting a couple of seconds before ringing the bell again. The skewed tone again. This could mean any number of things. The Boers were pretty lazy, generally speaking. The battery might have already spent several weeks on the shopping list, but kept being forgotten. Or the new battery had been bought days ago, but since nobody ever rang the bell, it just hadn't been installed. Anything was possible.

But, Moses thought, another possibility was that nobody had been living here for some time. Focus. If he couldn't get help here, where should he go?

The lounge and kitchen formed an elongated L. The large room this side of the front door took up almost half of the house's footprint. Two bedrooms and a bathroom behind that. At the very least. Maybe more than that. Somewhere the connector to the garage.

"Are you going to take care of this area?" Thembinkosi asked. "I'll take the small rooms." Nozipho nodded. He studied the furniture for a few moments. A living room suite in corduroy with a tiled coffee table. A dusty wine rack, almost empty. CD rack, gigantic TV screen. A photo of a young couple on a console table. He with a beard, she with long curls.

Both of them sort of blonde. "Are they the ones you saw?" he asked.

Nozipho leaned closer. "It was two men that I saw. Told you that. And did one of them have a beard? Psh. Hard to say. Somehow..."

"Uh huh... Somehow they all look alike."

"White people?"

"Uh huh..." Nozipho and Thembinkosi exchanged glances. Grinned. Nozipho gave Thembinkosi a quick kiss and vanished into the kitchen.

No books, Thembinkosi thought. Bad sign. Books indicated expendable income, more cash lying around, though less jewelry. But there might still be one or two small treasures. He already suspected what he would find in the closets. Above all, not much good taste.

The first door he opened was to a large bedroom. The bed had been made badly. On the nightstand, a pink clock to the one side, a small rugby trophy on the other. These didn't interest him though. He would rummage around in Madam's underthings a little later. He shut the door and turned the knob on the door across the hall. The second bedroom. Unused. That interested him.

As Thembinkosi stepped over the threshold, he caught a glimpse of a smudge on the doorframe. He bent down to examine it more closely. He wasn't completely sure, and this was a rather dark spot in the hallway... However, his first impression was that he was looking at dried blood.

Back out again? What else. Moses retraced his footsteps. What other options were there? There was no way he could find help here in the gated community. “Hello, do you possibly know how to fix a car?”

Although... he could ask the gardener. Perhaps he would know of someone or might at least let him make a phone call, if had some free minutes on his account. He was already back at the intersection from where he had caught sight of the gardener. But what if the failing doorbell really hadn't meant anything? Maybe it was just that nobody had gotten around to it yet. It might not be a priority to them. Had he really paid enough attention to verify that there were absolutely no signs that someone was living there? He hadn't been thorough enough. He should have taken a look inside the mailbox. Were the flowers in the front yard dried out? Were there any flowers at all? What if all of that didn't mean anything and Japie or Janie was about to get home? He could hear the sound of an engine not too far off. That might be him. On the parallel street. Just one more time, Moses told himself. One last try to get help there. The gardener was nowhere to be seen anyway. He turned around. Walked back quickly.

Already 1:16. What was Sandi doing? Hopefully, she was at least getting a little worried about him. Half the bottle of prosecco should have been drunk by now. And they should be... He didn't want to think about that.

Back down the street along the wall. Then left. There was the house. No flowers. The lawn was dry, but then again it was really hot. Had been for weeks. Moses rubbed his forehead and neck, wiping the sweat on his jeans. He couldn't hear the car anymore. The windows weren't all that clean. He pressed his nose against one to see inside.

The kitchen, neat. Nothing striking. The mailbox was empty, except for two ads. A building supply store and a chain drugstore. Both fairly new. Somebody had recently picked up the mail.

No Janie. No Japie. Moses turned around. So out of the subdivision after all? What should he do then? Stand out by the road and wait? There were hardly any taxis around here. It could take some time. But it would be one way that he could get to a shop. The taxi driver might be able to recommend one. Money wasn't a problem. He had several hundreds in his pocket.

Or wait until someone stopped to help him. Super idea. Between Abbotsford and Dorchester Heights, two suburbs where pretty much only whites lived. Sure, they'd be willing to stop to help a young black man.

Walking it was then. That was okay, too.

A white man appeared at the corner he was about to head toward. Sturdy, but not stout. Shorts, t-shirt. Looked like a rugby referee. Better not to cross paths with him. Moses turned in the other direction. Better to just get out of here altogether. He needed to call Sandi right way. The gate would hopefully open automatically from the inside.

Somebody was also coming from the other direction. Shit, a uniform. And another white man. A white man in a security uniform always meant trouble. White trash despair. He looked around. The referee was getting closer, his hand hidden behind his back. The thought that he should

run flashed through Moses' mind. He might have even given a little start. The referee flinched and fell back a step. He had been waiting for something like that. Run or not? He was in better shape than both of them. But where? Where could he run to escape? Did he really need to escape?

He could already make out the grin on the referee's face. Focus. The uniform was swinging a club in his hand. The referee now pulled out the hand from behind his back. Wow! What was that? A pistol? There was no way he would use that.

Both of them had slowed their pace. The referee was still grinning. Thin mustache over his upper lip. The uniform looked very, very grim. Stubby short hair, a just as stubby beard around his chin and mouth. Moses realized that the uniform wasn't actually a uniform. Plain black clothing, shirt and shorts. Both of them would reach him in about twenty meters. There wasn't much time for Moses to make a decision. Fifteen meters now, twelve, ten. Only a few steps remained between him and the two men. As if in unison, both men slowed their pace even more. He wanted to run, but he hesitated. The men came to a stop together. About five meters away from him. Maybe less.

Why do I feel so numb, Moses wondered. He hadn't done anything.

"Have you gotten lost?" The referee. What he was dangling in his hand wasn't a pistol at all. But what was it?

"You're a long ways from home, boy!" The one with the club.

"What should we do with you now?" The referee.

"Should we teach him a lesson?" The other man swung the club into the palm of his other hand.

"Whoa, whoa..." Moses exclaimed, raising both hands in front of his chest as a signal that he meant no harm. "I just wanted to visit a friend. Where's the problem?"

"Hm, a friend." The club was now being tapped rhythmically in the other hand. Tacktack, tacktack, tacktack.

"There's no way somebody like you has a friend in here." The referee.

"Do you think he's the right one?" The club now gripped in both hands.

Moses had seen the thing the referee was holding in his hand only once before. It was a taser. Operated by electrical shocks. Or something like that. Could knock you out. Or even kill you.

"Okay," he said. "You win. What should I do?" He kept his hands up where they could see them.

"Look at that," the referee remarked. "The boy knows how to behave himself."

"Yes, as long as he sees there's no way out!" The one with the club. "Now get on your knees, hands behind your head."

"Okay," Moses said. "Right away." He tensed his muscles for a moment. Braced one foot a few centimeters behind the other. Took a deep breath. And took off. Toward the wall, past one of the houses, and back in the direction from which he had come. "Hey!" he heard behind him. Followed by the sound of the two men also beginning to run.

For one very brief moment, it occurred to him that he had just made a major mistake. But what other choice had he had? Bastards. Moses kept running.