

LAUREN BEUKES



"A writer to watch – for
now and the future!"

Locus

ZOO CITY

"Down these mean streets a woman with a magic animal must go. You'll want to go there too. Lauren Beukes is Jeff Noon crossed with Raymond Chandler. What's real about the spirit of a place, in this case South Africa, previously invisible, is externalised, via magic, into features, events. Kind of genius that that's the plot too. I loved it, it's going to be huge."

- *Paul Cornell*

"In *Zoo City* we have an unfamiliar land full of familiars, a broken Johannesburg of the near-future peopled with damaged wonders. If our words are bullets, Lauren Beukes is a marksman in a world of drunken machine-gunners, firing her ideas and images into us with a sly and deadly accuracy, wasting nothing, never missing. I'll follow her career as long as she's willing to write and I'm able to read."

- *Bill Willingham*, creator of *Fables*

"While *Zoo City* still has an edge, it's more lyrical than *Moxyland*. And it has magic. Urban fantasy, for one of the most interesting definitions of the term... *Moxyland* was excellent. *Zoo City* is better."

- *Gill Polack*

"A pacey, hard-edged affair that is hard to put down once it's sunk its claws into you. *Zoo City*'s a damn novel with many a silver lining. This is intelligent and witty urban writing for the 21st century: wild and entertaining, yet richly nuanced."

- *Women 24*

By the same author

Moxyland

Zoo City



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ROBOT**

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Pale crocodile waiting

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PART ONE.

In Zoo City, it's impolite to ask.

Morning light the sulphur colour of the mine dumps seeps across Johannesburg's skyline and sears through my window. My own personal bat signal. Or a reminder that I really need to get curtains.

Shielding my eyes – morning has broken and there's no picking up the pieces – I yank back the sheet and peel out of bed. Benoît doesn't so much as stir, with only his calloused feet sticking out from under the duvet like knots of driftwood. Feet like that, they tell a story. They say he walked all the way from Kinshasa with his Mongoose strapped to his chest.

The Mongoose in question is curled up like a furry comma on my laptop, the glow of the LED throbbing under his nose. Like he doesn't know that my computer is out of bounds. Let's just say I'm precious about my work. Let's just say it's not entirely legal.

I take hold of the laptop on either side and gently tilt it over the edge of my desk. At thirty degrees, the Mongoose starts sliding down the front of the laptop. He wakes with a start, tiki tavi claws scrabbling for purchase. As he starts to fall, he contorts in the air and manages to land feet first. Hunching his stripy shoulders, he hisses at me, teeth bared. I hiss back. The Mongoose realises he has urgent flea bites to attend to.

Leaving the Mongoose to scrolf at its flank, I duck under one of the loops of rope hanging from the ceiling, the closest I can get to providing authentic Amazon jungle vines, and pad over the rotten linoleum to the cupboard. Calling it a cupboard is a tad optimistic, like calling this dank room with its precariously canted floor and intermittent plumbing an apartment is optimistic. The cupboard is not much more than an open box with a piece of fabric pinned across it to keep the dust off my clothes – and Sloth, of course. As I pull back the gaudy sunflower print, Sloth blinks up at me sleepily from his roost, like a misshapen fur coat between the wire hangers. He's not good at mornings.

There's a mossy reek that clings to his fur and his claws, but it's earthy and clean compared to the choke of stewing garbage and black mould floating up the stairwell. Elysium Heights was condemned years ago.

I reach past him to pull out a vintage navy dress with a white collar, match it up with jeans and slops, and finish off with a lime green scarf over the little dreadlock twists that conveniently hide the mangled wreckage of my left ear – let's call it Grace Kelly does Sailor Moon. This is not so much a comment on my style as a comment on my budget. I was always more of an outrageously expensive indie boutique kinda girl. But that was FL. Former Life.

"Come on, buddy," I say to Sloth. "Don't want to keep the clients waiting." Sloth gives a sharp sneeze of disapproval and extends his long downy arms. He clambers onto my back, fussing and shifting before he finally settles. I used to get impatient. But this has become an old routine for the pair of us.

It's because I haven't had my caffeine fix yet that it takes a little while for the repetitive skritchng sound to penetrate – the Mongoose is pawing at the front door with a single-minded devotion.

I oblige, shunting back the double deadbolt and clicking open the padlock which is engraved with magic, supposedly designed to keep out those with a shavi for slipping through locked doors. At the first crack, the Mongoose nudges out between my ankles and trots down the passage towards the communal litter tray. It's easy to find. It's the smelliest place in the building.

"You should really get a cat-flap." Benoît is awake at last, propped up on one elbow, squinting at me from under the shade of his fingers, because the glare bouncing off Ponte Tower has shifted across to his side of the bed.

"Why?" I say, propping the door open with my foot for the Mongoose's imminent return. "You

moving in?"

"Is that an invitation?"

"Don't get comfortable is all I'm saying."

"Ah, but *is* that all you're saying?"

"And don't get smart either."

"Don't worry, *cherie na ngayi*. Your bed is far too lumpy to get comfortable." Benoît stretches lazily, revealing the mapwork of scars over his shoulders, the plasticky burnt skin that runs down his throat and his chest. He only ever calls me "my love" in Lingala, which makes it easier to disregard. "You making breakfast?"

"Deliveries," I shrug.

"Anything interesting today?" He loves hearing about the things people lose.

"Set of keys. The widow ring."

"Ah, yes. The crazy lady."

"Mrs Luditsky."

"That's right," Benoît says, and repeats himself: "Crazy lady."

"Hustle, my friend. I have to get going."

Benoît pulls a face. "It's so early."

"I'm not kidding."

"All right, all right." He uncocoons himself from the bed, plucks his jeans from the floor and yanks on an old protest t-shirt inherited from Central Methodist's clothing drive.

I fish Mrs Luditsky's ring out of the plastic cup of Jik it's been soaking in overnight to get rid of the clinging *eau de drain*, and rinse it under a sputtering tap. Platinum with a constellation of sapphires and a narrow grey band running through the centre, only slightly scratched. Even with Sloth's help, it took three hours to find the damn thing.

As soon as I touch it, I feel the tug – the connection running away from me like a thread, stronger when I focus on it. Sloth tightens his grip on my shoulder, his claws digging into my collarbone.

"Easy, tiger," I wince. Maybe it would have been easier to have a tiger. As if any of us gets a choice.

Benoît is already dressed, the Mongoose looping impatient figure eights around his ankles.

"See you later, then?" he says, as I shoo him out the door.

"Maybe." I smile in spite of myself. But when he moves to kiss me, Sloth bats him away with a proprietary arm.

"I don't know who is worse," Benoît complains, ducking. "You, or that monkey."

"Definitely me," I say, locking the door behind him.

The blackened walls of Elysium Heights' stairwell still carry a whiff of the Undertow, like polyester burning in a microwave. The stairway is mummified in yellow police tape and a charm against evidence-tampering, as if the cops are ever going to come back and investigate. A dead zoo in Zoo City is low priority even on a good day. Most of the residents have been forced to use the fire-escape to bypass this floor. But there are faster ways to the ground. I have a talent not just for finding lost things, but shortcuts too.

I duck into number 615, abandoned ever since the fire tore through here, and scramble down through the hole in the floor that drops into 526, which has been gutted by scrap rats who ripped out the floorboards, the pipes, the fittings – anything that could be sold for a hit.

Speaking of which, there is a junkie passed out in the doorway, some dirty furry thing nested against his chest, breathing fast and shallow. My slops crunch on the brittle glitter of a broken lightbulb as I step over him. In my day we smoked crack, or mandrax if you were really trashy. I cross over the walkway that connects to Aurum Place and a functional staircase. Or not so functional. The moment the swing open the double doors to the stairwell and utter darkness, it becomes obvious where the junkie

got the bulb.

"Well, isn't this romantic?"

Sloth grunts in response.

"Yeah, you say that now, but remember, I'm taking you with me if I fall," I say, stepping into the darkness.

Sloth drives me like a Zinzi motorbike, his claws clenching, left, right, down, down, down for two storeys to where the bulbs are still intact. It won't be long until they too find a new life as *tik* pipes, but isn't that the way of the slums? Even the stuff that's nailed down gets repurposed.

After the claustrophobia of the stairwell, it's a relief to hit the street. It's still relatively quiet this early in the morning. A municipal street-cleaning truck chugs up ahead, blasting the tarmac with a sheet of water to wash away the transgressions of the night. One of the transgressions in question dances back to avoid being sprayed, nearly stepping on the scruffy Sparrow hopping around between her high heels.

Seeing me, she pulls her denim jacket closed over her naked breasts, too quickly for me to figure out if they're hormone-induced or magic. As we pass, I can feel the filmy cling of a dozen strands of lost things from the boygirl, like brushing against the tendrils of an anemone. I try not to look. But I pick up blurred impressions anyway, like an out-of-focus photograph. I get snatches of a gold cigarette case, or maybe it's a business-card holder, a mostly empty plastic *bankie* of brown powder and a pair of sequined red stilettos – real showgirl shoes, like Dorothy got back from Oz all grown up and turned burlesque stripper. Sloth tenses up automatically. I pat his arm.

"None of our business, buddy."

He's too sensitive. The problem with my particular gift, curse, call it what you like, is that everybody's lost *something*. Stepping out in public is like walking into a tangle of cat's cradles, like someone dished out balls of string at the lunatic asylum and instructed the inmates to tie everything to everything else. On some people, the lost strings are cobwebs, inconsequential wisps that might blow away at any moment. On others, it's like they're dragging steel cables. Finding something is all about figuring out which string to tug on.

Some lost things can't be found. Like youth, say. Or innocence. Or, sorry Mrs Luditsky, property values once the slums start encroaching. Rings, on the other hand, that's easy stuff. Also: lost keys, love letters, beloved toys, misplaced photographs and missing wills. I even found a lost room once. But I like to stick to the easy stuff, the little things. After all, the last thing of any consequence I found was a nasty drug habit. And look how that turned out.

I pause to buy a nutritious breakfast, aka a *skyf* from a Zimbabwean vendor rigging up the scaffolding of a pavement stall. While he lays out his crate of suckers and snacks and single smokes, his wife unpacks a trove of cheap clothing and disposable electronics from two large *amaShangaan*, the red-and-blue-checked bags that are ubiquitous round here. It's like they hand them out with the application for refugee status. Here's your temporary ID, here's your asylum papers, and here, don't forget your complimentary crappy woven plastic suitcase.

Sloth clicks in my ear as I light up my Remington Gold, half the price of a Stuyvesant. This city's all about the cheap knock-off.

"Oh come on. One. One cigarette. It's not like I'm going to live long enough to get emphysema." Or that emphysema isn't an attractive alternative to being sucked down by the Undertow.

Sloth doesn't respond, but I can feel his irritation in the way he shifts his weight, thumping against my back. In retaliation, I blow the smoke out the side of my mouth into his disapproving furry face. He sneezes violently.

The traffic is starting to pick up, taxis hurtling through the streets with the first consignments of commuters. I take the opportunity to do a little advertising, sticking flyers under the wipers of the

parked cars already lining the street outside *The Daily Truth's* offices. You have to get up pretty early in the morning to invent the news.

I've got ads up in a couple of places. The local library. The supermarket, jammed between advertisements for chars with excellent references and second-hand lawnmowers. Pasted up in Hillbrow among the wallpaper of flyers advertising miracle Aids cures, cheap abortions and prophets.

**LOST A SMALL ITEM OF PERSONAL VALUE?
I CAN HELP YOU FIND IT FOR A REASONABLE FEE.
NO DRUGS. NO WEAPONS. NO MISSING PERSONS.**

I've resisted going mass market and posting it online. This way it's kismet, like the ads find the people they're supposed to. Like Mrs Luditsky, who summoned me to her Killarney apartment Saturday morning.

To the old lady's credit, she didn't flinch when she saw Sloth draped across my shoulders.

"You can only be the girl from the ad. Well, come in. Have a cup of tea." She pressed a cup of greasy-looking Earl Grey into my hands without waiting for a response and bustled away through her dingy hallway to an equally dingy lounge.

The apartment had been Art Deco in a former lifetime, but it had been subjected to one ill-conceived refurbishment too many. But then, so had Mrs Luditsky. Her skin had the transparent shine of glycerine soap, and her eyes bulged ever so slightly, possibly from the effort of trying to emote when every associated muscle had been pumped full of botulinum or lasered into submission. Her thinning orange hair was gelled into a hard pompadour, like the crust on *crème brûlée*.

The tea tasted like stale horse piss drained through a homeless guy's sock, but I drank it anyway, if only because Sloth hissed at me when I tried to turf it surreptitiously into the exotic plastic orchid next to the couch.

Mrs Luditsky launched straight in. "It's my ring. There was an armed robbery at the mall yesterday and—"

I cut in: "If your ring was stolen, that's out of my jurisdiction. It's a whole different genre of magic."

"If you would be so kind as to let me finish?" the old lady snapped. "I hid in the bathroom and took all my jewellery off because I know how *you people* are – criminals, that is," she added hurriedly, "No offence to the animalled."

"Of course not," I replied. The truth is we're all criminals. Murderers, rapists, junkies. Scum of the earth. In China they execute zoos on principle. Because nothing says guilty like a spirit critter at your side.

"And what happened after you took it off?"

"Well, that's the problem. I couldn't get it off. I've worn it for eight years. Ever since the Bastard died."

"Your husband?"

"The ring is made with his ashes, you know. They compress and fuse them into the platinum in this micro-thin band. It's absolutely irreplaceable. Anyway, I know what happens when they can't get your rings off. When my neighbour's cousin was mugged, they chopped off her finger with a bloody great *panga*."

I could see exactly where this was going. "So you used soap?"

"And it slipped right off, into the sink and down the drain."

"Down the drain," I repeated.

"Didn't I just say that?"

"May I?" I said, and reached for Mrs Luditsky's hand. It was a pretty hand, maybe a little chubby,

but the wrinkles and the powdery texture betrayed all the work on her face. Clearly botox doesn't work on hands, or maybe it's too expensive. "This finger?"

"Yes, dear. The ring finger. That's where people normally wear their rings."

I closed my eyes and squeezed the pad of the woman's finger, maybe a little too hard. And caught a flash of the ring, a blurred silver-coloured halo, somewhere dark and wet and industrial. I didn't look too hard to figure out the exact location. That level of focus tends to bring on a migraine, the same way heavy traffic does. I snagged the thread that unspooled away from the woman and ran deep into the city, deep under the city.

I opened my eyes to find Mrs Luditsky studying me intently, as if she was trying to peer into my skull to see the gears at work. Behind her bouffant hair, a display case of china figurines stared down. Cute shepherdesses and angels and playful kittens and a chorus line of flamenco dancers.

"It's in the drains," I said, flatly.

"I thought we'd already established that."

"I hate the drains." Call it the contempt of familiarity. You'd be surprised how many lost things migrate to the drains.

"Well pardon me, Little Miss Hygiene," Mrs Luditsky snapped, although the impact was diminished by her inability to twitch a facial muscle. "Do you want the job or not?"

Of course I did. Which is how I got a look-in to Mrs Luditsky's purse for a R500 deposit. Another R500 to be paid on delivery. And how I found myself shin-deep in shit in the stormwater drains beneath Killarney Mall. Not actual shit, at least, because the sewage runs through a different system, but years of musty rainwater and trash and rot and dead rats and used condoms make up their own signature fragrance.

I swear I can still detect a hint of it underneath the bleach. Was it worth it for R1000? Not even close. But the problem with being *mashavi* is that it's not so much a job as a vocation. You don't get to choose the ghosts that attach themselves to you. Or the things they bring with them.

I drop off a set of keys at the Talk-Talk phone shop, or rather the small flat above the shuttered store. The owner is Cameroonian and so grateful to be able to open up shop this morning that he promises me a discount on airtime as a bonus. A toddler dressed in a pink fluffy bear suit peeks out between his legs and reaches for them with pudgy grasping fingers. The same one, I'm guessing, who was chewing on the keys in her pram before gleefully tossing them into the rush-hour traffic. That's worth fifty bucks. And it's more in line with my usual hustle. In my experience, the Mrs Luditskys of the world are few and far between.

I walk up on Empire through Parktown past the old Johannesburg College of Education, attracting a few aggressive hoots from passing cars. I give them the finger. Not my fault if they're so cloistered in suburbia that they don't get to see zoos. At least Killarney isn't a gated community. Yet.

I'm still a couple of kays from Mrs Luditsky's block, just turning off Oxford and away from the heavy traffic, which is giving me a headache, the kind that burrows in behind your temples like a bra termite, when my connection suddenly, horribly, goes slack.

Sloth squeaks in dismay and grips my arms so hard his long claws draw little beads of blood. "I know, buddy, I know," I say and start running. I clamp my fist around the cold circle of metal in my pocket as if I could jump-start the connection. There is the faintest of pulses, but the thread is unravelling.

We've never lost a thread. Even when a lost thing is out of reach forever, like when that wannabe-novelist guy's manuscript blew out across Emmarentia Dam, I could still feel the taut lines of connection between him and the disintegrating pages. This feels more like a dead umbilical cord withering away.

There's an ambulance and a police van outside Mrs Luditsky's block, strobing the dusty beige of the

wall with flicks of red and blue. Sloth whimpers.

"It's okay," I say, out of breath, even though I'm pretty damn sure it's anything but, falling in alongside the small cluster of rubber-necking pedestrians. I guess I'm shaking, because someone takes my elbow.

"You okay, honey?"

I'm obviously not remotely okay, because somehow I missed these two in the crowd – a gangly angel with huge dark wings and a dapper man with a Maltese Poodle dyed a ludicrous orange to match the scarf at his neck. It's the man who has attached himself to me. He's wearing expensive-looking glasses and a suit as sharp as the razored edge of his *chiskop* quiff. The Dog gives me a dull look from the end of its leash and thumps its tail half-heartedly. Say what you like about Sloths, but at least I didn't end up with a motorised toilet-brush. Or a Vulture, judging by the hideous bald head that bobbles up and down behind the woman's shoulder, digging under its wing.

The woman falls into the vaguely ageless and androgynous category, somewhere between 32 and 50 with a chemotherapy haircut, wisps of dark hair clinging to her scalp, and thin overplucked eyebrows. Or maybe she just tries to make herself look ugly. She's wearing riding boots over slim grey pants and a white shirt with the sleeves rolled up. It's accented by leather straps crossing over her chest from the harness that supports the weight of the hulking Bird on her back.

"You know what's going on?" I say to the Dog guy.

"There's been a *mur-der*," the man stage-whispers the word behind his hand. "Old lady on the second floor. Terrible business. Although I hear she's *terribly* well preserved."

"Have they said anything?"

"Not yet," the woman says, her voice, unexpectedly, the malted alto of jazz singers. Her accent is Eastern European, Russian maybe, or Serbian. At the sound of her voice, the Bird stops grooming and a long neck with a wattle like a deflated testicle twists over the woman's shoulder. It drapes its wrinkled head over her chest, the long, sharp spear of its beak angled down towards her hip. Not a Vulture then. She lays one hand tenderly on the Marabou Stork's mottled head, the way you might soothe a child or a lover.

"Then how do you know it's murder?"

The Maltese smirks. "You know how most people's *mashavi* and their animals don't line up?" he says. "Well, in Amira's case, they do. She's attracted to carrion. Mainly murder scenes, although she does like a good traffic pile up. Isn't that right, sweetie?"

The Marabou smiles in acknowledgement, if you can call the faint twitch of her mouth a smile.

The paramedics emerge from the building with a stretcher carrying a sealed grey plastic body bag. They hoist it into the ambulance. "Excuse me," I say and push through the crowd. The paramedic shuts the double doors behind the stretcher, signalling the driver to kill the lights with a wave of his hand. The dead don't need to beat the traffic. But I have to ask anyway.

"That Mrs Luditsky in there?"

"You a relative?" The paramedic looks disgruntled. "'Cos unless you are, it's none of your business, zoo girl."

"I'm an employee."

"Tough breaks, then. You should probably stick around. The cops are gonna want to ask you some questions."

"Can you tell me what happened?"

"Let's just say she didn't pass in her sleep, sweetheart."

The ambulance gives one strangled whoop and pulls out onto the road, taking Mrs Luditsky with it. I grip the ring in my pocket, hard enough to embed the imprint of the sapphires into my palm. Sloth nuzzles into my neck, hiding his face. I wish I could reassure him.

"Ugly business," the Maltese tuts, sympathetically. "Like it's any of yours."

I'm suddenly furious. "You with the cops?"

"God, no!" He laughs. "Unfortunately for this one," he says, nodding at the Marabou, "there's no real money in ambulance chasing."

"We're sorry for your loss," the Marabou says.

"Don't be," I say. "I only met her the one time."

"What was it that you were doing for the old lady anyway? If I may ask? Secretarial? Grocery runs? Nursing?"

"I was finding something for her."

"Did you get it?"

"Always do."

"But sweetie, what a *marvellous* coincidence! Oh, I don't mean marvellous, like oh, how marvellous your employer just died. That's ghastly, don't get me wrong. But the thing is, you see—"

"We're also looking for something," the Marabou cuts in.

"Precisely. Thank you," the Maltese says. "And, if that's, you know, your *talent*? I'm guessing that's your talent? Then maybe you could help."

"What sort of something?"

"Well, I say *something*, but really, I mean *someone*."

"Sorry. Not interested."

"But you haven't even heard the details."

"I don't need to. I don't do missing persons."

"It's worth a lot to us." The bird on Marabou's back flexes its wings, showing off the white flèche marking the dark feathers. I note that they're clipped, and that its legs are mangled, twisted stubs. No wonder she has to carry it. "More than any of your other jobs would have paid."

"Come on, sweetie. Your client just turfed it. Forgive me being so frank. What else are you going to do?"

"I don't know who you are—"

"An oversight. I'm sorry. Here." The Marabou removes a starched business card from her breast pocket and proffers it between scissored fingers. Her fingernails are immaculately manicured. The card is blind embossed, white on white in a stark sans-serif font:

Marabou & Maltese Procurements

"And procurements means what exactly?"

"Whatever you want it to, Ms December," the Marabou says.

Sloth grumbles in the back of his throat, as if I need to be told how dodgy this just turned. I reach out for their lost things, hoping to get anything on them, because they obviously have something on me.

The Maltese is blank. Some rare people are. They're either pathologically meticulous or they don't care about anything. But it still creeps me out. The last person I encountered with no lost things at all was the cleaning lady at Elysium. She threw herself down an open elevator shaft.

My impressions of the Marabou's lost things are weirdly vivid. It must be the adrenaline sharpening my focus – all that hormone soup in your brain messes with *mashavi* big time. I've never been able to see things this clearly. It's strange, like someone switched my vaselineslathered soft-focus perspective for a high-definition paparazzi zoom-lens.

I can make out the things tethered to her in crisp detail: a pair of tan leather driving gloves, soft and

weathered by time. One of them is missing a button that would fasten it at the wrist. A tatty book, pages missing, the remainder swollen with damp, the cover half ripped off. I can make out sepia branches, a scrap of title, *The Tree That*-. And a gun. Dark and stubby, with retro curves, like a bad prop from a '70s sci-fi show. The image is so precise I can make out the lettering on the side: *Vektor*.

Oblivious to me discreetly riffling through their lost things, the Maltese presses me, grinning. His painted Dog grins too, pink tongue lolling happily between its sharp little teeth. "We really need your help on this one. I'd even say we can't do it without you. And it pays very, very well."

"How can I say this? I don't like people knowing my business."

"You advertise," the Marabou says, amused.

"And I don't like your attitude."

"Oh don't mind Amira, she comes off mean, but she's just shy, really," the Maltese says.

"And I don't like small dogs. So thanks, but you know, as far as I'm concerned, you should go fuck the carcass of a goat."

The Maltese squinches up his face. "Oh, that's disgusting. I'll have to remember that one," he says.

"Hang onto that," the Marabou indicates the card. "You might change your mind."

"I won't."

But I do.

From: Livingstone Mission House [mailto: eloria@livingstone.drc]
Sent: 21 March 2011 08:11 AM
To: Undisclosed Recipients
Subject: A message in a bottle.

To whom it may concern,

My name is Eloria Bangana. I live in the DRC or Democratic Republic of Congo. I am 13 years old. When they killed my family I had a choice. I could be a prostitute or pretend to be a boy and work in the coltan mines.

Lucky, I am very small for my age. Most people think I am 9 or 10. So, I choose the mines, because I can crawl into tight spaces with my little bucket for sifting and my spade, although mostly I use my fingers. Sometimes my fingers get cracked and bleed from scratching in the dirt.

They say coltan makes cell phones. I do not know how you make cell phones from mud. Also computers and video games. All your technology runs on mud. Isn't that funny?

My cousin Felipe says he has played a video game in Kinshasa, he said you just press buttons to fight, buttons to walk or kick or punch. He said it was boring.

Felipe likes soccer more. I used to play soccer with him, but it wasn't really soccer. It's a game called 3 tin, because we only have tins to kick. The rules are similar. Maybe one day I can teach you. We don't play 3 tin anymore, because the rebels say there isn't time. We are here to work, not play. They shot my cousin Felipe in the back when he tried to run away. He died. It was very sad. We were very scared.

I get seven cents American for every kilogram of coltan. The rebels weigh it on the scales but they cheat. The lady at the mission station, Sister Mercia, says coltan is worth 100 times what they pay. She says they use us like slaves.

Sometimes it is hard to understand her because she is from America. She is helping me translate things because I speak French and my English is not so good. She is very helpful and very nice. She shows me how to use the computer. And she fixes my clothes and sometimes she gives me oranges.

Maybe you are wondering why I am emailing to you? Sister Mercia says we need to wake up the world about what is happening here. She says to tell you, don't worry, we are not asking for money. We are asking for help.

The orphanage where Sister Mercia works and I live now that the Vainglory Ministries rescued me, we have a problem. The rebels have cut off our phones and all our communication. We have one cell phone that we hide from them and it has WAP so we can send email, if you go stand at the top of the hill when the rebels aren't watching.

It is like a message in a bottle. We send it floating into the ocean and hope that someone finds it.

But this is not our real problem. The man who runs the orphanage, Father Quixote, has been kidnapped by the rebels and they want us to pay \$200,000 for him to come back safe to us.

Father Quixote is very brave, but he is also very clever. He has locked all the orphanage's money away in his bank account in America. The rebels cannot get to it, but we can't either using just a cell phone with WAP.

We have the password and the authorisation (Sister Mercia says you will know what this means) which means a Good Samaritan could help us.

We need money to feed the other children here (there are many babies as well as little children, some of us wounded and sick) and to pay Father Quixote's ransom.

Please, can you help us? If you can access Father Quixote's bank account, you can wire transfer some of the money to us. Sister Mercia says we do not expect you to do this for nothing. She says we can pay you a fee of \$80,000 for taking the risk to help us. She asks you to email her at directly at dogood@livinstone.drc.

Sister Mercia says we must pray for this message to find its way to someone who is good and kind and strong. I pray this is you.

Yours truly,

Eloria Bangana

There are two things in the interrogation room with me and Inspector Tshabalala. The one is Mrs Luditsky's ring. The other is twelve and a half minutes of silence. I've been counting the seconds. One alligator. Two alligator. 751 alligator.

She's forgetting I've done jail-time. 766 alligator. That if you're smart, prison is just a waiting game. I can wait when I have to. I can wait like nobody's business. 774 alligator. Sloth is the one who gets fidgety. He huffs in my ear and shifts his butt around. 800 alligator.

It's supposed to make me nervous. Nervousness hates a vacuum. 826 alligator. Nervousness will blurt right out with something, anything, to kill the silence. 839 alligator. Unless nervousness is kept busy doing something more useful. Like counting. 842 alligator.

The inspector's face is perfectly, studiedly neutral, like a 3-D rendering of a face waiting for an animator to pull the strings. 860 alligator. Watching her watch me gives me the opportunity to study her. She has a round face with cheeks like apples and baggy pouches under her eyes that look like they're settling in for the long haul. She wears her hair in braids tied back with a clip. Not exactly practical for *ipoyisa*, but then she's an inspector, not a patrol grunt. There is a tiny scar where she once had a nose piercing. 884 alligator. Maybe she still wears a *diamanté* stud off-duty. Maybe she has a whole secret life, a sideline in punk rock or a night-class PhD in Philosophy. 902 alligator.

Her navy suit has a food smear on the lapel. I'd venture tomato sauce. 911 alligator. Maybe blood. Maybe she beat up another suspect in another grey room just before she came in here. 922 alligator. I'd feel her out for her lost things, but cops and police stations are all equipped with magic blockers. It's regulation infrasound. Low-frequency sound waves below the range of human hearing, but which still resonate in your body, the kind that scientists use to explain experiences of haunted houses or the divine, usually brought on by something as mundane as an extraction fan or the low notes of a church organ. 932 alligator. That was before the world changed. It's a fragile state – the world as we know it. All it takes is one Afghan warlord to show up with a Penguin in a bulletproof vest, and everything science and religion *thought* they knew goes right out the window. 948 alligator.

Inspector Tshabalala leans across the table to pick up the ring, idly rolls it between her fingers. 953 alligator. She takes a breath. 961 alligator. Caves.

"Hardly seems worth it," she says. Sloth startles with a hiccup, as if he'd just been dropping off to sleep, which is not unlikely. He sleeps around sixteen hours a day.

"You think?" I'm annoyed that I have to clear my throat.

"You could probably get a good price for it. R5000 if you had the certification. But let's assume you don't, which means you're looking at what, R800 max, at a pawnshop. You that hard up for cash, Zinzi?"

She flicks the ring over her knuckles and back, the kind of cheap magic trick you might use to impress girls in high school.

"I don't know how *Mr* Luditsky would feel about that."

"Feel about what?"

"Being pawned. Bad karma. He might haunt me." I incline my head at Sloth. "And I'm haunted enough already."

"What are you talking about?"

"The ring? It's made with dead guy. Do your homework, Inspector."

She blinks, but just the once. "All right, so what were you planning to do with the ring?"

"Return it. It was a job. Like I told your guys outside her building. Repeatedly."

"Your fingerprints were all over the scene."

"I was in her apartment two days ago. She made me tea. It was undrinkable. You going to tell me how she died?"

"You tell me, Zinzi."

Sloth grazes my shoulder with his teeth, which is his way of kicking me under the table. I sort of specialise in social *faux pas*.

"All right," I say, causing Sloth to bite down on my shoulder *hard*. I shrug him away. "Let's see. She died on the scene. In her apartment. Gunshot?" I'm imagining a retro number with the words Vektor printed down the side, even though that's ridiculous. "Stabbing? Blunt object? Choked on a piece of stale biscotti?"

Inspector Tshabalala flicks the ring, backwards, forwards, palms it. Then she reaches into her bag and places a brown cardboard police docket on the desk. After a moment, she flicks it open to reveal the photographs. She fans them out, hoping to get a reaction. "You tell me," she says again.

There is a woolly sheepskin slipper lying in the passage by the front door. There is stripe of blood over the toe of the slipper that continues in an arc across the wall and a framed print of waterlilies.

There is a bloody smear against the wall, as if someone had fallen against it and scraped along, using the wall for support.

There is a black raincoat in the bathtub, a puddle of plastic and blood under the full blast of the shower. There are pink streaks down the bathroom sink.

The display cabinet is overturned. There are drag marks in blood across the floor. Someone trying to crawl away.

There is the shrapnel of china figurines everywhere. And I mean everywhere. A cherub's rosy buttock in the TV room. Little Bo Beep smiling blandly up from the kitchen tiles, decapitated, among the splintered remains of her little lamb.

Mrs Luditsky is sitting on the floor, slumped against the couch, her legs splayed out in an A. Her head lolls backwards and to one side at an uncomfortable angle. If it weren't for the wrinkles and the wounds, she could be a sloppy drunk, a teenage girl at a house party after one alcopop too many. She is wearing a voluminous silk blouse soaked in blood. It gapes in the places where it has been sliced through, revealing a beige bra and bloody gashes. She is wearing one slipper. The toenails on her other foot are painted a dark plum. Her eyes are open, as cold and glossy as Little Bo Peep's. Her *crème brûlée* hairdo is half crushed against the arm of the couch.

"I'm going to venture it wasn't stale biscotti," I say. Nor gunshot. Tshabalala exhales through her teeth and glances at the door.

"That," she says, tapping the photograph, "is not your everyday burglary. Seventy-six stab wounds? That's personal."

"Was anything taken?"

"We're checking with her housekeeper. She's still in shock. Why? You got something *else* you want to hand over?"

"The TV? The DVD player? Other jewellery?"

"You're the one with the ring in your pocket," Inspector Tshabalala smirks.

"I didn't do it," I say.

She strings out the silence. 97 alligator. 99, 128. "It's not like we don't know what you're capable of Zinzi," she says, finally. I lean back in my shitty grey plastic chair. I've heard this tune before and it's nothing but cheap muzak. She's reaching, which means she's got absolutely nothing.

"That's unconstitutional, Inspector."

"Save it for the animal rights people."

"That's the SPCA."

"What?"

"The animal rights people. Dogs, cart-horses, cats, lab rats, neutering programmes. I *know* you didn't mean to say anything that could be construed as racist, inspector. Something that could go on your permanent record."

"All I'm saying is that you've murdered before."

"The court said accessory to."

"That's not what the thing on your back says."

"He's a Sloth."

"He's *guilt*. You know how many people I've shot in eleven years on the force?"

"Do I get a gold star if I guess right?"

"Three. Non-fatal, all of them."

"Maybe you should spend more time at target practice."

"A good cop doesn't need to shoot to kill."

"Is that what you are? A good cop?"

She spreads her hands. "You see a furry companion at my side?"

"Maybe your conscience is on the fritz. There have been studies: sociopaths, psychopaths—"

"The difference between you and me?" she interrupts, the ring re-materialising in the crack of her fingers like a jack-in-the-box. "The Undertow isn't coming for *me*."

She flicks the ring into her palm and replaces it neatly, exactly in the centre of the table. I let her have her moment. One alligator. Getting the last word is all about the timing. Two alligator.

"Don't worry, Inspector," I say. "You've still got plenty of time to fuck up."

By the time I get out of Rosebank police station, the bright and shiny coating on my day has started to peel off. The cops kept the ring, confiscated the R500 in my wallet as "evidence" and made me sign a hundred billion forms.

The security cameras on Mrs Luditsky's building provided a clear record of my comings and going. Arrived Saturday 11h03, signed in, departed 11h41. Arrived again this morning, 07h36. Departed in the back of a police van in plastic cuffs after a heated argument on the street: 08h19.

But, really, it's thanks to my criminal record that they eventually had to let me go. Because they have my details on file.

Ref: Zinzi Lelethu December #26841AJHB

ID 7812290112070

Animalled 14 October 2006

(see Case SAPS900/14/10/2006 Rosebank cf: Murder of Thando December) Ability to trace lost objects.

Which means that my story checks out. Although the charming Inspector Tshabalala still insists that Benoît comes down to sign an affidavit about my whereabouts at 06h32. That's when the security cameras mysteriously fritzed out and Mrs Luditsky's neighbours reported hearing screams, right before they rolled over to go back to sleep, figuring it was probably just a violent show on TV with the volume pumped up, because maybe the old lady was finally going deaf. Tshabalala told me that much before she chucked me back out on the street.

People are such assholes.

The Daily Truth 22 March 2011

POLICE FILE

Crime Watch with Mandlakazi Mabuso

Mall Rats

Yoh, mense. Another nightmare day in dream city. Killarney Mall gets hit by armed robbers on Friday and yesterday the same gang hits Eastgate! No one got killed but believe you me, the shoppers are plenty shook-up by having okes with AKs storming around. The *tsotsis* hit a jewellery store and emptied the tills at Checkers before clearing out while mall security twiddled their thumbs. Okay, maybe understandable when witnesses report that the gangsters had a lion with them. Makes me wonder if we don't need a pass system for zoos after all!

Jump over to Linden for a happy ending (for once). A young mom was hijacked on her way back from crèche yesterday, but the baddies took pity and dropped the baby off, still in his car-seat, by the traffic lights a couple of kays away. *Ag voeitog.* Even gangsters have a heart sometimes.

But maybe not a nose. Over in Cyrildene, the cops found several million rands worth of *perlemoen* rotting in a garage. The *okie* who owned the place was bust when the neighbours complained about the reek of *vrot* sea snot that's supposed to be a potent aphrodisiac – and a protected species! Tell that to the Triads shipping them off by the rotting bucket-load to China, my china.

And over in *larney-ville* Sandton-side, it turns out Bafana boy Kabelo Nongoloza is a good striker off the field as well as on. His long-time girlfriend and debutante, Queenie Mugudamani, laid charge of assault against the young soccer star on Tuesday and is sporting a nasty bruised and swollen face a Exhibit A. Sounds like time for another nose job for Queenie. Pity you can't get a makeover for your bad taste in men!

People want to believe: you just have to feed them plausible constructs. The help-poor-widow-of-defunctgovernment-minister-get-\$25-million-out-of-the-corruptcountry is so stale and overused that even my mother wouldn't fall for it. And I know from personal experience that my mother would fall for a lot. I brush the dusting of Mongoose fur and flea eggs off my laptop, and flick open the screen to see if the phish have been biting.

I've become a master builder in the current affairs sympathy scam. A broken levee and an old lady with a flooded mansion, desperate to sell her priceless antiques cheap-cheap. A Chechnyan refugee fleeing the latest Russian pogroms with her family's diamonds in tow. A Somali pirate who has found Jesus and wants to trade in his rocket launcher and ransom millions for absolution.

It's all topical. All rooted in the hard realities of the world. Ironic that Former Life I never watched the news. But then, lifestyle journalists don't have to. And normal people don't have to pay off their drug debts by writing scam letters for syndicates. Or hide their sideline from their lover, who would definitely not approve.

There are 2,581 replies waiting. Not a bad hit rate out of the 49,812 that I sent out on Monday, not including the tens of thousands that bounced off spam filters. There are 1,906 "out of office" replies, which at least marks the email addresses as active, 14 irritated missives that range from "fuck you, scamefucks" to "pull the other one". Add 292 kanji variations, 137 in French, 102 in German, 64 in Arabic, 48 in Spanish and 12 in Urdu, all of which I'll plug into my translation software later. This leaves six potentials, two responding with cautious interest and the rest with abject confusion. I forward them all on to Vuyo, who is my catcherman. If people would just read the damn email properly, they would have responded to him directly.

And then there's an anomaly that chokes my auto-filter. Two stark sentences that read as either nonsense or poetry, or both.

When you eat, you are eating things from planes. The plastic forks, they leave a mark on you.

There is no link. No return address. No point to the message at all. It makes me nervous.

There is also an email from the dentist, a friendly reminder that it's time for my six-month check-up please contact Ms Pillay to make an appointment. I haven't been to a dentist since I went to jail three and a half years ago. This is code for "contact me immediately", which is worrying because I'm not due to report in until next week. I log in to Skype chat where Vuyo is already online. Probably talking to "clients" in other windows.

>>Vuyo: Yes?

He answers right away, curt as always. Vuyo is not his real name, of course. It's probably one of several not-hisreal-names that he uses in the course of business.

I like to think of him hanging out in a huge sprawling Internet café adjoining a raucous street market in Accra or Lagos, kinda like a 419 sweatshop, but the truth is he's probably in a dingy apartment like this one, maybe even right next door. Flying solo, because it's all carefully decentralised.

>>>Kahlo999: Hey, hello. How are you? Got a very strange msg. No return address. About forks. I'll fwd it.

>>Vuyo: No! U dont know what it is girl. Might b a virus. Might b bad muti.

>>Kahlo999: Or a msg about cutlery.

>>Vuyo: U dont know. Could b rival syndicate. Police. Click here.

>>Kahlo999: What am I downloading? It's just, you know, I have very particular tastes in porn.

>>Vuyo: Proprietary firewall 4 viruses spyware malware muti. And delete that thing.

>>Kahlo999: So what's with the dental appointment, boss guy? I haven't been flossing enough?

>>Vuyo: I need u 4 an interview. 2pm. Rand Club. Frances format. Clients want to meet her.

I turn cold. Frances is a refugee in a camp in Côte d'Ivoire. Twenty-three years old. Suitably flirtatious if the *moegoe* on the other end of the line is a man, a good chaste Christian girl if it's a woman. More or less. Most characters are designed to be slightly flexible depending on the operator, although Frances is fairly one-dimensional. After the rebels attacked, she fled to safety, got stuck in the refugee camp, and now she can't access her father's fortune. Bog standard format. That is to say, not one of mine.

>>Kahlo999: Sorry. Not in my contract.

>>Vuyo: Not neg.

>>Kahlo999: Let's talk remuneration.

>>Vuyo: Will deduct it from ur total. Dont worry, Im keeping track.

>>Kahlo999: It would be nice if I could keep track too. Not that I don't trust you.

>>Vuyo: U forget who u dealing with girl.

>>Kahlo999: My own personal knacker. The guys who bought the lame horse of my drug debt for cheap-cheap to turn it into glue.

>>Vuyo: Lame horse? Ur horse is expensive.

>>Kahlo999: Do you know how much racehorses go for? R150,000 is cheap at the price. So, here's the thing. Where do we stand you and I? What's my lame horse ass worth?

>>Vuyo: R55,764.18.

>>Kahlo999: Profit?

>>Vuyo: Ha. No. U still owe us R94,235.82.

>>Kahlo999: That's impossible. How many moegoes have I hooked for you?

>>Vuyo: Is v. possible. U forget interest. Normally 45%, but u get employee discount. Only 34%. And it is not fish on the hook, it is the fish in the bucket that counts.

>>Kahlo999: Fuck you, Vuyo.

>>Vuyo: This deal will bring in 50 Titos. If u do well, it is worth 10% to u.

>>Kahlo999: And if I don't?

>>Vuyo: Of course u will do well. U R practically a pro. Ur dealer told us about all the stories u came with, crying about ur mama with cancer + ur dead granny + being mugged just when u were coming to pay for ur coke. This will b easy for u.

>>Kahlo999: I mean, if I don't do it at all.

>>Vuyo: I will have to add a penalty to ur total. 20% + usual interest. So that is ... let me work it out.

>>Kahlo999: I got it, thanks.

>>Vuyo: 2pm at the Rand Club. Dress nice. But not 2nice.

>>Kahlo999: Refugee chic.

>>Vuyo: Good girl. BTW ur new format – the coltan – its doing well. Head office likes it.

>>Kahlo999: What can I say? I'm all about the job satisfaction.

>>>Vuyo: Cheer up girl. Greed is a bad thing. They deserve it.

Part of me thinks I do too.

I sign off and delete the forks message, but not before I've copied and pasted it into a Word doc. And I leave the install icon on the firewall waiting patiently in its folder, un-installed. I know how the Company works. Who knows what else their firewall will do?

The Rand Club is a relic of Johannesburg's Wild West days, when it was frequented by Cecil John Rhodes and other colonial slumlords who would sit around divvying up diamond fields and deciding on the fate of empires. A hangout for power people rather than two-bit crooks like Vuyo, who is waiting for me at the curved stretch of bar that folds itself around the room. I assume it's Vuyo because he's the best-dressed guy in here, in a suit and pointy shoes like shiny leather sharks.

The patrons pushing the boundaries of their liquid lunch-hour have the same aura of clingy colonial nostalgia as the venue, with its chandeliers and gilded railings, caricatures of famous members, mounted buck-heads and faded oil paintings of fox hunts. Vuyo, by comparison, has the air of the fox that's escaped the painting and doublebacked to raid the kitchen. I'd always pictured him as a skinny weasel of a guy with bad posture from hunching over his computer all day, but he's well-built, with swimmer's shoulders, broad cheekbones, a neat goatee and an easy smile. Generically handsome with a ruby stud in his ear that hints oh-so-tastefully at danger. All the better to scam the pants off you.

I extend my hand and he clasps it in both of his, as if we are old friends instead of only online acquaintances. "Mr Bacci, I can only imagine?" I say.

"Frances. It is so good to see you," he replies. I shouldn't be surprised that he speaks better than he types. Or that he's South African. Why should the West Africans and the Russians have all the fun of fleecing rich foreigners?

"Mr and Mrs Barber are waiting for us upstairs. They're excited to meet you at last," he says smoothly, as if the podgy bankers round the other side of the undulating bar might be listening in. But as he escorts me up the grand staircase, he hisses under his breath, "Less attitude, girl. You are a refugee, not a prostitute."

"Mr Bacci! Does that mean you don't like my dress?" The white shift is the plainest thing in my wardrobe, but I've touched it up with clunky beads and a *shweshwe* headwrap, with the perfect refugee touch, a red-, blue- and white-checked rattan carrier bulging with the weight of an exceptionally grumpy Sloth.

"It means, be soft," warns Vuyo, aka Mr Ezekiel Bacci, financial director of the Bank of Accra.

"Can you qualify that? Are we talking demure African princess soft, proud but humble and desperate to reclaim her throne? Or broken Janjaweed-gang-rape survivor soft?"

"It means none of your jokes. Keep that tongue tamed."

"You realise you employed me based on my writing skills, not my acting ability?"

"Just do what I tell you. Don't open your mouth unless I ask you something specifically. You read the emails?"

"Yes." Poor bastards.

We step into the grand library with shelves and shelves of books that look like they've never been cracked open. A couple the wrong side of middle age are waiting anxiously. Mrs Barber is sitting with a magazine on her lap, but I'm guessing she hasn't read a word. It's open to a double-page spread advertising a three yearold conference on the economics of environmental reform. Mr Barber is standing facing away from us, fiddling with the standing chessboard.

"You know, honey, I think these are ivory," he says, holding out a white bishop to Mrs Barber, his

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