

Lots and Lots of Sugar

A Memoir of South Africa

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A Smashwords Edition

Author's Note

I dedicate this book to my beloved husband, Weldon Cooke, who has always believed in me and who gave me the encouragement I needed to take on this endeavor.

I dedicate it also to my sons, Arthur, Dale and Phillip who were born in Zambia, Central Africa, lived with me in the shadow of Table Mountain in Cape Town on the very Southernmost tip of that Continent and who share with me the memories of that beautiful, intriguing land.

Lastly, I wish to mention the unwavering support of the Executive Editor of Elderberry Press, David St. John and to thank him for his part in making the experience of writing and publishing this novel, a happy and most satisfactory one indeed.

The Moving Finger writes; and, having writ,

Moves on: nor all thy Piety nor Wit

Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line,

Nor all thy Tears wash out a Word of it.

Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam

Prologue

This is a tale that began over half a century ago in Southern and Central Africa — regions that have all but disappeared in terms of how they looked politically at that time.

Only the geographical aspect of these countries remain the same, from the relentless rapids of the mighty Congo river, down to the sweeping beauty of Table Mountain.

The story then spills across oceans to Italy, the most beautiful country in all of Europe and back again to a troubled region in Northern Rhodesia (Zambia), just miles south of the border of the Belgian Congo (Zaire). It was a frightening time in Central Africa, when independence had been granted to Ghana and 'promised' to the peoples of Nigeria, Tanganyika and Northern Rhodesia, but denied the Congolese. The people of the Congo who had waited as long, and suffered as much as their neighbors under repression, saw this as an unforgivable injustice that demanded revenge. The seething rage and bloodshed that resulted was astronomical and no respecter of persons.

The outcome of these struggles are not argued here for the good or for the bad, neither are any of the political ramifications dealt with in any detail. This account merely touches upon the edges of some of these events as they related to the characters in this story, in a country that was home to them—inequities and injustices notwithstanding.

Finally, the story races from the ravished land of Central Africa to the very tip of the continent and then across the oceans once more, to the Eastern coast of North America.

In this tale, readers will see a reflection of themselves as portrayed in its characters. They will travel the road to the peaks and valleys of their own lives; laugh and cry at the funniness and pain caused by events and

circumstances. Relive the rage and the joy that has resulted from their own actions. They will weep at the irreversible and smile at the bold and proud moments of things past.

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The initial characters — a small family:

The father, a handsome, strong and resolute individual with enormous drive and determination, tempered by a gentleness and a playfulness. A man with a deep sensitivity to those less fortunate and to the racial inequities in his country, and born out of personal experience, a belief that there is a way to breach the gap. A man, most of all, passionate about his family, sparing nothing in his endeavor to give them the very best and in this one quest, losing them. His name—Frederick Johannes De Villiers. They called him Fred.

The mother, a pretty woman, tremendously talented, excelling in her creative endeavors. A woman seemingly happy but secretly weighed down by painful choices. Choices of being either with her husband and torn from her children or the reverse. Trying both alternatives, she pressed on doggedly in an attempt to make either one or the other work. Courageously, she gave it all she had. Sadly, ‘all she had’ was not enough. Her name—Freda Elizabeth.

Next, there were the daughters:

The older, Rene, was staid and sober-minded, studious and serious and always in charge. Self-sufficient from a young age, she seemed to know exactly where she was going and had little patience with those who vacillated or showed signs of not having direction. Her’s was a life of scintillating goals and achievements which ended too soon.

And then there was Maria. Taking after her father in many ways, she was adventuresome and filled with impishness and witticism. She dared to try the uncharted and not always the wise. Maria, with traits of whimsicality, was the consummate dreamer who often times acted upon her fantasies in daring pursuits. She was enormously tender hearted with an extraordinarily deep capacity to love. As is often the case with those who love so much, she experienced her full share of disappointment and broken dreams.

Finally, there was Nanny Dora Makumba, poised and eloquent, ... a pivotal part of this family. She had been there to see Maria and Rene take their first steps and to hear their first incoherent utterances. She loved the girls and they adored her. With patience and care she honed their manners to perfection and fine-tuned what became the essence of the girls’ decorum and pure speech patterns. She was deeply religious and never missed an opportunity to pass on to the girls her sacred beliefs, always warning:

“Of all the sins of the spoken word, there is none worse than taking the Lord’s name in vain!”

Nanny Dora was in possession of a wisdom that seemed to come out of an old-world culture from way back in her ancestry. When Maria, ... for reasons no one could explain, ... experienced lapses into slang at times and her parents seemed at their wits’ end, Nanny Dora said calmly and quietly:

“Leave her,—let her alone. Don’t draw attention to it by fussing so! She’s an imaginative child. She’s got spirit! She’s intrigued by words ... the good and the bad. One day she’ll stop using the bad and she’ll be oh so eloquent with the good! Leave her alone.”

And of course, as it turned out, she was right. Time and again over the years, Nanny Dora came up with sage advice that was the answer to Fred and Freda’s dilemmas.

This is a story about this family, but it is mainly about Maria.

One

It was a warm African night in February 1940 and the second world war was raging. On this night, Maria was not aware of the war. In a world where the vicious fury of battle had begun to rain down upon millions, filling

their hearts with dread and despair, ... she was not aware of their fears. It was a beautiful star-studded night ... Maria was not aware of the stars.

On that night, Maria was a frail six year old girl, both bewildered and excited, standing on the train station of a remote town in Africa with her parents, her sister, Rene and their Nanny Dora Makumba. The wild pounding of her heart could hardly be drowned out by the thundering rumble of the approaching train, the screeching of the massive wheels and the deafening hiss of the steam engine as it rolled to a final stop. Then came the hurried crunching sound of footsteps on the pavement gravel as the passengers, carrying their baggage, approached the train.

And then,—the bursting of Maria’s heart as her father’s arms enfolded her and held her for a moment,—then her mother’s. She heard a sob and felt tears on her face.

“Oh, my little girl, I’ll miss you so!” came from Fred before he let her go.

“I love you, Maria!” were the final words that broke from Freda’s lips.

And finally, there was Nanny Dora’s long embrace as she gave last minute instructions so typical of her:

“Now you be good girls. Remember your fine manners and listen to the teachers!” she said, trying to sound stern while gathering the girls in her arms.

So this is goodbye. In all the months of preparation for this event, the excitement leading up to it had overshadowed the reality of parting. All the sounds of that night were so amplified and the feelings so tumultuous that an imprint of that moment was made on Maria’s mind that would play itself out, over and over, for the rest of her life.

Minutes later, the train whistle sounded again and slowly the monstrous engine creaked forward, puffing and fussing like an impatient old man, dragging its coaches of waving passengers behind it. Then, picking up speed, it rocked and swayed as it headed south into the night. It was a bitter moment, which mercifully soon turned sweet. The girls’ focus changed to the cozy space of the brightly lit train compartment, the hustle of storing baggage and to settling down in the new surroundings which would be theirs for the next few days.

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Maria and Rene were being sent off to a boarding school far from home to the very Southern tip of the African continent. Boarding school was the only recourse their parents had, considering the situation: Fred was the Chief Geologic Consultant for the Anglo American Gold Mining Company in South Africa. He headed up the wide-spread drilling operations of Anglo-American which pulled up revealing core samples from deep beneath the earth’s surface, — the imperative precursor to the sinking of mine shafts that produced most of the world’s gold. The drilling operations required that Fred frequently relocate to regions known as the ‘goldfields’ by the mining industry where there were no cities or schools nearby. For this reason, going to school out of their home was not feasible for the children. Besides, in that era in most of Britain and its colonial cultures, the discipline that boarding school afforded was considered to be ‘good for children’, if not essential, and was not at all uncommon.

Fred had researched all of the most outstanding boarding schools in the country and had discovered this one situated thirty miles from Cape Town. It was nestled in the foothills of the beautiful four-peak Helderberg Mountain range within view of the majestic Hottentots Holland mountains to the East and breathtaking Gordon’s Bay to the South. It looked out over the point at which the Atlantic and Indian oceans meet and was as secluded as any private school administration could wish a school to be.

If Fred De Villiers had been looking for the most beautiful spot on earth, he had certainly found it. If he had in mind a place where his children would benefit the most—scholastically, socially, culturally and spiritually, he’d found it. Sadly though, the wrench of separation for Maria from her parents was often the source of pining and tearfulness. Rene, on the other hand, never looked back and thrived in this boarding school setting.

Fred had arranged that the girls be chaperoned on their three-day train journey to school. He had a long-standing friendship with a Catholic priest with whom he and a steady group of avid anglers used to go on deep-

sea fishing expeditions. The priest had put him in touch with two nuns who were traveling on the same train to a destination not too far from that of the girls'. Fred felt satisfied that they would be well taken care of.

"You'll be sharing the compartment with two very nice ladies on your trip to school," he had told them, "and remember, Maria,—pure language!" he reminded, despite Nanny Dora's theory.

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Fully expecting then that two very nice, ordinary ladies would join them in their compartment at the next train stop, they were taken aback when first one, then another figure, shrouded from head to foot in black ecclesiastical attire, each with a cane, entered the narrow door of the train compartment. The girls' eyes widened and a look of awe and disbelief crossed their faces. Taking in the winged hoods and long, voluminous habits that floated around these 'ladies', the girls were dumbfounded. They had only ever observed nuns from a great distance and, as with most things unfamiliar, nuns had always been surrounded by deep mystery and very scary myths.

The Sisters set down their bags and ran their fingers along the table, the bunks and the window ledges of the compartment as though they were exploring the texture of the surroundings.

"Crimeny!" exclaimed Maria right into Rene's ear, "what's this!"

"Maria! Don't swear!" admonished Rene in a whisper, "They're just nuns. Maybe they're looking for something," — but to herself she thought: 'I've always known nuns are not ordinary people. What's this 'feeling around' thing they're doing?'

"Well, this is it!" announced one robed figure to the other, as if satisfied.

"This is what?" panicked Maria and to Rene she whispered:

"Jeezy-wizz, Rene! ... are they really gonna stay?"

"Maria! ...Stop it!" said Rene, Nanny Dora's Bible teachings coming clearly to mind, then added: "Nanny Dora said never to use the Lord's vein in His name!"

"I didn't either use His vein in my name, Rene! ... 'Jeezy-wizz' isn't really saying 'Jesus', ... but look, they're so scary! What do you think they'll do to us," Maria whispered wide eyed, shrinking back into the farthest corner of the compartment.

Rene gave Maria a sidelong glance and rolled her eyes. Maria could tell by this familiar gesture from her older sister that she shared her fears exactly. 'Oh dear Lordy me, it's really bad! After all, Rene is a whole year older and she's very smart. If she's afraid, it must be we're in big trouble!' she thought, moving closer to Rene.

"Maria, you must behave and be very good," warned Rene in a whisper, "nuns aren't real people and they'll witch you if you're bad!"

"Good evening, girls," said the old, tall, scariest nun brightly, inclining her head toward the girls but staring straight ahead.

"Good evening, Miss ... er ... I mean Nun ... I mean Miss Nun," stammered Rene awkwardly. Turning beet red, she fidgeted nervously with the ribbon that tied one of Maria's long braids. Maria was speechless. She wasn't planning on saying anything at all right then!

"I'm Sister Agatha," said the tall, scary nun turning in the girls' direction still staring straight over their heads. "So, ... we're going to be traveling together!"

"And I'm Sister Gretchen," stated the smaller, less scary one with the same blank look.

The Sisters of course knew all about the girls from the information given them by Fred. Attempting to set them at ease, they addressed the girls as adults always seem to do, starting with the usual 'what's your name' question (even when they know a child's name.)

"What are your names?" queried Sister Gretchen, keeping her eyes focused oddly overhead.

During that era, families with financial means were experiencing kidnappings at an alarming rate the world over. For that reason, Fred had often instructed the children: ‘Don’t talk to strangers and if a stranger asks your name, never give it. Just walk away!’ So when the ‘what are your names’ question was asked, this warning ran through Maria’s mind without any rationale.

‘Daddy always said never to give your name to strangers!’ she remembered, panicking.

“My name is um ...,” Maria wavered, “... is um, ... my name is um, — Shirley!” she blurted out. ‘Don’t ever tell a lie, no matter what!’ was her memory of another warning from her Daddy, when she heard herself utter the incredible ‘Shirley’ answer. Stealing a guilty glance at her sister, she looked up and away.

Hearing Maria’s preposterous lie, Rene blushed again. A frown of total puzzlement crossed her face and she swallowed hard in disbelief, agitatedly poking Maria with an elbow.

“That’s a nice name, isn’t it Sister?” they heard the scariest nun say to the less scary nun nudging her.

‘Oh, so they’re sisters like we are! But, how can nuns be sisters if they’re not real?’ Maria wondered, confused.

“What’s your surname?” came the next question.

“Um ...” Maria said, ‘Never give your name to strangers ...’ echoed her Dad’s warning again. “Um ... my surname is um ... T-Temple,” Maria blurted out.

There was a long pause.

“Oh r-e-a-l-l-y, — any relative of the little actress?” asked Sister Agatha with an amused smile.

‘I thought nuns are s’posed to be holy? Hows come they know ’bout actresses?’ Maria wondered.

“Yes, ... I mean, ... no, she’s not our le-lerative,” she stammered.

“And your name?” asked Sister Gretchen, presumably of Rene, staring past her.

“Rene,” recited Rene quickly ... truthfully.

‘Oh, drat! How could she, when we’re not to give our name to strangers!’ Maria lamented silently.

“How do you do, Rene Temple and Shirley Temple; so nice to meet you. But there must be some mistake! We were supposed to be sharing this compartment with two little girls by names of Rene and Maria De Villiers! Maybe they’ll show up later,” chanted the nuns with big smiles, giving Maria an opportunity to rectify the gross misinformation.

‘What’s so funny?’ Maria pouted to herself. Somehow at that moment she regretted the terrible lie. ‘Right now, I’d rather be dead, or nearly dead anyway,’ she half wished. The Sisters stowed their luggage and shortly the train stewards brought in four sleeping bed rolls.

It was now late and the nuns announced that they were going to the bathrooms to prepare for bed. Poking around with their long white canes, they each took up a garment bag and a small tote of toiletries and left the compartment, silently disappearing down the corridor. Even though they were now alone, the girls could only talk in stage whispers.

“Do you s’ppose they use those canes to spank you when you’re bad? I heard that they’re very strict and they always do that,” said Maria, ... not sure she’d really heard that.

“Yes, especially when you tell big lies about your name,” Rene warned, “But they’re also very, very old ... you know, old people always walk with canes.”

“They said they were going to get ready for bed. Do they sleep? I mean, will they be sleeping here in the compartment with us?” Maria asked.

“Well, they’ll spend the night here, but of course they won’t sleep, silly! Only ordinary people sleep. They’re very, very holy and very holy people aren’t ordinary,” Rene preached. “What’s more, you can’t sleep if you keep your clothes on and they aren’t allowed to take those dresses off ever, ever because they don’t grow breasts and hair,” she fabricated monstrously.

“What!? They don’t grow breasts and hair? B-l-o-w me-down!” exclaimed Maria, astonished beyond belief at this new revelation.

“Maria!” Rene frowned deeply, “You know Nanny Dora says it’s unladylike to swear. And Daddy says swearing is never allowed in the De Villiers family!”

But Maria was oblivious of Rene’s repeated admonitions on her ‘impure language’. Her only thoughts at that moment were:

‘This is becoming really weird and scary now! Imagine: the whole night in this small compartment with these very strange, holy, old nuns without breasts and hair who don’t sleep at all!’

“I’m going to sleep with you,” she announced solemnly to Rene.

So continued the nervous interchange until the compartment door slid open and in came first one probing white cane, then a nun and then another cane and another nun. They’d prepared for bed. They looked exactly as they had before, ... only their black robes had turned pure white!

“Oh goosebumps!” whispered Maria behind her hand, “they probly witched themselves.”

“We’re now going to retire,” announced the nuns, “You girls also need to get to bed before too long. We ask that you please be very quiet while we say prayers before we go to sleep. We hope you don’t mind if we use the upper bunks for the sake of privacy?” they queried politely.

“We completely don’t mind!” Maria assured them quickly, wondering to herself who Privacy is.

Nimble, despite the folds of material of their robes, as though they were performing the Olympic hurdles, the nuns hoisted themselves onto opposite upper bunks.

“Wow!” mouthed Rene in a whisper.

“Cripes!” gasped Maria, openly staring.

They were not quite sure what they were so amazed at but aware that the nuns’ agility was somehow incongruous and unexpected.

“Do you s’ppose they’re going to pray forgiveness for lying about the ‘sleeping’ thing?” Maria whispered right into Rene’s ear as they settled into the one bottom bunk together even though there was a bed roll for each of them.

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The sheets were crisp and smooth and the blankets soft and warm. A small night light shone close to the floor where two white canes stood side by side like sentinels. The train rocked gently back and forth and far, far off they could hear its mournful whistle whaling in the night as the wheels rattled in a driving rhythm on the tracks. Huddled together, it seemed sleep would not come.

“Rene, are you awake? Are you scared? I’m not scared,” Maria stated boldly.

“I’m scared,” Rene whispered honestly.

“Me too,” Maria quickly admitted. “What shall we do?”

Fred had always told the girls that when faced with a problem, they should not sit and fret — rather they should find a way to solve it.

“I’ve been thinking,” Rene whispered in Maria’s ear. Rene was always thinking and problem-solving, it seemed. “We need to see if they’re really sleeping like they said they were going to. If they are, then maybe they’re a little ordinary and we needn’t be so very scared,” she instructed.

“You go first,” Maria said wide eyed, not sure what Rene had in mind, but certain that she would follow close behind, whatever she’d planned.

“Let’s go together. Come,” Rene said, tugging at Maria’s arm, as she slipped out of the bunk.

Stealthily they climbed up onto the middle bunk above them, Rene leading the way. Peeking over the edge of the top bunk, eyes wide and breathing shallowly, they beheld this first-time-ever scene. There lay Sister Agatha on her back with her hands folded on her chest,—that long beadlike-thing entwined around her fingers, her eyes closed, snoring lightly — fast asleep! The girls were satisfied. The myth was only partly true. There was no need for them to be so very scared!

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Morning came all too soon. Quietly the nuns descended from their bunks and changed into their black day robes while the girls were still asleep. Awakening, yawning and stretching, the girls gathered their first thoughts, noticing that the nuns' robes had mysteriously turned black again.

'Uh-oh—they've been witching again!' thought Maria.

"Good morning little ladies," the nuns greeted brightly.

"Good morning, Miss N ... Nuns," was the girls' unison, unsure reply.

"When the steward comes for the orders," said Sister Agatha, "would you ask him to bring us a large pitcher of orange juice and a glass for each of us? We like our orange juice first thing in the mornings. We're going to do our morning ablutions and may not be back before he comes to take the orders."

"Yes we will, Miss Nuns," agreed Maria pleasantly, then to herself she wondered puzzled '... morning ab-u-la-tions?'

"Thank you, girls, we'll be back before too long," said the nuns.

They watched in silence as the Sisters collected their toiletries and left for the bathrooms.

"Morning abu-la-tions!" whispered Maria as soon as they were alone, "what's that?"

"It's the nice word for when you go ka-ka, I think," Rene sniggered behind her hand, red faced.

A moment later, there was a knock on the door and the usual warning rattle of the latch before a train steward in a tuxedo opened it and poked his head in calling out in his rousing sing-song voice:

"Good morning little ladies! Tea ... coffee ... for anyone?"

'Mommy doesn't allow us to have tea or coffee ever, least of all in bed,' was the first thought in both girls' minds.

"No thank ...," started Rene.

"We'll have tea please!" Maria brazenly chirped in the best grown-up voice she could muster.

"Maria! — we're not allowed!" reminded Rene in an irritated tone.

The steward evidently chose to respond only to Maria's forceful request. In his routine of smart service, he swiftly drew down the folding table from its bracket on the wall, set out two fine china tea cups with their silver teaspoons, a dainty jug of cream, a small bowl of sugar cubes and finally, a shining teapot filled with steaming hot tea.

"Thank you, ladies!" he said with a smile, "anything else?"

"Yes please," announced Maria loudly, "The nun ladies are obulating and they want two glasses of orange juice and a large pitcher of ka-ka ... (gulp) ... I mean ... a large pitcher."

Rene gasped, smacking her hands to her mouth.

"... a large pitcher of what?" asked the steward taken aback.

"Just a large pitcher," replied Maria lamely, deeply embarrassed at misspeaking the way she had.

"Are you sure that's what they said?" asked Rene, "—just a large empty jug?"

"Yes, Rene! — that's what they said, didn't you hear?" replied Maria with certainty.

“Two glasses of orange juice and a large pitcher it will be then,” said the steward as he placed the glasses of orange juice and a large empty jug on the Sisters’ side of the table.

Smugly, the girls proceeded with the ritual of ‘serving tea’ the way Nanny Dora had taught them: cream first, then the tea and then the sugar cubes. With their little fingers sticking up in the air while holding their tea cups, and with impish smiles, they daintily sipped their tea, feeling very grownup and a little guilty.

The Sisters returned and stowed their toiletries.

“I got your two glasses of orange juice and your large pitcher for you, Miss Nuns,” announced Maria proudly.

The Sisters seated themselves at their side of the table and carefully, with their exploratory gestures, touched the full glasses of orange juice, discovering the large empty jug. Smiling and nudging one another, Sister Agatha simply said:

“Thank you, Shirley, for placing our order for us,” and they proceeded to drink their orange juice.

Watching them drink, Maria smiled proudly to herself for having executed their request so efficiently!

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When everyone was bathed and dressed, they were invited by the steward to choose between breakfast in the dining car or in the compartment. Since the Sisters elected to eat in the compartment, the girls proudly strutted off to the dining car, hardly hearing the nuns’ admonitions of:

“Take care, girls, and return directly after breakfast.”

‘Oh boy, this is getting better all the time!’ thought Maria, relishing this newfound freedom of being given choices without the strict boundaries of parental control.

The main topic of conversation over the breakfast table was an issue that had been a great puzzlement to Maria ever since the nuns had entered their compartment the first time.

“Rene,” she asked with a perplexed look, “what do you s’ppose that tapping-on-the-forehead-to-tummy and shoulder-to-shoulder thing is that the nuns do ever so once in a while?”

She knew Rene would be able to answer this because Rene always knew the answers to the really big mysteries.

“It’s dandrifft”, Rene whispered solemnly, leaning forward across the table so no one would hear.

“It’s what?” blurted Maria, too loudly.

“Shh, Maria,” warned Rene, then continued, looking around again to make sure no one was listening: “I said, it’s dandrifft,” she repeated.

“What’s that?” asked Maria puzzled.

“It’s that white stuff like dust that always sits on the Methingdist preacher man’s shoulders who comes to visit Nanny Dora. You’ve seen him flicking it off all the time from one side to the other side. Sometimes Nanny Dora helps him flick it off. She says it comes out of his hair and she told me it’s dandrifft.”

“Oh,” said Maria satisfied, but still a little puzzled. “So the nuns have dandrifft on their foreheads and tummies as well?” she asked.

“Maria, the nuns don’t really have dandrifft, silly. I told you they don’t grow hair, so they can’t have dandrifft. They just do it because they want to make sure they don’t have any,” Rene fibbed again.

“Not even on their foreheads and tummies,” agreed Maria, satisfied.

For the rest of the journey, every time Maria saw the nuns flicking away the ‘imagined’ ‘dandrifft,’ she peered at them with narrowed eyes, to make sure there wasn’t any. She even did the forehead-to-tummy-shoulder-to-shoulder-flicking-thing to herself from time to time ... just in case.

As they re-entered the compartment after breakfast, Maria tripped over Sister Agatha’s feet, falling headlong under the fold-out table and striking her head on a heating unit.

“Ouch! Gimminy Christmas!” she yelled.

“Maria!” chided Rene, with a reprimanding look.

“Oh, please be careful, ... is that you Shirley? Did you hurt yourself?” asked Sister Agatha concerned, staring blankly ahead with out-stretched arms, as if feeling the air.

“Please do take care where you step, girls. We can’t see where you are. Are you sure you’re alright?”

“Holy Moly,” Maria mumbled, rubbing a knot on her head.

Then annoyed, she thought—‘I’m not jolly invisible! What do they mean,—they can’t see us?—and I sure wish they’d stop calling me ‘Shirley’ all the time ... makes me crazy and embarrassed!’ she squirmed. But what she actually said in her sweetest voice was:

“It’s o.k., Miss Nuns,—I mean Miss Sisters.”

“We’re sorry,” apologized Sister Gretchen. “We sometimes take for granted that people know we can’t see. You know,—we’re blind.”

Maria’s mouth fell open and Rene looked stunned. They both stared at the Sisters as though they were seeing them for the first time.

“Oh for crying out loud—shiver-my-timbers!” blurted Maria. “Blind!”

“Maria, I’m going to tell Daddy on you for your swearing!” Rene whispered angrily.

“Well,” whispered Maria right into Rene’s ear, “do you realize we’re in a compartment with two holy-old-blind nuns who don’t grow breasts and hair?”

That was not the last time the girls fell over the Sisters’ feet that day or the next. The Sisters were headed for the School for the Blind in the city of Worcester where they were instructors. Years later, the girls learned that it was a very prestigious school where blind people the world over came to learn unique skills of coping with their handicap.

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During the course of the journey, these two heavily hooded nuns with their odd, blank stare, amazed and charmed Rene and Maria, finding their way into their hearts as they revealed their joy in little things. Their seemingly endless playfulness and zest for projects and fun never ceased to surprise and delight the girls. They became real buddies.

The Sisters were fully aware of Maria’s discomfort when they called her Shirley and Sister Gretchen decided early on the first day to set this issue straight.

“You know, Shirley, we love your real name ‘Maria’ and we’d like to call you by that name if you don’t mind,” she said, giving Maria the opportunity to get out of her uncomfortable predicament.

“I completely don’t mind,” was Maria’s immediate, relieved reply, “Shirley isn’t my name for real anyway and I also like my ‘Maria’ name.”

The Sisters smiled at this sweet confession.

“Now about your surname ...,” started Sister Gretchen.

“I most completely don’t mind about that either,” interrupted Maria quickly, blushing to the roots of her hair.

When the nuns had agreed to watch over the girls on the journey, they wanted to know what they could do to amuse and keep them occupied and Fred had told them that the girls liked to play spelling and vocabulary games. Mysteriously they produced a dictionary/thesaurus, one in Braille and one in regular print. They’d come prepared! They let the girls run their fingers over the little bumps on the pages, explaining that the bumps were really words. They read to the girls moving their fingertips swiftly across the pages. The girls were mesmerized!

Rene and Maria then took out some of their own books and read aloud to the Sisters who were amazed at the girls' advanced reading skills. What the nuns did not know was that when Maria read to them out of her own books, she ran her fingers across the printed words and pinched her eyes almost closed as she read.

"Maria, what are you doing? That's not nice!" chided Rene, embarrassed at Maria's mimicry of the nuns' handicap.

"Just reading, Rene, .. can't you see?" she said.

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The nuns had a great capacity for humor and kidded around about their blindness.

The girls told riddles and jokes and they laughed hysterically at the girls' funniness. They all sang songs together like: 'Row, Row, Row your Boat' and 'Old McDonald Had a Farm'." Then Sister Agatha said:

"Let's sing 'Three Blind Mice'," and when they'd finished the song, the nuns continued on their own with: 'Two Blind Nuns, Two Blind Nuns ...' They all laughed so hard, they collapsed in a pile.

At one point, Maria felt compelled to ask the question:

"Is your mommy and daddy also ... I mean ... blind? ... I mean 'cause you're both blind?"

"Shhh, Maria!" said Rene, holding up a finger to her lips.

The Sisters giggled. They explained that they were not sisters in the sense that the girls were, but that they called each other sister because they were 'Sisters in the Faith'. The girls sort of understood.

"Can we call you Sister too?" asked Maria plaintively.

"Oh, shhh, Maria!" admonished Rene

"Of course you may!" answered Sister Gretchen.

Then came the next question: It was a painful one fraught with faltering hope and fear of the answer.

"Is it all dark and black all the time ... I mean, can't you see just a little bit, Sisters?" Maria asked cautiously, covering her own eyes and peeking through slits in her fingers.

The nuns clearly understood the question and Sister Agatha tried to explain. Reaching out to Maria, she placed her hands over Maria's eyes.

"When I cover your eyes, you can't see anything can you? Well, do you remember how we said we can read the little bumps in our books with our fingers? Just so,—when we touch things, we can see them through our fingers. That makes us real lucky!" she said.

Maria, not quite getting the point, said:

"Can I touch your face, Sister Gretchen, and try to see you with my fingers?"

"Now stop it at once, Maria!" commanded Rene horrified at Maria's familiarity with the nuns.

Maria was already kneeling on the seat beside Sister Gretchen and with her eyes tightly shut, she was running her fingertips over Sister Gretchen's face.

"I could see you, Sister Gretchen," Maria lied, "now I want to look at you with my fingers, Sister Agatha," she said as she rolled over next to Sister Agatha.

The nuns were touched and amused by her sweet spontaneity. They asked if they could 'look' at the girls' faces. One by one they gently touched the outline of their cheeks, foreheads, brows and hair.

"What is the color of your lovely curls?" asked Sister Agatha of Rene.

A tear trickled down Sister Gretchen's cheek.

'Such a beautiful child,' she thought, as she ran her fingers down the length of Maria's long braids.

What a moment for them all!

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The following morning, as the train made its way through the spectacular pass of the Hex River Mountains, the girls silently watched as the nuns packed their bags and prepared to disembark at their destination. Rene couldn't say anything because there was this burning feeling in her throat and Maria kept rubbing her eyes because they were itching so! It was as though these happy ladies in black had been their friends for a long, long time and they didn't want them to go.

But this was goodbye again. When the train stopped at their station, Sister Agatha stood before Maria opening her arms wide. Maria flung herself against her and she hugged Maria to her soft breast. With this action, Maria had pulled the nun's hood slightly askew and quickly she tucked a strand of long hair back into place under her hood.

The nuns were 'ordinary' after all!

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When the Sisters had waved goodbye, the girls' long train journey was not yet at an end. They still had several hours to travel. Rene grabbed a book and nestled cozily, with her feet drawn up under her, into a comfortable position in a corner of the compartment, as usual, finding solace in reading. She was completely oblivious of her little sister's overwhelming sadness. Leaning on the window ledge with her forehead pressed against the glass, Maria gazed out across the vast valley thousands of feet below. She watched their long train as it almost doubled upon itself, the engine climbing the steep incline in the cut-out on the edge of one mountain side, while the tail-end and caboose followed in a cut-out on the opposite mountain side. She could see the patchwork of vineyards like a colorful quilt tossed carelessly in the curve of the valley far, far below. She was made sadder even by the mournful echo of the train whistle as it ricocheted against the cliffs, drowning out her violent sobs which suddenly seemed to come from nowhere.

But her sadness didn't come from nowhere. It came because of the profound goodbyes just a couple of days before, first from Mommy, Daddy and then Nanny Dora. It came because of this most recent farewell from those wonderful new-found blind friends, the Sisters. And it came as other sad memories of past farewells crowded her mind. She wept softly on and on as she recounted those other bittersweet times and sad good byes of so long, long ago

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On the North Western coast of South Africa there was a province called South West Africa, (now called Namibia). The northern part of this vast and rugged region is covered by savanna-type vegetation—sometimes called acacia bush lands—where wildlife roam in abundance. Beautiful species of antelope known as gemsbok, and another called steenbok, impala and eland; wildebeest and kudu proudly strut in large herds. Predators such as cheetah and prides of lion in all their magnificence stalk their prey in the dark of night and stealthy hyena and jackal follow in packs to greedily pick through the leftovers while hungry vultures circle above. Several hundreds of species of birds fill the skies with as many songs which come in the form of yodels and calls, screeches and cries and sounds so unimaginable as to defy mimicry.

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This then was where Maria's grandfather — her 'Oupa', (pronounced Oh-pa) as he was fondly called, became the landowner of thousands of acres of grasslands. He built a large, comfortable homestead which was kept cool with a handsome thatch roof and high ceilings. He stocked his land with hundreds of cattle and karakul sheep which in time became thousands. He was rewarded generously by the buyers of the meat products and the pelts of the sheep gave him a fine return in the markets of the world. Adjacent to the homestead, and matching in style, he erected a carriage house where he kept five magnificent carriages with large spoked wheels, grand leather seats and elegant fold-down canopies. Across from this building were the stables where he housed and groomed several fine horses. Then there was the dairy where the cows were milked and the milk-house where cheese, butter and cream was processed for sale. Adjacent to the milk-house, was the smoke-house for the

processing of smoked venison, beef and other meat products for the market. Beyond the stables were the sheds where farm implements of every variety were maintained and stored. Encircling this entire complex of buildings was the customary, very sturdy seven foot fence—to keep out lion, cheetah and other predators. Leaving the gate unlatched was considered to be the height of irresponsibility as it could lead to tragedy ... and sadly sometimes had, on neighboring farms.

The story was told of one fine day, Maria's grandmother, her 'Ouma', (Oh-ma) was busy at the kitchen stove preparing dinner as she had every day for many years, when she heard a sudden bone chilling growl behind her from across the room. Swinging around and drawing in her breath in disbelief and cold fear, she saw a lion, — his huge paws resting on the half door of the kitchen, his massive head and enormous, thick black mane filling the space above the half door. Fixing his intense gaze upon her, his eyes smoldering, his jaw slack and loudly panting, he showed immense, yellow teeth. Giving one snarling, menacing grunt, then another and then another while rolling his head from side to side, he blinked and stared intently at Ouma. (This is the customary vocal warning a lion gives before charging.) Then, raising his head as if making ready to send a message to the very heavens, his mouth wide open, he emitted a deep, thundering, belly wrenching growl that caused the very walls to shake! Transfixed in terror, Ouma instinctively knew not to scream or run. In that instant, expecting that in the very next moment this terrifying beast would lunge at her from across the room, she felt compelled to do something! Grasping the edges of her apron with trembling hands and waving it as though she were chasing the family dog from the kitchen, she called out:

“Shoo, shoo, shoo!” as loud as she could.

As if knowing that 'when Ouma speaks, you shall obey', the lion grunted once more, dropped his paws from his perch on the half door, turned and padded obediently toward the open gate, leaving the way he had come.

So prolific were the lion and so bold, that they would sometimes come up to the fence and pace back and forth or sit and watch, with that intense gaze so typical of these large cats, at the goings on around the complex. It was not uncommon for lion to jump the fence. Indeed, one of the major problems Maria's grandfather faced was keeping them out of the cattle and sheep enclosures. From dawn until dusk a 'lookout' was posted. Hunting rifles stood loaded and ready. The fencing notwithstanding, his livestock losses to lion were enormous.

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It was to this destination that Freda, her girls and her five brothers and sisters with their spouses and children traveled for two weeks over Christmas each year. (As usual, Fred could not get away on account of his busy schedule.) The entourage, ranging from the oldest to the youngest went like this:

The oldest son, Nicklaus and his wife, Greta and their only daughter, Kobie; Annie, the oldest daughter and her husband Robbie and their daughter, Joan.

Then Freda, the middle daughter and girls, Rene and Maria; (Fred absent). Middle son, dapper and handsome Pieter and his wife Helen and their children, Tabitha and Leslie;

Beautiful Kate, the youngest daughter and her husband Doug and girl, Rina. Youngest son Fritz and his wife Elaine (no children).

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Maria's Oupa, loved and respected by all who knew him, was a giant of a man standing six feet seven inches tall with a generosity to match his physical stature. Anger and impatience were foreign to his nature. He was even tempered and always saw the humorous side of things. This was noted by the witticism with which he named his eminently successful farming endeavor: 'Misgun' which means 'misfortune'!

Managing his huge cattle and sheep farms with their related enterprises, entailed long hours of hard work by dozens of people in various capacities every day of the year. He worked tirelessly side by side with those who had sought work on his farms. Some were Herero tribes people, some were young white men, the sons of neighboring farmers eager to learn firsthand the finest methods in animal husbandry; but most were Uvambo people. Though he was very talented and knowledgeable in all aspects of farming, he looked for every

opportunity to learn from the tribal people. They were certainly wise in the ways of wild game, seasonal idiosyncrasies of the weather, rivers, streams and indigenous vegetation, all of which affected the farming process in the region in one way or another. He was the master of tactfulness and would try their suggestions and techniques first rather than foist his upon them. He made it his business to learn their languages fluently and spoke to them in theirs, unless they chose differently.

A deep and genuine kindness and an upbeat sense of humor was the hallmark of his dealings with all his workers. He could always be seen joking with them and outbreaks of laughter could be heard wherever he worked among them. They were aware that here was a man who cared deeply about them and their families. He spoiled their many children and knew them all by name. This was the essence of the man known as: 'Oupa' to his grand children; 'Madala Ndoda' (old man) to his workers; 'Madala Ndoda Oupa' to his workers' children and Karl Bernard Gründeling to the community.

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The journey to Maria's Oupa's farm from the homes of his sons and daughters, was a long one, undertaken by an antiquated narrow gauge train that seemed to struggle its way tediously across the vast expanse of the Western edge of the Kalahari Desert. All the eye could see in the shimmering haze of the bleak horizon, were open, arid flats, covered sparingly with low, gray shrubbery and dotted very sparsely with acacia trees.

During the course of the journey, Maria could be found from time to time sitting at a window, chin cupped in her hands, staring out at the lonely, God-forsaken horizons as they slid by her gaze. 'There are miles and miles of forever!' she'd think, frightened by this ugly specter of bleached desert stretching in all directions. In her childlike fantasy, she wondered if any little child had ever gotten lost in this endless, barren land and what a frightening experience it would be! 'If it were I, which way would I run? ... how would I ever find my way back to Mommy and Daddy?' she'd think anxiously. When she found her own musings too troublesome, she'd struggle back to reality and make a dash down the train corridors to join the other children at play.

No matter to the children that the heat was stifling and the only available drinking water on the train was brackish and lukewarm. No matter that the compartments were small, cramped and soot-filled. No matter that the train labored at a snail's pace, hour upon hour and day after day, as though it would surely run out of steam and never reach its destination. No matter.

Every year this never ending journey was approached with almost unbearable anticipation by the children ... 'for all the fun that was to be had' ... and with sheer dread for the monotony and discomfort by the adults. The only reason it was not rather undertaken by car, was that the badly rutted, dusty roads in this part of Africa in the 1930's and 40's, the interminable distances, not to speak of the absence of speed in the automobiles of the day, would have made it even more treacherous and uncomfortable than did the train journey.

This primitive train had no dining car. Food that would not spoil had to be prepared for the journey. It was a real treat when the train made the rare stop for an hour or more at the larger stations, giving the passengers the opportunity to enjoy a hot meal in a station restaurant. It was not altogether uncommon for the little train engine's wheels to jump the tracks. Experience had taught the Department of South African Railroads to keep equipment handy on the train for just such an occasion. This was a splendid opportunity for the children to run in the fields to gather bright red ladybugs and to pick desert wild flowers, which were in abundance, (if it had rained), while the male passengers used the available pulleys and cranes to put the diminutive little engine back where it belonged so the journey could be resumed.

Once the railway tracks veered further North and then West, the terrain changed almost abruptly to 'bushveldt'. The scenery now greeting their eyes was of tall, waving grasslands, with dense, heavy shrubbery and numerous 'thorn' (acacia) trees so typical of game country. This was a sure sign that the journey was coming to an end. Excitement mounted among adults and children alike as they knew they were approaching the Northern regions of South West Africa. This is where Maria's grandparents lived.

It had been a whole year since they'd visited and a year was forever in the minds of the children. On this wonderful day, as on all those in the past, they were finally about to arrive at their destination in the long journey to visit Oupa and Ouma. The expectation of seeing them again was charged with uncontrollable

excitement for the children! Grimy faces and hands had been scrubbed, rumpled clothes packed away and the children dressed in their very best. Luggage stood ready in the train corridors and everyone took up positions at the windows, ... the children struggling for the best view.

“I bet I’ll see Oupa first!” was Maria’s challenge to the other children as she leaned out of the train window, pigtailed flying.

“No, you won’t, I will,” yelled Joan, Maria’s favorite cousin.

The train finally rounded the last bend and sent out a deafening whistle as if the din of the engine was not enough to alert everyone of its arrival. A proud sign planted in the center of a beautiful rock garden announced the name of this, the Northernmost stop for the train in South West Africa. ‘Grootfontein’—it read, meaning ‘great fountain’.

They’d arrived!

Craning to see above the crowds, Maria did not at that moment have in mind the farm, the fun that lay in store with all the cousins, or even her grandmother. She sought only the face of one man.

‘What if he isn’t here! What if he forgot!’ she thought with pounding heart. ‘But, no, he loved her so much, ... of course he’d be here!’

And sure enough—‘oh my, oh my!’ There he was, towering above everyone else; erect, broad shoulders pulled back, a mop of silver, shining hair and striking blue eyes searching the faces of the passing passengers in the train windows. And suddenly that dear face broke into the broadest smile.

‘Oupa! Oh, it’s my Oupa, he has seen me!’ Maria’s heart sang.

The train came to a halt, wheels screeching, the engine giving a final tired puff.

“Oupa, Oupa!” Maria cried, waving her arms wildly.

Then that smile changed to laughter and spreading his long arms wide, he leaned down and gathered up the children as they tumbled from the train.

“Oh my little lambs, my little lambs,” he cried as he hugged and kissed and hugged the children again and again. Eyes brimming, he muttered into their hair:

“I’ve missed all of you so! I’ve missed you so! Look how you’ve grown!”

There was no doubt in these children’s minds that they were special to their Oupa. But there was one child among them who sensed that she was loved by this man with an even more extraordinary love and that is why she returned it with the same fierce zeal. What is there to account for such a bond! The answer to this is in this story about Maria and her Oupa:

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Long after the greetings and the chattering of the children had ceased, all talking at once, telling about the most important things Oupa needed to know, Maria’s arms were still wrapped tightly around his neck in a clasp it would be hard to undo. Listening to his voice as it rumbled in his chest, it was the most beautiful music she’d ever heard.

Looking at his face and his beaming eyes, she tightened her grasp as her heart cried: ... ‘Oupa, my Oupa!’

With over a dozen adults and seven children to be transported back to the farm from the train station, Oupa had brought three of his larger carriages. One for the children and two for the adults. For the children who were not accustomed to riding in horse drawn carriages, this was the height of excitement! An indelible mark was made on Maria’s memory when she was hoisted high up into the carriage by Oupa, there to be deposited on the soft leather seats, ... all curved, contoured and comfortable, where she would snuggle beside him. This was her fairy tale dream! When all the other children were settled after scrambling for their seats, there was the crack of Oupa’s little whip as he tugged on the reins and commanded:

“Ja! Ja!” and the carriage started rolling forward in an ever-so-gentle sway with the muffled clip-a-tee-clop, clip-a-tee-clop of the horses’ hooves on the narrow, winding dirt road. The procession of carriages with their magnificent horses heading in the direction of Oupa’s farm was the beginning of a glorious time for the children. Intoxicated with happiness, Maria fell asleep in the peaceful knowledge that her Oupa was here, close beside her and all was right with the world.

Arriving at the farm a couple of hours later, they were greeted by Ouma and the smiling house maids with smart aprons who had set a large table covered with a white starched table cloth, upon which was set every conceivable dish. There were fresh vegetables from Ouma’s garden; steaming venison and beef roasts with potatoes, carrots and parsnips; there were salads of every kind and large jugs of fresh milk for the children—topped off with delicious puddings for desert. This was the kind of generous fare for each meal.

After baggage was deposited, hands were washed and everyone was seated around the very large table, grace was solemnly said by Oupa who always sat at the head of the table. During grace, Maria peeked through her fingers and watched her Oupa as he thanked God for all His goodness, ... for the abundance of food ... and for all his lovely grand children. She smiled deeply to herself because she was certain Oupa was especially alluding to her! He prayed also for his workers and their children and their well-being. A short pause followed Oupa’s ‘amen’ and then the pandemonium of the children’s chatter and laughter and the adults’ conversation blending with the clatter of china and silverware filled the air.

“Give the children more, they must be hungry, give them more!” Oupa insisted, heaping their plates with seconds until Ouma warned:

“Enough! Enough! You don’t want them to get tummy aches, do you!”

“Oupa, please say your ‘sufficiency!’” Maria would chirp happily when the meal was done.

And Oupa would lean back in his chair, rub his tummy and with a twinkle in his eye he’d say:

“I’ve had an elephant’s sufficiency!”

The children would scream laughing, because they knew he’d substituted the word ‘elegant’ with ‘elephant.’ Oh, what a funny, funny man Oupa was!

But look, here’s Ouma, standing ready with a glass of water and a quinine tablet for each child. ‘Why was Ouma always the one who remembered the quinine? They’re so bitter! Yuk! I bet Oupa wouldn’t make us take them if Ouma wasn’t looking,’ Maria secretly decided. She had not the faintest notion what a vicious illness malaria was, the victims of which Ouma had taken care of, and sometimes watched die, more times than she cared to remember.

Retiring to the living room for coffee, the adults instructed the children to bathe and put on their pajamas. After playful screams and laughter in the bathroom, the children were finally dressed in their night clothes. All clean and faces shining, hair still wet and neatly combed down, they seemed to get their second breath and little pajamad figures could be seen romping and chasing about the house. Then came devotions when Oupa read from the large family Bible. Maria jumped onto Oupa’s lap and listened as he read a passage from the New Testament.

When he came to the part that read: “... and Jesus said, ... suffer little children to come unto me and forbid them not” Maria tapped Oupa on the cheek and said:

“Oupa, why’s Jesus want the little children to suffer to him? That’s not nice!”

Trying to keep a straight face, Oupa explained to Maria that ‘suffer’ really meant ‘let’ in the olden days.

“Let little children come unto me,” he explained, “that was the language Jesus used.”

The scripture reading done, Oupa asked Maria if she wanted to say the prayer. Putting her hands together in supplication, Maria closed her eyes tight and prayed earnestly:

“Hello Jesus,” she said, “Thank you that we are on Oupa’s farm. Please suffer us to have a really good time and suffer us to be good. Also, ... for cripes sake, Jesus, ... please suffer Ouma not to give us anymore quinine tablets. Amen.”

There was a short pause. Maria had forgotten something:

“ ... oh, ... hey Jesus, ... come back, ... I’m not done yet. I also wanted to say it really would be o.k. for you to say ‘let’ instead of ‘suffer’. O.k.? ... now you can go, Jesus. Goodbye. Amen.”

After kisses goodnight, the children were sent off to bed. It was only the exciting sleeping arrangements that resulted in their immediate obedience as they took off down the long hallway to the large bedroom.

There, in the center of the room on the floor were seven mattresses, ... all lined up one next to the other, made up with fresh smelling, white, smoothly ironed cotton sheets and handmade quilts folded back from the pillows. Draped from a huge disk far, far above, close to the ceiling, was a giant mosquito net which spread out like the wings of an eagle and flowed down to the edges of the oversized bed on the floor where it was neatly tucked under. It is almost certain that this was Oupa’s design when, for sure, Ouma would have preferred seven separate, sensible beds!

The children howled with excitement, each claiming a mattress as they crawled under the mosquito net. Ouma was there to make sure no spaces were left open where mosquitoes could find their way in. All the excitement of the day soon found the children fast asleep, spread eagled, legs and arms tangled so that one could hardly be sure where one child began and the other left off while the distant roar of waking lion rolled against the stillness of the African night.

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Arising early, early, before dawn, as was his custom, Oupa silently headed for the kitchen to start the fire in the woodstove and to make the first pot of coffee. This done, he padded softly down the long hallway to the large bedroom where the sleeping children lay. Tiptoeing ever so quietly around the edge of the large bed, and raising the corner of the mosquito netting, he reached in to tug at one little girl’s toe.

“Maria, Maria, my little sweet one, wake up, it’s Oupa!” he whispered softly.

Maria’s eyes flew open. Instantly she responded, scrambling from under the net, into his waiting arms. Chuckling and hugging his little prize, Oupa carried her into the kitchen and sat her upon his knee.

“Oupa made us some coffee,” he said conspiratorially, “It’s the best coffee in the whole world! You’d like some, wouldn’t you?” he questioned, knowing full well that Maria’s mother did not approve of children drinking coffee. But what were Oupas for if not to spoil grandchildren. Besides, he saw no harm in a little treat for this, his most precious grand daughter!

“Yes, Oupa,” replied Maria, eyes wide, “I would love some coffee.”

“With milk and lots and lots of sugar?” asked Oupa with a big smile, as though the more sugar, the more love for this little girl.

“Lots and lots of sugar, please, Oupa!” Maria said, with a knowing twinkle in her eyes, catching the implication.

The tug at his heart at that moment caused his eyes to fill with tears. ‘All of life’s sadness that he’d experienced in his earlier years, and all of the pain that the rest of life could possibly hold, would be worth it if it meant that that would be the price to be paid for the love of this sweet, innocent child!’ he thought.

Maria watched in fascination, lip-synching the motion of his mouth as Oupa lit his pipe, sucking on it, letting out little puffs of smoke and lighting one match after another, until it finally ‘took’. She loved the aroma of the pipe tobacco, the smell of the coffee and most of all, the deep rumble of his voice, as he talked softly while they slurped their coffee and watched the darkness slip slowly away.

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Oupa told Maria the story of the huge, handsome rogue lion. He told of how the lion prowled the fences of the cattle enclosures in the dark of the night, stalking Oupa's cattle. He told of how lion, having once tasted the meat and blood of cattle, would lose their interest in the taste of wild game. He told of how he, Oupa, had gone out into the bushveldt where he suspected this lion used to hunt its prey and put out huge quantities of fresh antelope meat, in the hopes that the lion would eat it and regain its appetite for wild animals. He told of how this effort had failed. How this massive, hungry beast would again return, scale the fence, hoist the pick of its livestock onto its back, holding it steady with its strong jaws and leap back over the fence, disappearing into the thickets to devour its prey,—only to return again when it was hungry. Throughout the telling, Maria sat, wide-eyed, almost forgetting to breathe.

“Would you like to go and get dressed quietly, then come with Oupa so we can inspect the fences and see what that lion may have done during the night?” he asked.

‘What a question! What a proposition! What a thrill!’

“Yes, yes Oupa, I want to!” agreed Maria breathlessly.

“Quickly then, go put on your clothes, but be careful now, don't wake the others,” he warned as she hurried down the hall. In this little foray he was about to undertake, Oupa did not want to take more than one child at a time.

Slipping quickly into her clothes, grabbing her sandals and hurrying back to the kitchen, Maria bounced onto Oupa's lap, handing him her sandals, as if the chore of fastening them had always been his.

“The lion won't think we're cows or sheep and—um—you know,—um ...see us and — um”

Oupa smiled at Maria's attempted tactfulness in asking this question, the implications of which must be frightening her ... yet, she trusted him enough to still want to go along with him!

“Oh, no, my child, no—Oupa will take care of you,” he said fastening her sandals and hugging her to him.

“You see, Oupa has his big hunting rifle and no lion will ever, ever hurt you. Don't you ever be afraid. Madala Outa (respectful term for elderly tribesman) is coming along with his rifle too and he'll help shoot any nasty lion if it wants to hurt us.”

The Uvambo knew the habits of the wild game, could track them, predict them and anticipate them whenever and wherever necessary.

Leaving their footprints on the grass that was wet with the early morning dew, Maria made sure she held tightly onto Oupa's hand. As the massive gate was swung open on its hinges, Oupa explained that if ever any of the children discovered the gate had been left open, they were never to walk through it but were immediately to report it to him or to Ouma.

“No, Oupa, I'll never go through the gate, 'cause if I do, the lions will catch me and eat me!” she said with big eyes.

“That's right, my little girl,” Oupa said, “that's right.”

Oupa had no qualms about scaring the children in this instance because it could only assure their safety.

All along the outside of the high fence they trudged, the tall grass swishing around their legs, reaching to Maria's waist, sometimes to her face.

The sounds of predawn in the bushveldt of Africa are beyond astounding! It is as if a brilliant composer has drawn inspiration from nature, blending the songs of a thousand birds, intermingled with the grunting, barking and growling of wild game, putting it to music in a resounding chorus with chords and notes so unexpected and delightful as to stop one in wonder.

At this magic moment of the day, just before the sun blinks timidly through the trees, it seems as though nature is holding its breath. Then it spills its stunning beauty first across the dew-drenched grasses, then the valleys

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