

An Excerpt From This Book

On Saturday, all the morutis at the training centre had been invited to the funeral of a high-level village elder. At a village not far from Bobonong!

“Can’t I get out of this funeral, Tony?” I moaned. “It feels so morbid after all that’s happened. And I’m only a substitute teacher anyway.”

“Why, do you think that something bad has happened to Claire?” Tony asked.

“No, of course not,” I quickly changed my tune. What else was I supposed to say?

“Then I don’t see why you shouldn’t want to go. It’s an honour for us to be invited by the Kgosì.”

I relented, although it meant getting up at the crack of dawn for the bumpy ride to the remote village. I climbed sleepily into the back of the school’s pickup truck, called a bakkie. We had to be there by 7:00 am. Everyone was covered in blankets against the cold and huddled together. The bakkie rattled past quiet homesteads while I tried to make up for lost sleep. Luckily it didn’t rain.

We arrived when things were about to begin. We sat down with all the other guests in the sandy gathering place in the middle of the village. A tall young man in a white golf shirt walked past and I had to look twice. But it wasn’t the man, who had been to Tony’s house.

The speeches dragged on. Perhaps it was a good thing that I didn’t understand a word. I sat in the cold sand and looked around.

To our right, a number of village wives stirred the food in large, black tripods over open fires.

African hospitality knew no bounds and everybody, invited or not, would get their share of the funeral feast later.

I desperately wished I could stand up and stretch my legs, but I couldn’t let our Kgosì down. So I tried to look as solemn as possible, while shifting my weight ever so elegantly from one butt cheek to the other.

The speeches took more than two hours. We stood up on wobbly legs. Everyone lined up outside one of the huts I had studied during the endless address. So we did the same.

I began to wake up and realized that we were expected to file past the open coffin! A proper moruti had to show respect for the dead. Creepy.

A woman in traditional garb with heavily beaded braids walked around between the huts. I caught a glimpse for just a moment, then she was gone.

“Who was that?” I whispered to Neo behind me in the queue.

“Who?” Neo whispered back.

“The woman with the long, beaded hair.” I described what I had seen.

“Sounds like the sangoma.”

“A sangoma? What is she doing here?”

“Helps the spirit of the dead join the forefathers,” Neo answered.

My very first witchdoctor. Somehow she looked nothing like the wild-eyed sangoma in ‘Shaka Zulu’.

I wondered why she didn’t queue with the rest of us, then it was my turn to enter the hut, where the vigil was held. The deceased woman lay in state inside the coffin, with her hands folded on her chest. She seemed to sleep. It wasn’t pleasant, but also not half as bad as I had imagined.

There was a sudden high-pitched screeching outside. I left the hut quickly and saw three young women throwing themselves around in the sand. Screaming and crying with the white of their eyes showing as if they were in a trance. Others tried to help them up, but the women were beside themselves.

It was a sight the expatriates among us were unprepared for.

“This is quite normal at Tswana funerals,” Neo put us in the picture. “It’s even expected from female relatives.”

“Really?” I said.

“Yes, I hope it doesn’t upset you guys.”

“Bit strange, I’ll say,” Alfred mumbled.

Next thing we knew, we were stumbling up a stony footpath to a piece of ground shaded by thorn trees. A simple graveyard.

Pallbearers solemnly carried the coffin to an open hole in the ground. While the coffin was lowered, the three noisily grieving women tried to jump into the grave.

They were firmly taken away by villagers and a priest spoke a few winged words. As soon as the coffin was safely in the ground, the wake festivities began.

We teachers were directed to an elevated platform under a makeshift tent of red fabric. The other guests had to queue by the tripods for plates of food in the hot sun. The Kgosi and other dignitaries sat down with us and tried to make conversation to their best ability with Neo’s help.

The Kgosi saw to it that our plates were refilled with samp and goat’s meat that had been pounded into long fibrous strands. To my dismay I couldn’t eat the toughest, driest meat I had ever come across. So I praised the goat’s meat and stuck to the familiar coleslaw.

The sun was still high in the sky when we returned to Palapye.

The kraals that had been so quiet in the wee hours of the morning were now teeming hives of activity.

Women carried firewood and water pots nimbly on their heads. Children ran alongside our bakkie, cupped their hands and called: "Ke batlá mádi, ke batlá mádi!" I want money, I want money.

At a crossing, the bakkie had to wait for a herd of goats and the children climbed onto the tires. A little boy of about six held up a meter-long snake.

"Oh, yuck! That thing is as long as the child," Tony cried.

"He wants to show us how clever he was, killing the snake," Neo said.

"Wonderful. I hope it's not poisonous."

"No, it's not a poisonous snake."

Neo scolded them in a strict tone of authority. They immediately jumped off the car and ran back into the village.

He taught me to say 'Ga ke ná mádi', which meant 'I don't have money', to get rid of the little rascals in the next village.

I relaxed a little and took note of our surroundings. We were out in the bush, not in the Tuli Block, but close enough.

No chance of finding anything out about now. Perhaps it was my imagination, but I could feel Claire. How she laughed with us at the children's shenanigans.

I was stunned. Claire had to be here somewhere. Close by...