

Neighbours

by
Michael Stanley

There was trouble about the fence and trouble about the dog, but the worst trouble was about the goat.

Part of the problem was that no one in Gabane liked Nonyane. When he took over the small trading store in the village, he insisted on cash. To the well-off customers it was: “Dumela, Mma Molotsi. How is your sister? And your fine mother?” But for most he would add up the items, announce the price, and hold out his hand for money.

On the other hand Kutsi was a friendly man, and there was much sympathy for him over the issue of the fence. He had needed additional street frontage to fit in a large double gate for the delivery truck that was his livelihood. To achieve this, before Nonyane came to the neighbouring land, he had erected the fence at an angle to the road. A small wedge of the next property was thus included. Enough for the gate and the large garage he built for his truck.

Nonyane, however, spotted this infringement almost immediately.

“Rra Kutsi. There is a problem with your fence. It is not in the proper place. This section of it is on my side. And so your goats and fowls are on my side also.”

“Rra Nonyane. Good day, and I hope you are well?” As there was no response he plunged on. “I am well, although you did not ask. It is true that the fence is a little crooked. The man I paid to put it up was not too clever. He overcharged me, too. However, all the land belongs to the village and is given by the chief - as you well know - and the chief has accepted it. I have had no complaints before.”

Nonyane was unimpressed by this argument. “Why would anyone else complain? It is my land that has been stolen.” Kutsi’s mongrel Bina trotted over to the two and immediately started barking at Nonyane, jumping up and down and dancing side to side. Kutsi laughed and walked away, leaving Nonyane to continue the argument with the dog.

Nonyane, furious about the fence and Kutsi’s rudeness, took the matter to the local *kgotla*. When next the elders met with the chief to debate matters of import to the village, Nonyane made his complaint. It was a conundrum. Kutsi had certainly taken more of the street frontage than was fair. But no one had objected before. Could it not be argued that the layout was now altered by tradition? It was so argued. And what of the garage? It would be

very expensive to move. Still, by what right did Kutsi take the extra land in the first place? He could have asked the chief for more land, but admitted that he had not done so. The matter was argued back and forth by the elders at the *kgotla* while Chief Nkosi listened.

Nkosi was a wise man. He knew that a peaceful life required compromise. That right and wrong, like beauty, sometimes lay in the eye of the beholder. He also knew that the time to intervene was when all the others had had their say. He held up his hand for quiet.

“Is it not so,” he asked, “that the use of the land in the village is my gift?” There was nodded agreement. “I have given land use to Kutsi, and I have given it to Nonyane. So this is what I shall do. I will take back the wedge of Nonyane’s land that Kutsi mistakenly fenced and give it to Kutsi.” He held up his hand again to still the excitement of both sides. “But for this favour, I shall require a fine goat. And this goat I shall give to Nonyane in compensation for what he has lost. It is my wish that Nonyane and Kutsi live beside each other in peace.”

Everyone thought this a wise decision. Although it was not in his nature to be generous, Kutsi was careful to give the chief a fine goat, not his best but still a good specimen. Anything less would be an insult, not to Nonyane, but to the chief. Nonyane feigned disappointment with the outcome, but actually he was quite happy with the goat. It was plump, had good confirmation, and an attractive, groomed coat. Things were peaceful between the neighbours for a while.

Unfortunately Bina was not happy, and the goat was not happy. Bina had taken a dislike to Nonyane and barked whenever he came near the fence. It was particularly irritating for Nonyane to be barked at by a dog standing on what he still felt was his land. The goat, on the other hand, wanted to join the rest of his herd on Kutsi’s side of the fence. It was forever trying to break through the fence, bleating its disapproval at the enforced separation. To make things worse, Bina now regarded the goat as an intruder and vigorously fended off its advances with barks and snarls.

Then Bina started barking at night, for no apparent reason, racing up and down the fence. Sometimes Kutsi could see a light late into the night. It was very suspicious. People who worked hard and feared God went to bed early and rose early. They didn’t wander around late at night causing other people’s dogs to bark. Indeed, why was Bina so set against Nonyane? What was it that Nonyane did in the early hours of the morning? These were good questions, Kutsi thought, and he put them to Nonyane when he came to the fence to complain about the barking.

“Your dog keeps me awake all night. He barks for no reason.” Nonyane lent across the fence, momentarily reoccupying part of his stolen land.

“What is it that you do there late at night? Sometimes the light is on when I call the dog in.”

“The light is on because the barking wakes me up! What I do – when your flea-bitten dog permits it – is to sleep! Are you an idiot?”

“Bina never caused trouble before you came. He doesn’t like you. Why is that?”

“Perhaps he barked at the people who lived here before. How would I know?”

Kutsi shrugged. “Dogs bark at strangers. That is what they are for. It is the way of dogs.”

Nonyane clenched his teeth. “We will see about that,” he said.

At this point the goat made a foray at the fence almost knocking into Nonyane.

Kutsi smiled broadly. “He knows where he ought to be,” he said turning away. He added over his shoulder: “It is the way of goats.”

A few days later, the morning after a night of prolonged barking, as Kutsi reversed his decrepid delivery truck from the garage, he saw Bina lying near the fence. Immediately he knew something was wrong. The dog always bounded up to the vehicle as he left, but today there was no such exuberance. He jumped from the truck and walked over. Bina was lying on his side with his tongue hanging out. He was dead.

“Thobela. Thobela, come here,” Kutsi shouted. His wife hurried from the house, two children in tow.

“Look what has happened to Bina,” he exclaimed.

“Someone has poisoned him,” Thobela said.

“Bina would never eat anything I didn’t give her.”

“It’s Nonyane,” Thobela cried, pointing across the fence. “He hated the poor dog. He is certainly to blame for this.” She picked up a handful of sand and threw it over the fence towards Nonyane’s house.

“And what about the children?” she asked, pulling them close. “This man is a bad man. I’m scared for the children. Maybe he will kill them for *muti*. Aai, I am afraid!”

Kutsi shook his head. “He is a pig, but he wouldn’t dare touch us.”

They buried the dog at the back of the garden. Kutsi read a verse from the bible, where Noah had the animals two by two. Thobela held the crying children. Then they threw earth into the grave and covered it with stones.

Kutsi vowed that he would get even.

The next day Nonyane came home, and there was no sign of the goat. It infuriated him that the goat still wanted to return to his enemy. He had fed it for nearly a month, but it had no loyalty. He checked the fence. Sure enough he found a place where the goat could have forced a way through. The man who had built Kutsi's fence without any geometry skills, also had very little engineering expertise. The wires were not tensed; the fence was not taut.

He stormed to his neighbour's house. Thobela opened the door in response to his angry banging. She shrank back. "Rra Nonyane, what do you want? We are having our supper." But the man forced past her into the kitchen where the family was gathered around the table. He glared at Kutsi.

"Where is my goat?" he demanded.

Kutsi looked at the food in front of him, untouched, awaiting the saying of Grace. "How should I know where your goat is? Why should I care?"

Nonyane looked at the food. "What is it you are eating?" he demanded.

Thobela replied. "It is stew," she said. "Goat stew, if you want to know."

Nonyane could hardly speak. "He came through the fence, didn't he? Or you stole him!"

Kutsi looked at him. "I bought half a goat in town. Some is in the fridge. Some is here in the stew."

"You are eating my goat!"

Kutsi shrugged. "I don't know whose goat it is. I bought the goat in town – paid far too much for it, especially if it was yours. Now you must go, so that we can thank Jesus for our food and satisfy our hunger."

Nonyane glared at him, his face full of anger. He turned and left. Kutsi looked satisfied, but Thobela was scared. She ate very little.

The next day, his deliveries done, Kutsi came home and demanded lunch. Thobela was busy cleaning.

"What do you want?"

"Some of the goat. It was good. I like goat."

His wife took a container from the fridge and threw some stew in a pot and started to reheat it.

"Is there no pap? I can't eat it like that." He opened the fridge and helped himself to a beer that was barely cooler than room temperature.

“I’m not starting to make pap now. There is none left over,” Thobela said sullenly.

“I’ll have some of the vegetables.” Kutsi pointed to the jars of green beans that Thobela had preserved. He had obtained a special price for a overly large parcel of beans.

“They are for a special occasion!” But Thobela opened a jar and dumped some on the plate with the stew. She shoved it in front of her husband.

“Where did you get the goat?” she demanded.

Kutsi finished a mouthful. “What’s the matter with you? I bought it. I got a good price for the half. Why don’t you eat some?” Thobela shook her head. She didn’t want to eat that goat.

By his second beer, Kutsi was brooding about his dog. He wasn’t satisfied. He wanted the matter investigated at the next *kgotla*. He drained the beer and went to see the chief. There he related the story of Bina and asked to present his case to the *kgotla*.

“Your visit is most convenient,” the chief said. “Only this morning Nonyane arrived to complain that you had stolen the goat I had given him. And that you ate the goat in a stew.” Kutsi was about to protest, but was silenced by the chief’s raised hand. “Now you say he killed your dog and threatened your family.” He stood up, angry. “You will appear at the *kgotla* tomorrow afternoon, and we will listen to both of you.”

Kutsi left the chief and finished his afternoon’s work. But that evening he started to feel unwell - his mouth was dry, and he had some difficulty focussing. I never get ill, he thought. It must be related to the death of the dog. Nonyane has put the witchdoctor onto me. I will tell the chief tomorrow.

The next morning he felt worse. Still the dry mouth, and his vision had deteriorated – he was seeing double. Still, he had no fever and had much to do, so he took several aspirins and set off for the day’s deliveries before he was due at the *kgotla* at 4pm.

Chief Nkosi was not happy. His elegant solution to the Nonyane-Kutsi conflict had dissolved into chaos. Nkosi shook his grey head. He would have to teach the two a lesson on how neighbours should behave.

By three o’clock people had started to gather for the *kgotla*. It was traditional for relatives of those appearing in the proceedings to gather and provide support. Besides, the elders might even call on them to provide information for the deliberations. Having come to the village from the north, Nonyane didn’t have any relatives to support him. However,

Kutsi's family was there in force. The family had lived here for generations and were plentiful. They sat in front of the elders, umbrellas unfurled to ward off the fierce sun.

There was one other dispute before the *kgotla*, and the chief heard it first because he feared the disagreement between Nonyane and Kutsi would take a long time to resolve.

As the arguments in the first case wound down, Thobela became increasingly worried. Kutsi had not yet arrived. She stood up and looked around, but he was nowhere to be seen. A few minutes later, Chief Nkosi asked Nonyane and Kutsi to come forward. Nonyane did so, but there was no Kutsi. It was very rude and disrespectful to keep the chief waiting, so Thobela was embarrassed for her husband. Perhaps his delivery truck had broken down on the way back from Mochudi. She dialed his mobile phone. There was no answer. Eventually she stood up and approached the chief.

"Chief Nkosi," she whispered in his ear. "Kutsi does not answer his phone. I worry something must have happened to him. You know he has always respected you. I must go and look for him."

Angrily Chief Nkosi ended the *kgotla*, ordering Thobela to have Kutsi come and see him. Thobela walked home with the embarrassment of her family on her shoulders. What had happened to Kutsi?

As she approached the house, she saw Kutsi's truck parked outside. How could he have forgotten? she wondered.

She pushed open the door and gasped. Kutsi was lying twisted on the floor, his face contorted, mouth open. Thobela screamed and rushed to him.

"I can't breathe," he gasped, his hoarse voice difficult to hear.

She screamed again and again. Within minutes neighbours had gathered and an ambulance was called. Kutsi was soon on his way to the Princess Marina hospital in Gaborone, nearly twenty kilometres away, with the paramedics doing what they could to keep him alive.

The doctors were puzzled. Kutsi continued to deteriorate even though his pulse, temperature, and blood pressure were normal. His breathing became more laboured, and he could barely speak. He had great difficulty swallowing the medicine they gave him.

"It's Nonyane. He's a witchdoctor. He's cursed me." He whispered at the doctors. He was barely audible. "It's Nonyane." That was the last thing he said.

The next morning the village turned out to pay their respects to Kutsi and to sympathize with Thobela, who cried and wailed in sadness and fear. Later in the day, when it was cooler,

Chief Nkosi arrived with some of the elders. When she saw him, Thobela screamed that it was Nonyane who had killed her husband. Had Kutsi not named him with his dying breath? She told how Nonyane had barged into their house just as they were about to say Grace, accusing Kutsi of stealing his goat and eating it.

“Kutsi bought half a goat from the Ever Fresh butchery,” she shouted. “You can ask Thebe there. He bought it from him!” She turned and pointed at Nonyane’s house.

“Nonyane is evil! At night he is making *muti* there in the house. That is why Bina barked at night. That is why Nonyane killed him. Now he has cursed Kutsi and killed him too! You must arrest him. Put him in jail.” She started to cry.

A ripple of support ran through the throng. Several men suggested waiting for Nonyane to return in order to beat him until he confessed to whatever witchcraft he had used. Chief Nkosi sensed the growing swell of anger and demanded silence.

“It is only I who can punish Nonyane if he has done something wrong. You all know the game we played when we were young. We tried to guess what type of bird was calling in a tree. And often we were wrong because it was a drongo, which is very clever and makes the calls of other birds. So before we punish Nonyane, we must shake the tree to make sure what bird is in it.”

The crowd murmured, appreciating the wisdom of Nkosi, but still wanting action.

“We will have a *kgotla* in two days,” Nkosi continued. “Then I will tell you what I have found out.”

Chief Nkosi realised the situation was not one for him or the *kgotla* to resolve, so he telephoned the policeman son of his friend Wilmon.

“Detective Bengu,” he said after being put through to Assistant Superintendent David “Kubu” Bengu’s office in Gaborone. “I am an old friend of your father. He has told me many times how clever you are catching people who have done wrong.” He quickly summarized what had happened over the past week. “I need your assistance. My people are angry because they think one neighbour has killed another. They want to beat Nonyane, maybe kill him. But it is the anger of Kutsi’s wife that stirs them, not proof that Nonyane is guilty. I do not know whether he killed Kutsi, but if he did it is no longer my responsibility, and the police must take over. I have called a *kgotla* in two days and want to tell them what actually happened. I wish for you to come and see for yourself and decide what should be done. I will be at the customary court building in the morning.”

“Yes, certainly I will do what I can to help,” Kubu replied. Although he thought it would be a fruitless effort, he agreed, mainly because of the chief’s friendship with his father, to visit the village first thing in the morning.

Kubu set off early in a vain attempt to avoid the traffic on the Gabane road. It’s busy all day, he thought, as he swerved to avoid a minibus taxi that had shot onto the road from the pavement. But it only took him just over half an hour to get to the village, where he soon found the customary court enclosure nestled below the hills at the top of the main road. Kubu wondered whether the buffalo head sculpted on the gate was a warning about the chief’s temperament. He found some of the tribal elders seated under a tree.

“*Dumela*. Greetings. I am looking for Chief Nkosi,” Kubu said as he approached.

The man closest to the tree stood up. “I am Nkosi.”

“*Dumela*, Chief Nkosi. I am Assistant Superintendent David Bengu. Everyone calls me Kubu! You spoke to me on the phone yesterday.”

“Welcome Kubu.” The chief’s eyes twinkled. “I can see why you have such a name.” He glanced at Kubu’s considerable bulk. “We are fortunate to have a hippo in our midst. I have known your father for many years. How is he?”

“He is well, as is my mother. I am very fortunate.”

Over a cup of strong tea, without biscuits to Kubu’s disappointment, Chief Nkosi told Kubu everything he knew about the Nonyane-Kutsi affair.

“Nonyane was not happy when he found Kutsi’s fence on his land. Then Kutsi was suspicious that Nonyane may have used muti to kill his dog. Next Nonyane’s goat disappeared, and Nonyane is certain that Kutsi stole it and ate it.” He shook his grey head sadly. “It is not like it used to be. When neighbours were friends and helped each other. Now they fight. And maybe they kill each other.”

Kubu listened to the details, and then took his leave.

“Chief Nkosi, I understand you have a difficult problem. This man Nonyane seems to be a suspect, but the evidence is circumstantial. It isn’t clear how Kutsi died. I don’t know. But I will do my best.”

Despite the extra drive, Kubu decided to make the Princess Marina hospital his first stop. He wanted to question the doctors about what Kutsi had said, and he wanted to link up with Ian MacGregor, the forensic pathologist. He needed to be as well informed as possible before he met Kutsi’s wife.

The doctor and one of the nurses confirmed that Kutsi had accused Nonyane of witchcraft, but that he had said little else, saving his strength to breathe. After that Kubu sought out Ian in his laboratory attached to the hospital. He found the pathologist in a pensive mood.

“Let’s get some coffee,” said Ian, by way of greeting.

The reception area of the hospital had a vending machine which produced a foul brew, in Kubu’s opinion. Ian commented, “At least it’s wet and has caffeine.” Despite black looks from the staff, Ian filled his pipe and sucked in the moist tobacco aroma, but made no attempt to light it. At last he was ready to talk.

“It’s puzzling, Kubu. Nowadays one always suspects AIDS when a youngish man dies, but there is no wasting, and anyway they did an HIV test which was negative. The early symptoms looked like a stroke, but that isn’t consistent with what came next. A snake bite was a possibility, but they examined the body and found no fang puncture marks. The doctor did a pretty thorough job.” He shook his head. “Could be some sort of rare disease, but I doubt it. It all happened too quickly.”

Kubu nodded, impatient.

“Well, what do you think killed him then?”

“You can’t rule out witchcraft.”

“Witchcraft!” Kubu exploded. “You’re not serious.”

“Oh, yes. Kutsi thought Nonyane himself, or some witchdoctor, had cursed him. There are many cases where a powerful curse has led to death. There is no physical cause, just the victim’s belief that he will die. And he does.”

This was exactly the scenario Kubu and Nkosi wanted to avoid. “What about poisoning?”

Ian shrugged. “Yes, that’s a possibility too. Nothing obvious, though. No almond smell or anything like that. And the symptoms don’t indicate any common poison. But the desert is full of rare plants that hardly have names. Who knows what one can find out there? But maybe I’m missing something.” He seemed to be about to say more, but sucked again on his unlit pipe. “I’ll do a full autopsy. Perhaps then we’ll know more.”

Disappointed, Kubu clambered to his feet. “Well, I’m going to drive back and visit the widow. She’s the one making the claims about Nonyane, so I’d better see if she has any real evidence against the man.”

“May I tag along? I’d like to see his house, where he was eating and such like.”

Kubu was surprised, but Ian was his friend and the company would be welcome.

Kubu and Ian found Thobela with her family and her children around her. She seemed calm and took them into the kitchen for coffee and privacy. She offered them homemade bread with jam, but to Kubu's disappointment, Ian refused firmly, if graciously, for both of them. At another time, Thobela would have been embarrassed to have a senior official and a white doctor in her kitchen, but now she was beyond that.

"Why do you not arrest this evil man? He sits there in his house watching us. Perhaps I am next, or the children. What will you say then?"

"Mma," said Kubu, "I am a senior officer in the CID, and this is the chief police doctor here with me. You can see how seriously we, and the chief who asked for us, are taking this case. I believe it will be solved in the next few days." Kubu wondered if there was any chance of that happening. Then he asked Thobela about their friends, enemies, family. She kept coming back to Nonyane. Ian took his coffee and walked around the kitchen, stopping to look at various items. But he touched nothing. At last, when there was a break in the interaction with Kubu, he ventured a question.

"Mma, would you tell me exactly what Rra Kutsi ate on the day before he became ill?"

She gestured to a row of boxes of cornflakes – their breakfast since Kutsi had discovered an extra carton loaded onto his truck – and mentioned the leftover goat and the vegetables for lunch, and the pap and wors they had shared for dinner. Ian asked if anyone else in the family had felt unwell, but she shook her head.

"Was there anything that only Rra Kutsi ate or drank?"

She thought for a moment. "The leftover goat stew and the beans. Two beers at lunchtime and two more in the evening." She hesitated. "Maybe he had something in the morning when he was doing deliveries. He was sick of cornflakes. And you have to throw out the weevils."

Ian was looking at the jars of preserved goods supporting the cornflake boxes. Something stirred in his memory.

"The beans. Were any leftover?"

Thobela pulled a container from the fridge, still a quarter full, and put it on the table. Ian unscrewed the lid and carefully examined the contents, but nothing seemed untoward. "I'd like to take this with me," he said.

"There's nothing wrong with the beans," Thobela said. "I made them myself. And how could Nonyane know which jar Kutsi would eat? How would he get into the house?"

Ian had no answer for this, and Kubu took up the questioning again. Shortly after, they left with the remains of the beans but little else to show for the visit.

As they drove off they noticed that Nonyane's windows had been broken. It seemed the people were already taking matters into their own hands.

Ian returned to Gaborone in his own car and Kubu continued to investigate. Thebe at the Ever Fresh butchery had no recollection of Kutsi buying half a goat, so Kubu asked the police in Gabane to investigate any other butchers there. No doubt they made jokes behind his back about why he would be looking for only *half* a goat, but that bothered him not at all. Next he visited Nonyane at his store. It was empty; no one would shop there now. Nonyane closed up and took the detective to his small office at the back. He emphatically denied any involvement with Kutsi's death, but he came clean about the dog.

"It made me crazy. Always barking, even in the middle of the night. And Kutsi did nothing. He didn't care. Eventually I could stand it no longer. I consult a man sometimes. On matters of love. You know how it is. Well, he said he could help me. He gave me some muti, said I must mix it with meat and give it to the dog. Then it would stop barking at me. When it killed the dog I was very upset, but this man just laughed at me. 'Well, it's not barking at you, is it?' he said. I won't ever go to him again."

Kubu left, worried. He believed Nonyane. Why admit poisoning the dog if he had poisoned Kutsi too? But what then had caused Kutsi's death? Could someone else be behind it? What about the grieving widow who was so keen to lay the blame next door? She would have no trouble slipping something into Kutsi's food; no one else could be sure who would eat what. His mind was turning over this new possibility when he heard from the Gabane police.

"Can you believe our luck, Detective Bengu? The very first butcher we visited said he traded Kutsi half a slaughtered goat. In exchange for a live one. And Kutsi said something strange that the man remembered. He said that he'd exchanged the goat for a dog."

Perhaps the issues of the goat and the dog are resolved, Kubu thought. But that is not what the chief and the *kgotla* will want to know about tomorrow. They will want Nonyane's head, and failing that, they may want mine.

But when he got back to Gaborone, Ian was waiting with a new twist.

This time the whole village turned out for the *kgotla*. There were not enough seats so people stood around at the back. Thobela sat surrounded by her family and friends, a big

gathering under a sea of colourful umbrellas. Nonyane sat alone. He looked very scared in the midst of the hostile crowd. Kubu sat next to the chief, with Ian at his side. He had insisted that Ian come to tell his story himself. Assuming his strange idea with its roots in his training in Scotland could be confirmed, of course. If not, Kubu meant to arrest Nonyane on suspicion of murder. Not because he believed the man guilty, but because he had to get him away from the crowd which could easily become a mob. He had asked the chief to delay the *kgotla*, but Nkosi had refused. “You must tell us what you have found. The people are too angry to wait.” So here they sat, waiting for Ian’s cellphone to ring.

At last the chief spoke, and the crowd quietened. At a leisurely pace he outlined the whole history of the conflict, starting with the fence, then the dog, then the goat, and culminating in Kutsi’s horrific death. “Now the police will tell us what actually happened,” he concluded with a confidence Kubu couldn’t duplicate.

Kubu hauled himself to his feet and wished he had eaten a better lunch. He had to face the crowd on a half-empty stomach. He began with the story of the goat in full detail. It would be best to show that Kutsi, too, had been at fault. Then he told what had happened to the dog. There was an angry growl from the crowd. It seemed to them a small step from poisoning a dog to poisoning a man.

It was then that Ian’s cellphone rang. Kubu sighed. At least now they would know one way or the other. He waited while Ian listened to his phone. Then Ian nodded, and Kubu let out the breath he hadn’t realised he’d been holding.

“Dr. MacGregor is the chief police doctor for all Botswana. He will now explain the poisoning of Rra Kutsi,” he said and sat down.

The crowd was puzzled. Why was this white man telling the story instead of the important detective? But Ian had lived for many years in Botswana, and he spoke good if accented Setswana.

He nodded to the chief and to the crowd and began with a list of his qualifications. What he would say would count for little if they didn’t believe him.

“When I was a young man,” he began, “I trained at a small country hospital in Scotland, like the one at Mochudi.” He described where one might find Scotland. The people were listening now, caught up in the story. “One day a man became very ill after eating a can of fish. This man was poisoned by a very bad poison which comes when food goes rotten in a most unusual way. The food can be sealed – in a can or in a jar – but there are seeds of a germ that can grow unless they have been killed by long boiling. These germs even grow in the dark or where there is no air. This is how Rra Kutsi died.” He held up his cellphone. “I

have just this minute heard from our laboratory where the test was done. Rra Kutsi died of botulism – the poison made by these germs - which was in the jar of beans he ate with his lunch.”

There was chaos. Everyone spoke at once. Thobela screamed that there was nothing wrong with her food. The chief and other elders stood up and told the gathering to be quiet. At last it was possible for Ian to answer questions.

Thobela’s brother jumped to his feet. “Is it not possible for someone to put this poison in the food? Someone who hated Kutsi? Like Nonyane.”

Ian shook his head. “How could he do that, Rra? The jars were sealed.” He looked at Thobela, and she reluctantly nodded. “And how was he to get into the house? Also, this is not a poison you can find or buy. It is rare. You would need a laboratory to make it.” “What about witchcraft? What about a curse?” Thobela’s sister pointed to Nonyane. “Kutsi said that man cursed him!” But Ian answered everyone’s questions with firm confidence, and eventually the mood shifted. Thobela started to cry quietly, accepting that her beans, boiled, but not for long enough, had led to her husband’s death. Not Nonyane. Not witchcraft.

At last there was quiet, and Chief Nkosi summed up: Kutsi had died by accident, and Nonyane was innocent and free to go. Kubu noted with relief the nods of acceptance from the crowd.

When they left after the profuse thanks of the chief and the elders, Kubu gave Ian a slap on the back. “Well, you left that till the last minute, Dr. MacGregor, but you came through in the end.” Ian started to answer, but his cellphone interrupted him. He listened for a few minutes, thanked the caller and hung up. Then he turned to Kubu with a broad smile. “That was the lab. They’ve confirmed that Kutsi died of botulism. And it *was* the bottled beans that were contaminated.”

Kubu’s gaped. “But didn’t they tell you that earlier? The call at the *kgotla*?”

Ian shook his head. “That was someone trying to sell me life insurance. But I knew I was right.” For a moment Kubu was stunned. Then he started to laugh.

It was a month after the funeral, and Thobela was alone, the children at school. When she opened the door in response to a firm knock, she was startled to see Nonyane. He was dressed smartly in a dark grey suit, matching felt hat, polished black shoes. He was holding a cardboard carton with both hands.

“What do you want, Rra Nonyane?” asked Thobela.

The man looked down at the cardboard box. "I have come to offer my condolences, and pay my respects, as a good neighbour should. I regret that Rra Kutsi was not my friend. Nevertheless I am saddened by his passing on." He paused. "May I come in?"

Thobela hesitated, but in the end this man had not harmed Kutsi, and she was curious about the carton. She led him to the small lounge, pointed to the couch, and sat opposite him in the farthest chair.

Nonyane sat with the box on his lap, looking around the room, at a loss for words. "You have a fine house," he said at last. "Rra Kutsi was a good provider." His embarrassment made him uncomfortable. "I am thankful that the fat detective proved me not guilty of your husband's death. It was a very bad time for me too, you know. It is very frightening to be accused of witchcraft and having rocks coming through your windows." Thobela nodded, but said nothing.

"I brought you this." He opened the box revealing a nondescript puppy, just weaned. He placed the scrawny, now yelping, creature in Thobela's arms, where it set about testing her fingers with milk teeth. In spite of herself, she smiled and cradled it. "The children will be pleased," she said. But her face darkened at the thought of her fatherless children and all their expenses.

Nonyane seemed to pick up the thought. "Is there any money now?"

"A little. There is the truck – I can sell that – and this house. That's all."

Nonyane nodded, and there was silence again. "Please ask me if you need a man to help you with something. I am right next door." He rose to go, and Thobela saw him out. At the door he turned back, put on his hat, and took her hand.

"We are neighbours who are both alone. May I call again? When it is convenient?"

Thobela did not smile, but she did not pull back her hand. After a moment she nodded.

"Yes, Rra Nonyane. When it is convenient," she said. Then she closed the door and returned to the lounge. The puppy was wagging its tail, unashamed. Next to it was a small, yellow puddle.