

The Ring

by

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I guess some people are just nasty. Take Miss Joubert, for example. Her house is number 15 in that big fancy complex on Fairfield Street. Rich people live there and they throw out lots of good stuff, so I get there early on Thursdays before the Pickitup people come through to collect. Some people are nice and put the good stuff separately, but most times I just have to dig through the bins to find the plastic and the cardboard and other things that I can sell. That's okay. I shake them off, squash them as flat as I can, and pack them into my trolley. It's a platform on wheels with sacking that can stretch up the sides, and by the time I'm finished my rounds on a good day, it's almost as tall as me.

But Miss Joubert, she was different. First time I see her, she drives out of the electric gates in her fancy silver BMW and pulls over on the wrong side of the road next to me. I think maybe she has some food she doesn't want anymore. Sometimes people do that—give me half a loaf of old bread or something left over. But not her. She rolls down her window and starts going at me.

“What you doing in my garbage, hey? You leave that alone! It doesn't belong to you.”

I tell her I'm doing recycling, but she cuts me off. “I left that out for the Pickitup people to take away. Till they do, it's mine. You leave it alone. *Voetsek!*”

I'm offended. I tell her I'm a licenced conveyer of recycling, and once her rubbish is on the street, it belongs to anyone who wants it. The business about the licence I make up, but she doesn't know that. Anyway, she's not impressed. She just swears at me and grabs a spray can from under the driver's seat—a big yellow can of Doom, like I'm an insect or something. I'm taking no chances, so I move away and start on another bin. She shouts at me again, and then drives off, so I go back to her bin. I don't know what all the fuss was about—all I get are some dirty cardboard boxes and some old fruit she threw out. Nothing good.

I see her again the next week, but by then I've found out her name. I asked Freddie—he's the gardener at the complex. He does a great job, place looks like a park. Not one of those Johannesburg city parks with weeds and rubbish, but really, really nice. Okay, he's not the brightest. You have to go slow with him, but a great gardener. His passion.

“That’s Miss Joubert,” he tells me and makes a face. “I don’t like her. Always something wrong, always shouting at me. Says she’s going to get me fired cause I’m a *moron*. What’s a moron, Mr Malele?”

He always calls me Mr Malele. Nice and respectful of his elders.

“She told me to *voetsek*,” I tell him.

“I can’t lose my garden. I just *can’t*.” He looks like his mother just died.

“Hey, she can’t do nothing to you, Freddie. You’re black and disabled. Gold for them. And you do a great job. They’ll *never* fire you.”

He nods doubtfully, still looking really unhappy.

Anyway, so when she drives up to me the next week, I’m going to sweet talk her. Nice and polite. Get her on my side.

“Miss Joubert, ma’am,” I begin. “I’m so sorry about our little misunderstanding—”

She doesn’t even let me finish the sentence. She starts swearing at me and spraying Doom, so I have to run backwards. I trip over some bottles I’d taken from her rubbish, and only save myself by grabbing at a bin.

The next week I don’t touch her bin till she’s left, but when I dig in it there’s a loud snap—gives me a fright, I can tell you—and I jerk my hand out. There’s a *mousetrap* in there, brand new. No dead mouse. She put it in to get me, hid it under some newspaper. Like I said, a really nasty person. I got a nice price for that trap, though.

So, I’m nervous, right? Who knows what she’s got in there this week. I even use old gardening gloves that I found in number 13’s bin, but they’re not much help. Full of holes and the fingers stick through. Anyway, this time right on top I find a clear plastic bag, and it’s got a mask or something in it, all covered with red goo. So, I stand back and take a careful look. Could be black magic. Maybe she’s a witch doctor. Maybe it’s a curse. Maybe I should just leave her rubbish alone after all.

Enoch is with me, and he’s working the next bin. He’s sort of my partner, more like an apprentice. People throw away a lot of good stuff and you have to get in early, so he helps me, and we move through the area much more quickly. And it’s good to have two people pulling that trolley into town. Sometimes it’s damn heavy up those hills around Melville *koppies*.

“What you found?”

“Nothing. I don’t know.” He comes over anyway, takes a look, and jerks back.

“*Eish*,” he says, looking into the bin. “It’s covered in blood.”

“Don’t be stupid. She’s done that to scare us. Tomato sauce.”

Enoch looks relieved, sticks his finger into the red stuff, and takes a taste.

“Ugh!” He spits. “Blood, definitely blood.”

Well, maybe it’s a pig’s head or something she’s thrown out. Something really good. So, I pull it out and yank off the plastic bag. It’s a head all right, but it’s not from a pig. The head belongs to Miss Joubert.

I dropped the head right away, and she’s looking up at us from the top of the bin.

“We’ll have to tell the cops,” Enoch says.

I shake my head. What’s he thinking of? Our job is to *avoid* the cops. The cops’ job is to make people like us *pay* them to leave us alone. If we tell the cops, it’ll be expensive and take lots of time. Sometimes Enoch can be a bit like Freddie.

“No way. We just leave it.”

After a moment, Enoch gets it and nods. “Put it back in the bag,” he says.

“What for?”

“Cause the Pickitup guys will see it for sure. And they know we go through these bins. And there’s fingerprints and stuff.”

I think he’s been watching too much CSI on TV, but he has a point. I reach into the trolley to get a bag and some newspaper.

“You guys find something?”

I nearly jump out of my skin, but it’s just Freddie standing at the complex gate watching us.

“How’s it, Freddie? No, nothing special. Just the usual.”

He nods, and gives me the smile. He has a smile to melt hearts if he only knew it.

Just as I’m about to shove the head in the bag, I see something gold shining in the hair. Shit, it could be real gold. She seemed like a real jewellery sort of woman, what with that BMW and the Fairfield address. I know it’s a mistake, but I can’t stop myself. I yank it to get it off, and it comes away with some hair still stuck to it. I shove it quickly into my pocket so the others don’t see, stuff the bag with the head under some cardboard, and wipe my hands on some newspaper. Waste of good paper, but I throw it on top of the bin, and say bye to Miss Joubert. No one’s going to find her head, or Enoch’s ‘fingerprints and stuff’, in the middle of the rubbish dump, except maybe one of the wild dogs that hang around there. Then we hear the Pickitup

truck in the next street, so we leave the rest of the bins in Fairfield unchecked and move on to Johannes Street.

Of course, we know who killed her—that serial killer. The Beheader, the newspapers call him, always leaving a quote from the Koran and a headless body. The cops think he takes the heads as trophies or uses them for black magic. I wonder if they've ever looked in the rubbish? Maybe too simple for them.

Anyway, we do the next street, but we're shaken up and slow. Funny thing. The Pickup truck doesn't catch up to us. I have a bad feeling about that, and I'm right. Pretty soon we hear the sirens.

A good thing about the recycling business is that no one knows you. Maybe they see you every week, but most rich people don't take any notice of poor people digging through their garbage. Makes them feel uncomfortable. So even if they give us something, no one asks our names, or where we live, or who we are. We're like the beggars, or the parking guards who 'look after' your car while you're shopping—you just accept that's the way it is in Johannesburg.

That's what I tell Enoch. He's nervous about people knowing we went through that garbage before the Pickup people got there. I tell him even the people who drove past wouldn't have noticed us, let alone remembered what we look like. But he says he's moving to Cosmos City.

"You mad? Those people aren't rich. They won't throw out good stuff. You'll starve."

Turns out he has a second cousin there. He says maybe he'll leave Johannesburg altogether. I wish him luck and leave it at that.

When I have a chance, I take a quick look at the ring. It's really big, a heavy gold band. I can't remember her fingers, but I think maybe it wasn't hers. That gives me a funny feeling. Maybe it was the man's ring, and it got tangled in her hair when he cut off her head. Suddenly I'm not sure that selling it would be such a good idea.

That night it's hard to sleep. I share a few *Klippies* and coke with Miriam, but brandy doesn't really relax me. Makes me more alert, gets my mind working, but I eventually doze off.

In the middle of the night I'm thirsty and sweating from nasty dreams—men after me swinging axes, blood everywhere. I think I'll never get back to sleep because of Miriam's snoring, but I do.

I wake up screaming with my eyes stinging. The dream was so clear I remember it like it was real. It was Miss Joubert, stark naked, holding a can of Doom, and walking towards me. She was saying that I'd stolen her ring and I'd better give it back. I don't know how she talked or how I knew who she was since she had no head. But I did. Then she sprayed me in the face with the Doom.

Miriam sits up and looks at me. "You and *Klippies* don't mix."

"What time is it?"

"It's going on five."

She goes to make the coffee. A good woman, that Miriam.

The next week when I'm back in Fairfield Street, there's a car parked outside the complex. A coloured guy gets out and comes over to me.

"You Malele?" He lights a fag and offers me one. Why not? I thank him, and he lights me up. You never find fags in the rubbish, just *stompies* where you can maybe dig out bits of unburnt tobacco. Maybe ten of them gives you a roll-your-own. So we smoke for a bit, and I wonder what he wants. Like I said, no one stops to talk to recyclers.

Turns out he's a cop—Captain Willemse—but he's not after money, and so right away I know I must be careful. He wants to know about last week.

"No, sir, I saw nothing. We were a bit late starting so we skipped this street and went straight from Kessel to Johannes."

Why miss out the best street? he wants to know. And who was this 'we'?

I take a long drag while I wonder how I managed to slip up twice in one sentence when I was being careful. I also realise this guy isn't stupid.

I shrug. "Us recyclers. Sometimes we do that. Work every other street. Others come behind us later. Share, you know?" I can see he doesn't believe me. Shit.

"So you weren't even in Fairfield Street?" He gives me a hard look. "You heard about the Beheader murder here, didn't you? You know the Pickup people found the victim's head in the rubbish in this street? They don't know which bin it was in because it fell out of a bag only when they got to the end of the street. You know nothing about that?"

The victim? Hard to think of Miss Joubert as a victim, but I guess that's what she was. I nod firmly. "Like I told you."

He gives me another long, hard look. “So, you won’t mind coming down to the Fairlands police station and giving a statement. And we’ll take fingerprints. Just to eliminate you.”

Shit. Maybe Cosmos City has possibilities after all.

“Sure,” I say. “Let me finish my rounds, and I’ll come over there.”

But Willemse wasn’t born yesterday. “We’ll do it now. Get in the car.” There’s an anger in his voice that I don’t understand. Like I insulted him. I don’t like it one bit.

And I have to get rid of that ring. It seems to be weighing down my pants.

I asked Freddie to watch my trolley, but that was the day gone. After I’d given the statement, and they’d taken pictures and fingerprints, they let me go but I knew I was in trouble. I was pretty sure that between the plastic bags and the newspaper I’d used to wipe my hands, they were going to match my prints. I wish I’d watched more CSI.

Freddie had my trolley safe inside the gate and had even collected some bits of plastic and bottles for me. I’m wondering how Willemse knew me, but Freddie has the answer to that.

“He asked me who looks through the bins, so I told him you and Enoch come every week.”

Not like Freddie to be so chatty. He’s *really* shy with strangers. “You know this guy?”

“He’s here sometimes.”

For a moment, I don’t get it. “You mean even before the murder?”

Freddie nods.

“Why?”

“Miss Joubert. He visits there sometimes.”

After a while I close my mouth because it looks funny open, and Freddie’s starting to grin. But my mind is really working on this now.

“He was here Wednesday a week ago?”

Freddie thinks for a bit and shakes his head. “I’m not so good remembering, Mr Malele.”

“He comes during the day or at night?”

Freddie shrugs. “Sometimes.”

I’m thinking about the ring, and now I’m sure it’s a man’s ring. And I’m thinking that a wedding ring is tight and doesn’t slip off that easily. But maybe a man will take it off if he’s visiting a woman. A woman who’s not his wife.

“The chairman was just around, Mr Malele. He said I was doing a really nice job with the garden. He took me round to his own house and I planted some things for him there. He was very happy.” Freddie gives me that special smile of his.

Right away I call Enoch and tell him the whole story. He’s not happy.

“You been following what the news says? The police aren’t sure this is the Beheader at all. No Koran verse. They think it could be a copycat.”

This is supposed to make me feel better? Shit.

“I’m thinking about the cop, Enoch. He knows her. Maybe he was with her that night, maybe she was trying to blackmail him. Who knows? She wasn’t a nice person.”

Enoch says nothing for so long, I wonder if I’ve lost the signal. “Really? A cop? I don’t know. But if it’s not the Beheader, they need another killer, and your prints and DNA and stuff are all over.” Some more silence. “I’ve got family at home in Zululand. I’m going to head down there. Do me a favour. Take my number off your phone.”

That’s it. Cuts me off. Doesn’t even say goodbye.

I’m left looking at my phone and wondering what I do next.

I decide I’d better come clean. Keeping out of trouble is one thing, being a murder suspect is something else altogether. And I’m thinking that maybe I’m getting too worked up about the Willemse story. So, he knew Miss Joubert. So, he visited her. Maybe he even slept with her. Lots of guys cheat on their wives. That doesn’t make them murderers, does it? Although I’m guessing Willemse’s boss would be pretty unhappy if he knew about it.

So, I go back to Fairlands police station, and tell them I want to add to my statement, and they take me in to Willemse. He looks at me like I’m something straight out of one of the bins I go through, but he digs out my statement from his drawer and shoves it over his desk to me.

“Okay, you going to tell me the truth this time?”

But I don’t say anything. I’m looking at his hands resting on top of my statement. He’s got big hands, big hands and thick fingers. And the ring finger of his left hand has a deep mark running round it, like a ring was there and it was too tight.

“Well?”

“I changed my mind,” I say. “It’s not really that important.” I get up to go, but he’s much too quick for me. He looks pretty bulky blocking his office door.

“You’re not going anywhere, Malele. Sit down!”

He grabs my arm and yanks me back to his desk. I’m starting to sweat, and I’m not feeling good at all. How am I going to get out of this? But right then I get a bit lucky. The door opens, and a black man in a smart uniform comes in. I wonder if I can sneak out past him, but I don’t fancy my chances of getting very far.

“This the suspect?” says the new guy, looking at me. “I told you I wanted to be in on this one.”

“He just came in voluntarily, sir.”

I’m adding this up very quickly. I’m a suspect, and I was lucky I came in myself or otherwise Willemse would’ve been out looking for me. I might just’ve had an accident ‘resisting arrest’. Also, Willemse called the new guy ‘sir’, so maybe I’ve got a chance.

“Excuse me, sir,” I say to new guy, “I do have important information, sir. I’d be happy to make a full statement. To *you*, sir.”

New guy gives me another look and turns back to Willemse. “Bring him to the interview room. We’ll talk to him there.”

Willemse says, “Yes, Colonel,” but he doesn’t look pleased at all. I let out my breath.

It wasn’t quite what I wanted. I didn’t want to be talking in front of Willemse, but beggars can’t be choosers.

So, I tell them what really happened that Thursday morning. Every single thing, except for the ring and Enoch. Why get him into the same mess I’m in?

Willemse glares at me. “You pig! That’s exactly the story you’d give us if you *had* killed her. To explain why your fingerprints are all over everything.”

I wait a few seconds, then I ask him if he lost his wedding ring. He glances at his left hand and tells me to shut up, but the colonel wants to know why I asked.

So, I tell them Freddie’s story—he’ll also be for it, I guess, and I feel bad about that, but I’m getting desperate now. Willemse tries to interrupt but the colonel shuts him up with one hand wave. When I’m finished, they both look like they’re going to explode. I hope I’m far away when it happens. But when the colonel speaks, it’s to Willemse and real soft. Like a snake.

“Is this true?”

“Well, yes, sir. I visited the lady a few times, but—”

“And the wedding ring?”

“Yes, I must have lost it. Probably at home somewhere.”

So, I play my last card. I fish the ring out of my pocket and put it on the table. “I found it.”

The whole thing is almost worth it just to see Willemse’s face. Almost.

“Is that it?” the colonel asks Willemse.

Willemse doesn’t answer right away. “It could be. Where the hell did you steal it from you little—” Again the colonel shuts him up. He picks up the ring and looks at it carefully. “The hair’s *tied* to it.” Shit, I never looked that closely.

“Where did you find this?”

“It was in her hair. It must’ve got tangled up in it. I thought it was hers, and she didn’t need it no more.”

I guess that wasn’t the right thing to say. The explosion took place, and I’d been right to hope that I’d be far away, but I wasn’t. It was three days before they let me go, and they’re still holding charges of stealing evidence and lying to the police over my head. They found a lot of fingerprints in the apartment but not mine, and no one could suggest how I’d get through the security. Then I had no motive. Break in and kill someone for a ring I didn’t even know was there? And Miriam stuck by me. I was with her all that night.

I didn’t see Willemse again after that interview with the colonel, but when I leave, another coloured policeman grabs me and pushes me against a wall. Hard.

“Captain Willemse’s been suspended you filthy *skelm*, because of you. He’s got a wife, and he was with her the whole night. He’s worth fifty of you, and a lot of us feel that way. If anything bad happens to the captain, you’d better be watching your back. All the time.”

To drive home the point, he knees me in the balls and leaves me collapsed on the ground. So much for being a good citizen and telling the truth. As I limp off, I console myself by wondering if Mrs Willemse will stick to her story once she hears about where her husband left his wedding ring, and why he took it off in the first place.

The next Thursday I make a point of chatting to Freddie. I’m guessing he’s also had a pretty tough time. All thanks to me.

I find him at the outside tap washing a *panga*, too heavy for a garden tool—more like what you'd use for cutting sugar cane.

“Hello Freddie. You okay?”

He looks up and nods. “Hello Mr Malele. I'm fine. The chairman likes me. And Miss Joubert is gone. My garden is really happy now.” He gives me the big smile.

“Police didn't give you a hard time?”

He shakes his head slowly. “They had *lots* of questions. About you. About Mr Willemse. I just told them everything true, if I remembered it. And they wanted to know who else I've seen here. I told them about lots of people. Keep them really busy, I guess.” He chuckles. “They asked me about why my fingerprints were inside Miss Joubert's unit. I told them I help Cynthia—she's Miss Joubert's maid—with windows and stuff when I'm not busy.” He nods a few times. “That's just what I said. I help with windows.”

I'm thinking about the ring again. Can't seem to get it out of my mind. How Willemse swore he lost it, how Freddie helps Cynthia clean, and how it was *tied* into Miss Joubert's hair.

“Freddie,” I ask before I can stop myself, “What were *you* doing that night?”

He frowns, and it's a few moments before he replies. “They also wanted to know if I let anyone through the gate that night. I told them that I'm not so good at remembering things. But maybe I could remember someone, Mr Malele. Maybe I could remember you.” He's not smiling anymore. “Got to get back to the tools now. Really important to keep your garden tools clean and sharp, you know that, Mr Malele.”

The *panga*'s all covered in soil. It looks like he's been using it to dig a hole or like it's been buried. What the hell does he need a *panga* for anyway? He never lets a weed grow to more than a centimetre high.

As he washes it, the water starts to run off a bit pink.

I'm thinking about Freddie and his garden and his *panga*. I'm thinking about Willemse and those coloured policemen and their fists. I'm thinking about Enoch in Zululand, and how I still have his number—I never took it off my phone. I'm thinking how it's nice and warm down there in Zululand. Miriam hates the cold, and the winter's coming on.