

But recently there has been talk in the village that a strange, incurable, sexually transmitted disease is ravaging the country. They say it is found in blood and that it makes its victims pine away. Already whispers are linking Eranive and Langi to the disease. But can this be true?

These days when I am passing through the village, where two or three people are gathered to chat, talk dies down, only to resume after I have passed. Even the way they look at you, you know there are stories behind those stares. Ours is one of those villages where victims of such a disease as this one are regarded as more sinful and more adulterous than any other.

To survive, therefore, I have developed a thick skin around myself through which no whispers can permeate.

1 Among the Chewa people of Malawi, a woman with child is called by the name of her child. 2 Both words mean a barren person. 3 Very thick porridge made with maize flour, always eaten with something, e.g. meat, eggs, vegetables, etc. 4 A wooden handle (linked to a door by a string) which holds the door firmly from outside the house. 5 Among the Chewa people, one announces one's arrival using this word. 6 A dance for girls. 7 Outer edge of a house.

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Poison

Henrietta Rose-Innes

LYNN HAD ALMOST MADE it to the petrol station when her old Toyota ran dry on the highway. Lucky me, she thought as she pulled on to the verge, seeing the red and yellow flags ahead, the logo on the tall facade. But it was hopeless, she realised as soon as she saw the pile-up of cars on the forecourt. A man in blue overalls caught her eye and made a throat-slitting gesture with the side of his hand as she came walking up: no petrol here either.

There were twenty-odd stranded people, sitting in their cars or leaning against them. They glanced at her without expression before turning their eyes again towards the distant city. In a minibus taxi off to one side, a few travellers sat stiffly, bags on laps. Everyone was quiet, staring down the highway, back at what they'd all been driving away from.

An oily cloud hung over Cape Town, concealing Devil's Peak. It might have been a summer fire, except it was so black, so large. Even as they watched, it boiled up taller and taller into the sky, a plume twice as high as the mountain, leaning towards them like an evil genie.

As afternoon approached, the traffic thinned. Each time a car drew up, the little ceremony was the same: the crowd's eyes switching to the new arrival, the overalled man slicing his throat, the moment of blankness and then comprehension, eyes turning away. Some of the drivers just stood there, looking accusingly at the petrol pumps; others got back into their cars and sat for a while with their hands on the steering wheels, waiting for something to come to them. One man started up his BMW again immediately and headed off, only to coast to a halt a few hundred metres down the drag. He didn't even bother to pull over. Another car came in pushed by three sweating men. Their forearms were pumped from exertion and they stood for a while with their hands hanging at their sides, exchanging brief words in Xhosa with the petrol attendants. There was no traffic at all going into the city.

Over the previous two days, TV news had shown pictures of the N1 and N2

jam-packed for fifty kilometres out of town. It had taken a day for most people to realise the seriousness of the explosion, then everybody who could get out had done so. Now, Lynn supposed, lack of petrol was trapping people in town. She herself had left it terribly late, despite all the warnings. It was typical, she struggled to get things together. The first night she'd got drunk with friends. They'd sat up late, rapt in front of the TV, watching the unfolding news. The second night, she'd done the same, alone. On the morning of this, the third day, she'd woken up with a burning in the back of her throat so horrible that she understood it was no hangover, and that she had to move. By then, everybody she knew had already left.

People were growing fractious, splitting into tribes. The petrol attendants and the car-pushers stood around the taxi. The attendants' body language was ostentatiously off-duty: ignoring the crowd, attending to their own emergency. One, a woman, bent her head into the taxi and addressed the driver in a low voice. He and the *gaurijie* were the only people who seemed relaxed; both were slouched low on the front seats, the driver's baseball cap tilted over his eyes. On the other side of the forecourt was a large Afrikaans family group that seemed to have been travelling in convoy: mother, father, a couple of substantial aunts and uncles, half a dozen blonde kids of different sizes. They had set up camp, cooler bags and folding chairs gathered around them. On their skins, Lynn could see speckles of black grime, everybody coming out of the city had picked up a coating of foul stuff, but on the white people it showed up worse. A group of what looked like students – tattoos, dreadlocks – sat in a silent line along the concrete base of the petrol pumps. One, a dark, barefoot girl with messy black hair down her back, kept springing to her feet and walking out into the road, swivelling this way and that with hands clamped in her armpits, then striding back. She reminded Lynn of herself, ten years earlier. Skinny, impatient. A fit-looking man in a tracksuit hopped out of a huge silver bakkie with *Adil's IT Bonanza* on its door and started pacing alertly back and forth. Eventually the man – Adil himself? – went over to the family group, squatted on his haunches and conferred.

Lynn stood alone, leaning against the glass wall of the petrol-station shop. The sun stewed in a dirty haze. She checked her cellphone, but the service had been down since the day before. Overloaded. There wasn't really anyone she wanted to call. The man in the blue overalls kept staring at her. He had skin the colour and texture of damp clay; a thin, villain's moustache. She looked away.

The black-haired girl jumped up yet again and dashed into the road. A small red car with only one occupant was speeding towards them out of the smoky distance. The others went running out to join their friend, stringing themselves out across the highway to block the car's path. By the time Lynn thought about

joining them, it was already too late – the young people had piled in and the car was driving on, wallowing, every window crammed with hands and faces. The girl gave the crowd a thumbs-up as they passed.

A group was clustering around one of the cars. Peering over a woman's shoulder, Lynn could see one of the burly uncles hunkered down in his shorts, expertly wielding a length of hose coming out of the fuel tank. The end was in his mouth. His cheeks hollowed; then with a practised jerk, stopping the spurt of petrol with his thumb, he whipped the hose away from his mouth and plunged it into a jerry-can. He looked up with tense, pale eyes.

'Any more?' he asked, too loud.

The group moved on to the next car.

She went to sit inside, in the fried-egg smell of the cafeteria. The seats were red plastic, the table-tops marbled yellow, just as she remembered them from childhood road trips. Tomato sauce and mustard in squeazy plastic bottles, crushed around the nozzle. She was alone in the gloom of the place. There were racks of chips over the counter, shelves of sweets, display fridges. She pulled down two packets of chips, helped herself to a Coke and made her way to a window booth. She wished strongly for a beer. The sun came through the tinted glass in an end-of-the-world shade of pewter, but that was nothing new; that had always been the colour of the light in places like this.

Through the glass wall, she watched absently as the petrol scavengers filled up the tank of *Adil's IT Bonanza*. They'd taken the canopy off the bakkie to let more people climb on. The uncles and aunts sat around the edge, turning their broad backs on those left behind, with small children and bags piled in the middle and a couple of older children standing up, clinging to the cab. What she'd thought was a group had split: part of the white family was left behind on the tar, revealing itself as a young couple with a single toddler, and one of the sweaty car-pushers was on board. The blue-overalled guy was up front, next to Adil. How wrong she'd been, then, in her reading of alliances. Perhaps she might have scored a berth, if she'd pushed. She sipped her Coke thoughtfully as the bakkie pulled away.

Warm Coke: it seemed the electricity had gone too, now.

Lynn picked distractedly at the strip of aluminium binding the edge of the table. It could be used for something, in an emergency. She opened a packet of cheese and onion chips, surprised by her hunger. She realised she was feeling happy, in a secret, volatile way. It was like bunking school: sitting here where nobody knew her, where no one could find her, on a day cut out of the normal passage of days. Nothing was required of her except to wait. All she wanted to do was sit for another hour, and then another hour after that; at which point she might lie down on the sticky vinyl seat in the tainted sunlight and sleep.

She hadn't eaten a packet of chips for ages. They were excellent. Crunching them up, she felt the salt and fat repairing her headache. Lynn pushed off her heeled shoes, which were hurting, and untucked her fitted shirt. She hadn't dressed practically for mass evacuation.

The female petrol attendant opened the glass door with a clang, then pushed through the wooden counter-flap. She was a plump, pretty young woman with complexly braided hair. Her skin, Lynn noticed, was clear brown, free from the soot that flecked the motorists. She took a small key on a chain from her bosom and opened the till, whacking the side of her fist against the drawer to jump it out. With a glance across at Lynn, she pulled a handful of fifty-rand notes from the till, then hundreds.

'Taxi's going,' she said.

'Really? With what petrol?'

'He's got petrol. He was just waiting to fill the seats. We made a price - for you too, if you want.'

'You're kidding. He was just waiting for people to *pay*? He could have taken us any time?'

The woman shrugged, as if to say *taxi-drivers*. She stroked a thumb across the edge of the wad of notes. 'So?'

Lynn hesitated. 'I'm sure someone will be here soon. The police will come. Rescue services.'

The woman gave a snort and exited the shop, bumping the door open with her hip. The door sucked slowly shut, and then it was quiet again.

Lynn watched through the tinted window as the money was handed over. The transaction revived the inert *gardië*. He straightened up and started striding back and forth, clapping his hands, shouting and hustling like it was Main Road rush hour. The people inside the taxi edged up in the seats and everyone else started pushing in. The driver spotted Lynn through the window and raised his eyebrows, pointing with both forefingers first at her and then at the minibus and then back at her again: coming? When she just smiled, he snapped his fingers and turned his attention elsewhere. People were being made to leave their bags and bundles on the tar.

Lynn realised she was gripping the edge of the table. Her stomach hurt. Getting up this morning, packing her few things, driving all this way... it seemed impossible for her to start it all again. Decision, action, motion. She wanted to curl up on the seat, put her head down. But the taxi was filling up.

Her body delivered her from decision. All at once her digestion seemed to have speeded up dramatically. Guts whinnying, she trotted to the bathroom.

Earlier, there'd been a queue for the toilets, but now the stalls were empty. In

the basin mirror, Lynn's face was startlingly grimed. Her hair was greasy, her eyes pink, as if she'd been weeping. Contamination. Sitting on the black plastic toilet seat, she felt the poisons gush out of her. She wiped her face with paper and looked closely at the black specks smeared on to the tissue. Her skin was oozing it. She held the wadded paper to her nose. A faint coppery smell. What was this shit? The explosion had been at a chemical plant, but which chemical? She couldn't remember what they'd said on the news.

She noticed the silence. The slightly reverberating stillness of a place that has just been vacated.

There was nobody left on the forecourt. The battered white taxi was pulling out, everyone crammed inside. The sliding door was open, three men hanging out the side with their fingers hooked into the roof rim. Lynn ran after it on to the highway, but the only person who saw her was the blond toddler crushed against the back windscreen, one hand spread against the glass. He held her gaze as the taxi picked up speed.

The cloud was creeping higher behind her back, casting a murk, not solid enough to be shadow. She could see veils of dirty rain bleeding from its near edge. Earlier, in the city, she had heard sirens, helicopters in the sky, but there were none out here. It was silent.

Standing alone on the highway was unnerving. This was for cars. The road surface was not meant to be touched with hands or feet, to be examined too closely or in stillness. The four lanes were so wide. Even the white lines and the gaps between them were much longer than they appeared from the car: the length of her whole body, were she to lie down in the road. She had to stop herself looking over her shoulder, flinching from invisible cars coming up from behind.

She thought of the people she'd seen so many times on the side of the highway, walking, walking along verges not designed for human passage, covering incomprehensible distances, toiling from one obscure spot to another. Their bent heads dusty, cowed by the iron ring of the horizon. In all her years of driving at speed along highways, Cape Town, Jo'burg, Durban, she'd never once stopped at a random spot, walked into the veld. Why would she? The highways were tracks through an indecipherable terrain of dun and grey, a blur in which one only fleetingly glimpsed the sleepy eyes of people standing on its edge. To leave the car would be to disintegrate, to merge with that shifting world. How far could she walk, anyway, before weakness made her stumble? Before the air thickened into some alien gel, impossible to wade through, to breathe?

It was mid-afternoon but it felt much later. Towards the city, the sky was thick with blood-coloured light. It was possible to stare at the sun - a bleached disk, like the moon of a different planet. The cloud was growing. As she watched, a

deep occlusion spread towards her, pulling darkness across the sky. She ducked reflexively and put her hands up against the strange rain. But the raindrops were too big, distinct – and she realised that they were in fact birds, thousands of birds, sprinting away from the mountain. They flew above her and around her ears: swift startings, labouring geese. Small rapid birds tossed against the sky, smuts from a burning book.

As they passed overhead, for the first time Lynn was filled with fear.

Approximately fifty packets of potato chips, assorted flavours. Eighty or so chocolate bars, different kinds. Liquorice, wine-gums, Smarties. Maybe thirty bottles of Coke and Fanta in the fridges, different sizes. Water, fizzy and plain: fifteen big bottles, ten small. No alcohol of any kind. How much fluid did you need to drink per day? The women's magazines said two litres. To flush out the toxins. Would drinking Coke be enough? Surely. So: two weeks, maybe three. The survival arithmetic was easy. Two weeks was more than enough time; rescue would come long before then. She felt confident, prepared.

Boldly, she pushed through the wooden flap and went behind the counter. The till stood open. Beyond were two swing doors with head-high windows, and through them a sterile steel-fitted kitchen, gloomy without overhead lighting. Two hamburger patties, part-cooked, lay abandoned on the grill, and a basket of chips sat in a vat of opaque oil. To the right was a back door with a metal pushbar. She shoved it.

The door swung open on to a sudden patch of domesticity: three or four black bins, a skip, sunlight, some scruffy blueguns and an old two-wire fence with wooden posts holding back the veld. A shed with a tilted corrugated-iron roof leaned up against the back wall. The change in scale and atmosphere was startling. Lynn had not imagined that these big franchised petrol stations hid modest homesteads. She'd had the vague sense that they were modular, shipped out in sections, everything in company colours. Extraneous elements – employees – were presumably spirited away somewhere convenient and invisible at the end of their shifts. But this was clearly somebody's backyard. It smelt of smoke and sweat and dishwasher, overlaying the burnt grease of the kitchen. Through the doorway of the shed she could see the end of an iron bed and mattress. On the ground was a red plastic tub of the kind used to wash dishes or babies. Two plastic garden chairs, one missing a leg. A rusted car on bricks.

Lynn laughed out loud. Her car! Her own car, twenty years on: the same model blue Toyota, but stripped to a shell. The remaining patches of cracked paint had faded to the colour of a long-ago summer sky. The roof had rusted clean through in places, and the bottom edges of the doors were rotten with corrosion. Old carpeting was piled on the back seat and all the doors were open. Seeing

the smooth finish gone scabrous and raw gave Lynn a twinge at the back of her teeth.

She walked past the car. There was a stringy cow on the other side of the fence, its pelt like mud daubed over the muscles. A goat came avidly up to the wire, watching her with slotted eyes, and she put her arm through and scratched the coarse hair between its horns. The cow also mooched over in an interested way. Smelling its grassy breath, Lynn felt a tremor of adventure. She could be here for *days*. She felt no fear at the prospect: nobody else was here, nobody for miles around. (Although briefly she saw again: the hand sliding across the throat ...)

Out back here, the sky looked completely clear, as if the petrol station marked the limit of the zone of contamination. She shot her fingers at the goat and snapped them like the taxi-man, spun round in a circle, humming.

And breathed in sharply, stepping back hard against the wire. *'Jesus.'*

Someone was in the car. The pile of rugs had reconstituted itself into an old lady, sitting on the backseat as if waiting to be chauffeured away.

Lynn coughed out a laugh, slapping her chest. 'Oh god, sorry,' she said. 'You surprised me.'

The old lady worked her gums, staring straight ahead. She wore a faded green button-up dress, a hand-knitted cardigan, elasticised knee stockings and slippers. Grey hair caught in a meagre bun.

Lynn came closer. 'Hello?' she began. Afrikaans? Hers was embarrassingly weak. *'Hallo?'* she said again, giving the word a different inflection. Ridiculous.

No response. Poor thing, she thought, someone just left her here. Would the old lady even know about the explosion? 'Sorry... *innit?*' she tried again. She'd never seriously called anyone *'innit'* before. But it seemed to have some effect: the old lady looked at her with mild curiosity. Small, filmed black eyes, almost no whites visible. A creased face shrunken on to fine bones. An ancient mouse.

'Hi. I'm Lynn. Sorry to disturb you. Ah, I don't know if anyone's told you – about the accident? In Cape Town.'

The woman's mouth moved in a fumbling way. Lynn bent closer to hear.

'My grandson,' the old lady enunciated, softly but clearly, with a faint smile. Then she looked away, having concluded a piece of necessary small talk.

'He told you about it?'

No answer.

So. Now there was another person to consider, an old frail person, someone in need of her help. Lynn felt her heaviness return. *'Tannie'*, she said – having begun with it she might as well continue – 'There's been an accident, an explosion. There's chemicals in the air. Poison, *gij*. It might be coming this way. I think we should go out front. There might be people coming past who can help us. Cars. Ambulances.'

The old lady seemed not averse to the idea, and allowed Lynn to take her arm and raise her from her seat. Although very light, she leaned hard; Lynn felt she was lugging the woman's entire weight with one arm, like a suitcase. Rather than negotiate the series of doors back through the station, they took the longer route, clockwise around the building on a narrow track that squeezed between the back corner of the garage and the wire fence. Past the ladies, the gents, the café. As they walked, it started to rain, sudden and heavy. The rain shut down the horizon; its sound on the forecourt canopy was loud static. Lynn wondered how tainted the falling water was. She sat the old lady down on a sheltered bench outside the shop, and fetched some bottles of water and packets of chips from inside. Then she urgently needed to use the bathroom again.

The toilet was no longer flushing. Her empty guts felt liquid, but strained to force anything out. The headache was back.

Outside, she saw the rain had stopped, as abruptly as it started, leaving a rusty tang in the air. The old lady had vanished.

Then Lynn spotted movement out on the road: her car door was open. Coming closer, she saw that the woman was calmly eating tomato chips in the back seat. Having transferred herself from the wreck in the backyard to the superior vehicle out front, she was now waiting for the journey to recommence.

A neat old lady, Lynn noted: there were no crumbs down her front. She seemed restored by the chips. Her eyes gleamed as she whipped a plastic tortoiseshell comb out of a pocket and started snatching back wisps of hair, repinning the bun with black U-bend pins that Lynn hadn't seen since her own grandmother died.

In contrast, Lynn felt increasingly dishevelled, and embarrassed about her tip of a car: the empty Heineken bottles on the floor, the tissues in the cubbyhole. She should have kept things cleaner, looked after things better.

'My grandson, the woman said to Lynn, with a nod of reassurance.

'Of course,' said Lynn.

Evening was coming. The clouds had retreated somewhat and were boiling grumpily over the mountain. The brief rain had activated an awful odour: like burnt plastic but with a metallic bite, and a whiff of sourness like rotten meat in it too. Lynn sat in the front seat, put the keys into the ignition and gripped the steering wheel. She had no plan. The sky ahead was darkening to a luminous blue. The silent little woman was an expectant presence in her rear-view mirror. Oppressed, Lynn got out of the car again and stood with her hands on her hips, staring east, west, willing sirens, flashing lights. She ducked back into the car. 'I'll be back in a sec. Okay? You're all right there?'

The old woman looked at her with polite incomprehension.

She just needed to walk around a bit. She headed off towards the sun, which

was melting messily into smears of red and purple. The mountain was no longer visible. The road was discoloured, splattered with lumps of some tarry black precipitate. She counted five small bodies of birds, feathers damp and stuck together. Blades of grass at the side of the road were streaked with black, and the ground seemed to be smoking, a layer of foul steam around her ankles. It got worse the further she walked. She turned around.

There was someone stooped over her car. At once she recognised the moustache, the blue overalls.

Her first impulse was to hide. She stood completely still, watching. He hadn't seen her.

The clay-faced man was holding something ... a box. No, a can. He had a white jerry-can in his hands and he was filling her car with petrol. Suddenly her stomach rolled and she crouched down at the side of the road, vomiting a small quantity of cheese-and-onion mulch into the stinking grass. When she raised her chin, the man was standing looking back at the petrol station.

Deciding, she made herself stand, raising her hand to wave - but in that moment he opened the door and got in; the motor turned immediately and the car was rolling forward. She could see the back of the old woman's head, briefly silver as the car turned out into the lane, before the reflection of the sunset blanked the rear windscreen. The Toyota headed out into the clear evening.

Lynn sat in the back of the rusted car and watched the sky turn navy and the stars come out. She loved the way the spaces between the stars had no texture, softer than water; they were pure depth. She sat in the hollow the old lady had worn in the seat, ankles crossed in the space where the handbrake used to be. She sipped Coke; it helped with the nausea.

She'd been here three days and her head felt clear. While there'd been a few bursts of warm rain, the chemical storm had not progressed further down the highway. It seemed the pollution had created its own weather system over the mountain, a knot of ugly cloud. She felt washed up on the edge of it, resting her oil-clogged wings on a quiet shore.

Sooner or later, she was certain, rescue would come. The ambulances with flashing lights, the men in luminous vests with equipment and supplies. Or maybe just a stream of people driving back home. But if that took too long, then there was always the black bicycle that she'd found leaned up against the petrol pump. The woman's grandson must have ridden here, with the petrol can, from some place not too far down the road. It was an old postman's bike, heavy but hardy, and she felt sure that if he had cycled the distance, so could she. Maybe tomorrow, or the day after. And when this was all over, she was definitely going to go on a proper detox. Give up all junk food, alcohol. Some time soon.

Lynn snapped open a packet of salt 'n' vinegar chips. Behind her, the last of the sunset lingered, poison violet and puce, but she didn't turn to look. She wanted to face clear skies, sweet-smelling veld. If she closed her eyes, she might hear a frog, just one, starting its evening song beyond the fence.

Henrietta Rose-Innes was born in 1971 and lives in Cape Town. She is the author of two novels, *Shark's Egg* (2000) and *The Rock Alphabet* (2004), both published by Kwela Books, and was the compiler of an anthology of South African writing, *Nice Times! A Book of South African Pleasures and Delights* (Double Storey, 2006). Her short stories and essays have appeared in a variety of publications in South Africa and elsewhere. A translated anthology of short pieces will be published in Germany in 2008, and *The Rock Alphabet* has been published in Romanian translation. She was the winner of the 2007 Southern African PEN short story award, and was shortlisted for the Caine Prize in 2007.

The Day of the Surgical Colloquium Hosted by the Far East Rand Hospital

Gill Schierhout

THREE MONTHS AGO I lost my hand in a mining accident. Doctor sewed it on again. Now here I am at this Medical Conference, a marvel, picking up cotton reels, tying bits of string. Doctor is saying something, pointing to pictures of my X-rays that are projected up on a big white screen, like the Drive-in.

Strange seeing the stump of your wrist bloated up to 20 times its usual size, projected up there on the wall. I don't recall giving anyone permission to take that picture. There's no doubt it's my limb though. See, the same tattoo as on my forearm, the ink has sunk deep, its pinpricks of blue show up like the pores of a giant orange up there on the wall. I consider whether or not to roll up my sleeves so that at least in the tea-break the audience can see it's me – but then I'd have to take my jacket off and Doreen made me promise to keep it on. I just sit, waiting, like in church. Big holes of sweat are forming under my armpits.

Doctors are here from all over: Jo'burg General, Helen Joseph, Bloem, Chris Hani Baragwanath, everywhere, man. You can tell from the labels they've pinned to their coats.

Must be a good lens on that doctor's camera to take pictures like these. I wouldn't mind a better camera myself. One day I'd like to set up a dark room in the house, do the developing, play tricks with the light, put heads on bodies that do not match. I've seen this in the photographic magazines in the Hospital Waiting Room. I imagine Doreen as a twin. I could do with two wives – I'd let them grimace at one another, identical in blackened tooth, across the picture.

Every week Doreen does the crossword from the Sunday papers, and then she posts it off. They put all the entries into a hat and the first correct one to be drawn