

Gappah, Petina. "The Death of Wonder." *Rotten Row*, Faber and Faber, 2016.

### **The Death of Wonder**

But let judgement run down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream.

– *The Book of Amos* –

Asi kururamisa ngakuyerere semvura, vuye kururama sorwizi runongoramba rucidira.

– *Buku yaMuprofita Amosi* –

In the newspapers, they called him the murdered man who got his own justice. They said he fought his own battle. When I talk about his case, particularly in a drinking setting when the shadows of the night are lengthening and the beer and talk are flowing and we take a turning to the supernatural, I will often do a bit of grandstanding, you know, making light of it all and hamming it up for effect, but if I am to tell you the truth, Wonder's case shook me up in a way that no other case had ever done. These days, I am no longer as secure in myself as I once was. I am no longer as certain in my beliefs.

Three facts, at least, are beyond dispute. The pathologist who handled Wonder's autopsy is indeed mad. If you ever have reason to go to the psychiatric hospital at Ingutsheni in Bulawayo, and I hope, for your sake, that you never do, you will find him there, but whether he is there because of his handling of the post-mortem, I cannot say.

It is also true that the two cousin brothers who were the killer's accomplices have departed this life. But did they die simply because it was their time, or was it, as all of Gokwe would have you believe, the wrath of Wonder reaching out from the grave to bring them to him? And it is true that in his cell at Whawha Prison, the man who killed him is now blind. That was Wonder, says Gokwe, using his own mother's blindness to close forever the eyes of his murderer.

Without ever actually using that word, I always thought that I was an atheist. As a policeman, you see enough raped children, battered women and murdered men to doubt that God exists. Or else you conclude that if this is what the world looks like with a supposedly All-seeing and All-knowing Being in charge of it, such a Being is not one in which you want to believe.

I used to love that book by Stanley Nyamfukudza, do you know it, *The Non-Believer's Journey*? It was one of my O level set books. I thought it a particularly apposite title for my own life. But it is an awkward position to be a non-believer when the companions on your life's journey are all believers for whom even the slightest whiff of disbelief is enough to brand you the leader of one of those Satanic sects that always seem to be popping up in Mufakose. So I kept my disbelief to myself. I went to church every Sunday with my wife and children. I sang the hymns. I said the prayers.

My disbelief went the other way too, in the direction of what my mother called Chivanhu. Until Wonder's case, I did not believe at all in the world of traditional beliefs and all that goes with it, you know, the naked witches flying in the night, the talking snakes that spit out cash, the owls and omens. I do not recall when it was that it seemed preposterous to me that people could believe that women, and they only ever seemed to be women, could fly naked in the night on winnowing baskets, or sit astride hyenas as they travelled to eat the flesh of the dead.

At the most basic of levels, it struck me as a stupid waste that witches would expend such marvellous abilities on such pointless activities as flying to cemeteries to eat rotting

corpses, when they could have gone anywhere in the world that they chose to go without the trouble of applying for visas or purchasing air tickets. They could have transformed aviation as we know it. Those Wright brothers would have had nothing on them.

My mother managed to believe in both ChiKristu, Christianity, and Chivanhu. When close family members died, she and the family elders would go to a *gata*, that supernatural autopsy in which a *n'anga* is asked to determine how the deceased met his death. My late father succumbed to a combination of lung cancer and cirrhosis of the liver when I was twenty-five. My mother wanted us to attend a *gata*. As she put it, 'Yes, it may very well be that the doctors are right that it was this lung liver disease that killed him, but we need to find out who it is that gave it to him in the first place, who it was that allowed this to happen.'

Considering that my Old Man's liver had finally given out on him after he spent two days drinking non-stop in a township shebeen, a death preceded by a lifetime of smoking three twenty-packs of Kingsgate every day and drinking his wages away with every hooker between Zengeza 4 and Seke before coming home to use his fists on his wife and children, his death under those circumstances should have been a surprise to absolutely no one. And as you can probably tell, I have no fond memories of the man. We were like the family in that Oliver Mtukudzi song, what is it called, '*Tozeza baba, baba chidhakwa*'; we were a family ruled by fear and alcohol. It's probably why I became a cop, come to think of it, to get over that sense of helplessness, that constant feeling of powerlessness.

But back to the main point. After my passing out parade at Morris Depot and I was posted to police villages across the country, I took the lead from my superiors in how the law dealt with witchcraft. Incidentally, it was usually the same sort of person accused, an unpopular in-law, the usual family conflicts spilling out into accusations of witchcraft. It was striking that the young and the beautiful were never accused; *shavi reuroyi*, that pestilential spirit of witchcraft, it seems, chooses to possess only the old and unpopular, the lame and the halt.

In such cases, we ignored all the mumbo jumbo and the superstitions. We concentrated on what the law could actually touch. We focused on the actual harm caused, and punished that, and on threats to do harm and punished those. The Witchcraft Suppression Act helped keep things in check. A colonial statute from about 1895 or thereabouts, it gave us powers to arrest anyone who accused any other person of witchcraft. In their reforming zeal, our colonial overlords took the view that the belief in witchcraft was a primitive superstition best suppressed by punishing any native who talked of it.

But as with all things that are driven by punitive legislation and not genuine social change, the act did nothing to suppress witchcraft. It only served to drive underground the work of the many witch-hunting *tsikamutanda* around the country who never went away. When it was finally repealed a few years ago, I almost choked on my tea when I read the headline in the state paper that trumpeted: 'GOVERNMENT LEGALISES WITCHCRAFT.'

Now, I hope that I am not giving you the impression that I am a scientist of any kind, because that is the last thing I am. I cannot claim to be of a particularly scientific bent. I did Core Science in school, of course, like everyone. I remember some of the periodic table, you know, hydrogen, helium, lithium, beryllium, boron, carbon, nitrogen and all that. I remember my biology lessons about Mendel's experiments and Pavlov's dogs and the peppered moth. I know the difference between an atom and an amp. At least, I think I do. I have just always been suspicious of things that cannot be proved. So I placed value in things that could be demonstrated as truthful without needing to have faith, and without having to believe the say-so of a man who knows a man who knows a man who knows another who saw a ghost. I considered both ChiKristu and Chivanhu to be equally irrelevant to my life, because as far as I was concerned, they were both superstitions and I believed in neither. This is who I was, until the death of Wonder.

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Wonder Pasipanodya was just twenty-one years old when he died. It is a great thing to be a young man of that age. I remember my own early twenties with extreme nostalgia. At that age, you have not only discovered the delectability of girls, but you have also realised that some of them, with the right inducement, can be taken to bed. You have discovered the pleasures of beer. You are probably in your first job, or if you are really lucky, you are learning a trade or, if you are luckier still, you are at college or university. You have a bit of money, but are not yet weighed down with the turgid responsibilities of being a full adult. The world seems yours to conquer. Unless, that is, you are living in a place like Gokwe or any of the other shitholes in this country.

What can I tell you about Gokwe that you don't already know? Keeping with the religion theme that I have started, there are places so beautiful that they are considered God's own countries. The kindest thing you can say about Gokwe is that it is a place that the Devil once called home until he abandoned it altogether as he ran shrieking from its ruins.

Back in the 1890s when Cecil John Rhodes and his band of merry marauders established Rhodesia by taking over the fertile land on the Mashonaland plateau, they dumped the people who lived there in places they called native reserves. It is where the term *kumaruzevha* comes from, and it is generally agreed that such a life, *hupenyu hwekumaruzevha*, is one of unremitting hardship. Gokwe was one of the first native reserves. The keen injustice of it was that this abandoned land onto which people were dumped from their fertile land had been abandoned for a reason.

With a harsh and unforgiving terrain, bad harvests and worse roads, Gokwe's other claim to fame used to be that it was one of the main tsetse fly base stations for Midlands province. I suspect that many of the tales of witchcraft deaths there arose from plain old sleeping sickness. Its recent elevation to town status has not changed it much from the days it was a reserve, apart from the addition of a bank or two, a small dusty branch of the country's biggest supermarket chain and the requisite mobile phone steel towers. It is still the same poor community in the middle of nowhere that it has always been, only now it has a Town Council, complete with a chairperson, a secretary, an administrator and a clutch of other councillors who earn salaries running it when there is really nothing to run.

I can hear you ask, why, then, it is that I find myself here. It is important that you believe me, so I will tell you the truth about myself. I will say right away that I am here because I took bribes. There. I took bribes. Or, perhaps I should say that I took too many bribes. I got careless. I got caught.

No one in the police gets fired for corruption any more. If they did, all that would be left would be some skinny bald-headed recruits from Chendambuya who don't know their docket-books from their traffic-books. So bent cops like me are not removed from the force. We just get sent to places like Gokwe, like Checheche, or the aforementioned Chendambuya. And there we stay until we can plot our return to the streets of Harare that are full of drivers to milk.

There was a curious symmetry to my career, such as it was, in Gokwe. Wonder's case was my last case. My very first case also involved the supernatural. A week after I got to Gokwe, I was informed by my new private, Phiniel Zuze, that we had to look into a case of missing women's underwear. I was still smarting from my transfer, and thinking of the half built house that I had left at Mainway Meadows and that I could have completed in a few more months of collecting traffic fines and keeping them for myself if I had not been caught. So when this underwear case came to me, I was not in the best of moods.

I thought at first that there had been a breaking and entering at one of the two clothing shops in what passes for the town, but Phiniel soon put me straight. By the way, before I had even arrived in Gokwe, Phiniel had somehow ferreted out my totem title. Instead of

addressing me by my name, as Mafa, my official title, Chief Inspector, or even as just ‘Chef’ as is normal, he addressed me as ‘Mwendamberi.’ This, combined with his self-effacing and over-confiding manner always made him sound like a man touching up a recalcitrant son-in-law for a loan when he still owed on a previous one. Indeed, he had asked to borrow money within two days of meeting me, spelling out his request in an elegant note written on a page torn from the Charge Book and signed Constable Phiniel Zuze, Gokwe, just in case I mistakenly gave the money to another Phinel Zuze not in Gokwe. Don’t let the gentle exterior fool you; when Phiniel places his unforgiving hands on a criminal, it is all we can do to restrain him. So fearsome is his reputation around these parts that his nickname is Boko Haram.

Someone, Phiniel said, was taking the underwear off women at night all across the outlying village of Nembudziya. ‘The women go to bed at night all there, but in the morning, Mwendamberi, they have no underwear. It just vanishes. Disappears. Like it was never there. They suspect it is a *chikwambo*.’

Now, in a full demonstration of the limitations of the English language to capture fully the fetid inventiveness of the Shona imagination, a *chikwambo* is usually translated as a goblin, when in fact it is a combination of a familiar, a good luck charm and a sort of unpaid messenger. Sure enough, our *chikwambo* soon made its debut in the papers as the ‘Gokwe Goblin’. I became the butt of jokes among my old colleagues. Any time I went back to Harare and stopped for a drink at the Police Club and went into the officers’ mess, I would get slaps on the back and questions about whether I had caught the goblin yet.

In Gokwe itself, I was inclined to ignore the whole thing, but the matter became serious when the female teachers at the local school demanded that I do something at once or they would all of them leave, en masse. This was followed by angry calls from the provincial head of the education ministry in Gweru. The goblin appeared indiscriminating: old women, young women, fat women, thin women, tall women, short women, all had their underwear removed.

Phiniel muttered darkly about *mubobobo* spells, he believed that someone in the village was using the goblin as a succubus to have virtual sex with all the women in the village. I did not believe a word of it. I told him that while I admired this mysterious man’s ingenuity and redoubtable stamina, there were surely more pleasurable ways to be with a woman than by remote control.

I considered the whole thing to be a big waste of my time, to be honest with you, and did not always listen to Phiniel’s witterings about the latest developments. I did attend a few village meetings, and found myself in the middle of accusations that flew faster than an Air Zimbabwe plane taking the President to his annual Asian holiday. Talk about long memories. Someone remembered a grandfather saying that person’s grandmother had said something about a *chikwambo* to that other person’s *tateguru* in the time of Hitler’s war; another’s mother-in-law had done this to that one’s great-aunt two years before the mission school was built and this person had been told she was to inherit her aunt’s witchcraft *shavi* spirit and it had been passed on to her children. But so it is with people who do not ever leave the places they are born in until they are eventually buried there. All they have are memories, petty strife and grudges handed down along with the inherited clothes of the dead.

In the end, it apparently took the combined effects of both ChiKristu and ChiVanhu to restore nocturnal dignity to the women of Nembudziya. A local sikamutanda joined forces with a Harare prophet of the fire and brimstone variety. They called an assembly of all the villagers. Together, they pointed to a cluster of men. One of them fell in a heap to the ground and confessed and produced the goblin, which apparently chose to make its entrance in a pair of moth-eaten underwear belonging to the village headman’s wife. On seeing it, she

immediately had the vapours. After she had been restored to her senses, and the *chikwambo* burned and buried, the matter was considered closed.

But as I pointed out to Phiniel, who narrated these events to me in a breathless voice, it was astonishing that the journalist from the *Metropolitan* newspaper who reported the *chikwambo*'s exposure, or even Phiniel himself, for whom separation from his phone for more than an hour is enough to declare national mourning, had had no eye on posterity. They had not thought to actually record the creature with their cameras.

For a man who claimed to have laid eyes on the thing, Phiniel was suspiciously vague in the details. In his placid, confiding tones, he said, 'It was not quite human, Mwendamberi, but not quite animal, maybe a little bit birdlike but it had no wings. It was half and half, yah, half and half, Mwendamberi, with a head larger than a rooster's but smaller than a very small baby's, but a different shape, a bit like a mouse, not a house mouse as such but a field one, yah, that sort of shape but not quite. It also had quite a lot of fur, but not too much.'

And clearly, I added, the goblin's bottom must have been quite sizeable if it was able to fit into the underwear of the wife of Nembudziya's village headman. She is not, by any means, a small woman.

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This, then, was the Gokwe in which Wonder and his friends came to young adulthood, a backwoods hotbed of superstition, gossip and grinding poverty. If they had been in Tsholotsho or Beitbridge, the youth of Gokwe would have hot-footed it across the border to South Africa or Botswana, braving the crocodiles of the Limpopo just to get away. A few did leave, mainly to go to relatives in Gweru, Harare or the resort town of Victoria Falls, but they soon came back. Those cities soon spat them out; they have unemployed youths of their own.

Wonder wanted the three things that any young man of that age wants: a job that gave him a bit of money, a girlfriend and a smartphone. The latter two obviously depend on the first of those. But in Gokwe, there are no industries, no farms, no jobs, no hope. Like many other young people, he and his friends saw their future as coming from the elections. With the right government, they believed, all things were possible. Poor deluded bastards. The one bit in the Bible with which I agreed with all my heart is that bit that says, how does it go again, put not your trust in princes and the sons of men.

Wonder and his friends were burning for change. They joined the opposition party and went around in party regalia. They drank the free beer at rallies where they sang and chanted slogans. They stuffed themselves with opposition food. But the ruling party is strong in Gokwe. There were soon what the papers called skirmishes between youth groups of the rival parties.

It was a busy time for us, I can tell you. In the run-up to the elections, my men and I got frequently called out to hear cases of tit-for-tat assaults, hut burning and that sort of thing. There were sporadic attacks across Gokwe North and South, from Kuwirirana Kana all the way to Zumba, and from Nembudziya all the way to Gandavaroyi, which was Wonder's village. Mostly though, the youth gangs limited themselves to insulting songs and dances after their rallies and meetings. There is nothing as amusing as rival gangs trying to out-dance each other. It was like that video of Michael Jackson's 'Beat It', I tell you, only with bare feet and ragged clothing, better moves and serious intent.

As the police, we could afford to ignore most of it. It helped a lot that both parties were equally responsible. I know that the standard line is that opposition activists are a helpless lot who do no more than turn the other cheek meekly when presented with ruling party violence. Well, cry me the Zambezi at flood time, will you, because nothing could be further from the truth. Give a bunch of idle youths a bit of beer and a burning cause of

whatever stripe and as sure as cows have calves, you can create your very own militia. Our only saving grace was that none of the parties could actually afford to arm their youths with guns.

As I say, both parties were responsible for the mayhem that followed. Where we could not ignore it, we took a few of the more boisterous opposition activists into our custody, to keep them safe, we said, but of course the truth is that we would have had blue murder on our hands if we had so much as cast a glance in the direction of the ruling party youths. When you are in the police here, you know whom to arrest. And better still, whom not to arrest.

Then came the two big rallies, one after the other. Without the distinction created by the differing party colours and empty slogans, you would have thought the politicians from both parties were the same people visiting on two consecutive weekends. The same big men from Harare in their four-by-fours came to promise the earth, along with their orange-toned women in big hats and vertiginous shoes. They sat on the same sort of tent-covered platform, in plush seats of violent colours while the poor women of Gokwe baked in the sun and ululated and the young men danced in the dust and chanted from the trees they sat in to get a better view. Then the politicians drove off in their air-conditioned vehicles, leaving behind them inflamed tempers and painful hope, leaving nothing for the young to hold on to beyond their hate and their rage.

Three days after the second rally, Wonder was found beaten to death. I had, to say the least, a knotty problem on my hands.

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Police work is not like you see it on television. I would say that in eighty to ninety per cent of the normal cases, it is easy to identify the culprits. One of the things they teach all would-be officers during training at Morris Depot is that the first and most important question to ask the victim of any crime is: 'Who do you think did it?' I can see you are looking sceptical, but it is much more effective than you would think. Of course, you get your armed robberies and stranger rapes and so on, but crime is, for the most part, an intimate matter, particularly in places like Gokwe.

Even in this case, it did not take long to identify the killer. Wonder had last been seen in a fight with three youths, who were then seen dragging him towards the field in which he was found dead. There was no doubt at all as to who those three were. They were Takura, the youngest son of the local Member of Parliament, and Dakarai and Rangarirai, two cousin brothers who served as his unpaid minions and acolytes. The word was that all three had been heard boasting that they had fixed Wonder, the cousin brothers had held him while Takura beat him. So I had on my hands an opposition party activist killed by ruling party activists. And they were not just any old raggedy-taggedy activists either, one of them was the son of the local Member. I was in what you might safely call a quandary.

I won't lie to you, I thought if we did nothing for long enough, and gave a few soothing assurances to Wonder's family along the lines that we were pursuing several avenues and soon a number of people would be called in to help with our inquiries, it would all die away. But the opposition sensed that they could make a meal out of this case.

The newsmen soon descended, with their screaming headlines. Wonder's death was a gift to the opposition, their strategy before each election was to trumpet any such deaths because, of course, they needed to discredit the government and the outcome of the election. The aspiring Member for the opposition raised a hue and cry. He even made an appearance on the BBC, his subtitled grief beamed to all the world. The president of the party wept for him like he was his own child. Overnight, Wonder was transformed from being just another

ragtag youth who occasionally sang and danced at rallies in exchange for booze to the lynchpin of the entire opposition movement in Gokwe.

The government, for its part, was doing its damndest to dis credit itself without opposition help. I soon received instructions from Harare to do nothing at all. The Governor of Midlands Province himself summoned me and told me in no uncertain terms that if I or any of my men made as much as a move towards the Member's son, I would know what it was that caused a dog to have the ability to snarl when it was unable to smile. As I had neither the burning curiosity nor desire to solve that particular riddle, I did nothing. It didn't hurt at all that he followed up the stick with a carrot that came in the exceedingly pleasing faces of several dead American presidents.

The most I did was to issue the usual anodyne statement that we trot out in domestic violence disputes, 'Members of the public are urged to refrain from using violence to resolve family disputes', crossing out the word *family* to suit the circumstances. The trouble began three weeks after his death.

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After Wonder was found, I ordered that his body be taken to the mortuary in the government hospital next to the police station in Gokwe Town, where it was to stay until the post-mortem. I received instructions from Harare that I was to call the Provincial hospital in Gweru to speak to a government pathologist called Dr Ananias Rixon Ngabi. I spent the better part of the day calling him. He eventually called me back a day after I had tried to reach him.

'So tell me about this Never,' he said.

'Wonder,' I said.

'What do you wonder?'

'His name is Wonder.'

'Ah. Tell me how you found him.'

I described the finding of the body and how the body looked. As I talked, chewing sounds came down the line to me, and I imagined him at his desk, chewing whatever it was he was eating as he listened to me. The injuries to the front of his body appeared to be defensive wounds, I explained, but the real damage seemed to have been done by the blow to the back of his head that had cracked his skull.

'That is what probably killed him,' I added.

'Now, now, Officer Mafa,' Ngabi said as he took a gulp of whatever it was he was drinking. 'Officer Mafa. Let's see, Mafa, Mafa, Mafa, I know that name. Are you one of the Mafas who come from Mberengwa? Was your father a headmaster?'

'I am a Mafa from Shurugwi,' I said.

'Mberengwa, Shurugwi, same same *fananas*,' Ngabi said. 'Now then, Officer Mafa from Shurugwi, all these things you are telling me about this Clever ...'

'Wonder,' I said.

'... all these defensive wounds and so on and so forth, who here is the pathologist precisely? Is it you, Officer Mafa of Shurugwi and not Mberengwa, or myself, Dr Ngabi?'

'Will you send a car to pick up the body?' I asked. 'Or will you come down yourself? We have no transport and we are not likely to have any for a while as we do not have enough cars or fuel to get him to Gweru.'

'That is not at all necessary,' he said. 'Your description of the body is detailed enough for me to go on.'

'Are you certain you can reach any sort of conclusion without actually examining the body?' I asked.

'Oh yes, yes,' he said as he chewed, 'the rest is just detail, and so on and so forth.'

He then spent the rest of the conversation not talking about Wonder at all but trying to establish whether I knew every Mafa who had ever crossed his path.

Ngabi duly issued his report. Wonder, he found, had died from self-inflicted wounds. The burial could go ahead with no inquest. Indeed, confirmed Harare, there was no foul play. Now, I won't lie to you, I have participated in a cover-up or two in my time, but even I thought this was going a bit far. At a minimum, there should have been even the most basic kind of inquest to record a verdict of foul play by a person or persons unknown, if only to give the semblance of, well, a bit of integrity to the whole thing.

Speaking of foul play reminds me of one of my first trials as a police offer. There was this particular interpreter who became a little confused when the prosecutor asked if a witness had suspected foul play. The poor chap obviously confused foul with fowl, because he translated it as *makafungira here, changamire, kuti kungangova nekutambatamba kwehuku*, upon which the irate magistrate said, what playing chickens are you on about now. You really see a lot in the courts, I tell you.

But back to Wonder. I informed one of his uncles that the body could now be released for burial. When no one had come to collect him by the end of that day, I again sent word that they should come and pick him up. The answer was a short and uncompromising no. So I ordered my men into a truck and drove to his family homestead.

We arrived just after 3 p.m. As usual in these villages, word of our intentions had preceded our arrival. We found a group of Wonder's relatives. In their ragged clothing, they radiated hostility. The women among them immediately started keening and wailing. I waited a bit until the worst of it was done, but just when I thought I could finally speak came a keening so sharp it was like an animal in pain.

Supported by two young women, his mother emerged from her hut and was led to where we stood. There is that saying, isn't there, that a grieving person is not one you look full in the face. I averted my eyes. To be honest with you, I would have done so anyway, even if she had not been grieving. I have never been able to look a blind person in the face, there is something not quite right about being looked at by a blind person, okay, I know it is not a look exactly, but you know what I mean, there is something unsettling about knowing that the person looking at you cannot see you but you can see them. There is a sort of nakedness in looking at eyes like that, eyes that look at you without seeing you.

Her voice, when she spoke, was heavy with surrender. 'These tears on my cheeks,' she said. 'My eyes have not cried tears for the ten years that I have been blind, but every evening I weep for my son and the tears run down like rivers.'

I was touched, I have to say, I would have to have been made of stone not to be moved, but my path was clear. They were to bury the body, I said. If he was not buried by the next day, I would arrest them all for the crime of refusing to dispose of a dead body in an appropriate manner. I quoted the relevant section of the Criminal Codification Act. I drove back to Gokwe with my men.

The next day, I came late to the station. The coffin was still there. It remained there for another two weeks. All this time, the opposition people were crying to anyone who had a microphone or notebook, and orders were being barked to me from Gweru and Harare. It is obviously not the business of the police to bury bodies, but that was the order that came from Harare. We were to bury him at the first opportunity that presented itself, preferably at night. I ordered a fearful Phiniel to go with three other men to the hospital.

'He will not like to be buried, like this, by strangers and not his own people, Mwendamberi,' Phiniel said. 'This is why this country is cursed. All those boys who died in the independence war, lying like wild animals in Mozambique and other places, buried by strange hands, all away from home. Wonder will not like it.'

'Wonder', I said, 'will just have to lump it.'

I went off to get my lunch.

It was a baking afternoon with not a single cloud above, in other words, a true Gokwe day. By the time I got inside my house, I was sweating from the heat and boiling with rage. I would arrest all the male members of the family, I swore. They needed to know who was the law. But I had to face the reality that if they chose to riot, I did not have enough men to arrest all of them. I was contemplating whether it was worth it to request back-up from Gweru, or even to get some army reserves called in when Phiniel ran up. His eyes were wide and fearful.

‘It won’t move,’ he said.

‘What?’ I asked.

‘The coffin, Mwendamberi, it just won’t move.’

He was right. The coffin would not move. It was as though the wood had joined with the steel of the mortuary cabinet. I ordered them to pull it out. Then I tried it myself but I too had to give up. It was at this point that doubts began to enter my mind, but I clung to the possibility that there was a perfectly reasonable explanation. Perhaps there was something that caused the wood to stick.

After that, none of my men would go near the coffin. I eventually had to tell Harare that if they wanted Wonder buried, they just had to come to Gokwe to do it themselves. I would hear from them what the next steps in the matter would be, I was told. But there were no next steps. The coffin remained in the mortuary for almost a year.

In that year, the talk in Gokwe was that Wonder was haunting Gokwe, and that he was being seen everywhere but in the one place that I most wished him to be, six feet under with grass growing over him, as far away from my jurisdiction as it was possible to be.

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He was first seen outside the mortuary. ‘*Anga akatobhara* four *zvake* Wonder, Mwendamberi,’ said Phiniel. ‘Cool as anything he looked, sitting there cross-legged and all, like it was the most normal thing in the world to be sitting there all cross-legged, Mwendamberi, when he was actually dead.’

He was then spotted on a moonless night, outside the Member of Parliament’s kraal, counting the Member’s herd and repeating the names of all the cows. Then he was seen outside the bottle store owned by the Member. A teacher at the school claimed that Wonder had stopped her to tell her he was tired. A bus driver claimed he almost had an accident because Wonder stood in the middle of the road.

Then came the animal deaths. Three of the governor’s cows died in calf. A goat belonging to the Member drowned in shallow water. A dog at the homestead of the parents of the two brothers went mad and killed six chickens. It was at this point that Phiniel, who, until now, had been content to recount the things that others had told him they had seen, gave himself a starring role in the drama. He claimed that one of his she-goats had given birth to a creature with a humanoid form, something no one could verify as he and his brother had burned it before anyone could see it. He had touched the coffin, he said, and this was the result. He asked for leave to consult a woman in Chipinge who could intercede for him with Wonder. When he came back, he told me that he would sooner be fired than touch that coffin again.

Then followed a series of car accidents. There was even a car accident in the family of Wonder’s murderer’s brother in England. I was sceptical that Wonder’s reach was extraterritorial. At this point, you will understand, I was becoming more and more uncertain, but I still scoffed at all the strange happenings.

Then I received the phone call from my wife. She had taken one look at Gokwe and turned her heel. She had chosen to stay in our house in Harare. She was one of the reasons I

so frequently left the area. There had been an accident at school. My son is one of those township boys who took to cricket like a duck to water. His room is papered with cuttings and posters of Hamilton Masakadza, Tatenda Taibu and Chris Gayle and with the Manica land Mountaineers and Mashonaland Eagles. Now, my wife informed me, he had been hit in the head by a cricket ball. He had turned his head at just the wrong time and the ball had felled him to the ground. It was a freak accident, but now he was in a coma.

I rushed to Harare, but there was nothing to be done. We had only to sit and wait. I have vivid memories of that day. We managed to get him into the Avenues, thank heavens for my wife's health insurance. In the next bed a group of people sang over a small child. I will always remember that song. From the lugubrious melody of the song, I could tell they were members of my mother's church, a church she continued to call Dutch Reformed long after it dropped that name. The words of the song were a familiar tune. *'Makakomborera vamwe, musandipfuure.'*

As I sat and watched my son's still face, I found myself saying the words of the song: 'You, who have brought blessings into the lives of others, don't pass over me.' I even found myself praying. I hedged my bets and addressed both God and my son's ancestors on both sides. And I bargained with Wonder.

I did not stay in Harare long because I was called back to Gokwe. Things were boiling over. Harare was thinking of sending out a riot squad.

The governor's daughter had died in a car accident in South Africa. All Gokwe was now whispering with the news that all of us who had been afflicted with misfortune had stood in the way of justice for Wonder. Everyone wondered who would be next. As it turned out, it was the pathologist. Reports came from Gweru that he had been struck mad, and was eating from bins. He could not stop chewing, even when he was not eating, his jaws moved up and down in momentary spasms.

When the two accomplices heard this news, they attempted to flee the jurisdiction. They left Gokwe without anyone knowing where they were going. The next we heard of them was that both cousin brothers had perished in the Beitbridge Bus Disaster. You must surely remember that one, it was the bus disaster of the year. Two buses racing each other on the Masvingo Road collided with a haulage truck and half the passengers in each perished. The brothers were in the bus that was going to South Africa.

Two days after the bus accident, Phiniel came running to my office. He is confessing, he said without preamble. And indeed, Takura sat in the Charge Office, his father and mother on either side of him, all three looking drawn and desperately ill.

This was one case we did not need to torture out the confession. I did not need to set Phiniel on them for the full Boko Haram treatment. Takura was clearly more afraid of what Wonder could do to him than anything Phiniel could have done. I really should not say poor Takura, because of course he killed Wonder. But I think of him as poor Takura because, as I said earlier, he developed an eye infection in Hwahwa Prison and went blind. He is still in prison, the death sentence spared only because he made a full and remorseful confession.

That was the beginning of the end of the matter. On the day after Takura was sentenced, the Member and his senior relatives went to Wonder's homestead. Phiniel and I accompanied him, to keep a watching brief. The Member took off his shoes and approached the homestead on his stomach, while his elders clapped their cupped hands as they rested on their knees. Wonder's mother came keening from her kitchen hut. She felt her way to him, raised him, and the two, the mother of the murdered and the father of his murderer, embraced and keened and staggered in supportive sorrow.

The negotiations followed. The Member pledged to give a hundred head of cattle. The families held a ceremony to the spirits of Wonder's ancestors to beg them to intercede with Wonder and soften his heart. Things became a little tense when they began to talk about a bride for Wonder. The tradition, of course, is that the family of the deceased has to pledge a young girl to the family of the victim, to bear sons to replace the dead.

Every man has his sticking point, and this was mine. I can overlook a lot but crimes against children will see me move heaven and earth to effect an arrest. I have never accepted a bribe in any crime against a child. *Ngozi* or not, I said, there would be no girl exchanged. Cows and cloths were all well and good and they could trade those to their hearts' content, but, even with all that I had seen, I felt it had to stop somewhere. What justice was there in using a young girl to appease a crime she had nothing to do with, thus blighting every chance of a better life of her own?

'The minute any young girl is sent from your homestead to this one,' I told an emissary of the Member, 'I will arrest your Chef for facilitating a kidnapping.'

I repeated the same message to Wonder's family.

'It is up to Wonder,' they said.

'Actually,' I said, 'this one is up to me.'

Wonder or no Wonder, I was not going to let some child miss out on an education just so that she could be married off to God knows which of Wonder's many unwashed male relatives. On this point, I am pleased to say, they listened to me.

They finally buried Wonder a year after his death. When his brothers lifted his coffin from the mortuary, it moved lightly to their shoulders. They buried him on the *churu* where his grandfathers also lay. Throughout the night of his long wake, Gandavaroyi rang with drums and rattles. The air trembled with the sharp keening and ululating of women. And after that, Gokwe saw Wonder no more.

Now, I don't expect you to believe me, people outside the area rarely do. After all, animals die all over the place. The number of road accidents is no surprise given the potholed roads and the decrepit cars that are driven by drivers in possession of bought licences. And can it really be that Wonder killed a whole busload of people just to get at the two brothers? Perhaps Ngabi would have turned mad anyway. Perhaps my son just had concussion, as the doctors said. And prison conditions are bad enough to throw up all sorts of illnesses, including eye infections. Perhaps the sightings of Wonder were some species of mass hysteria, a manifestation of collective guilt.

But I still remember the cold panic when my wife called me about our son. And I remember my bargain with Wonder. If my son became well, I had vowed, the arrest of the man who killed him would be the last thing I did in the force. I would never take another bribe; a vow that I could keep only if I left the force.

It has been hard but I have kept my word. There are no more road traffic fines for me, no more conveniently misplaced dockets. My wife and I set up an auto-parts company on Rotten Row. We travel to Zambia and Botswana to buy parts to sell. The house in Mainway Meadows is still not finished. But my son is in the First Eleven at school, they get beaten more than they win. It is enough to see the joy on his face. We struggle and we get by. It is a life.

I had just one thing to do before I left Gokwe. I took the two thousand from the governor and gave half of it to Phiniel. A nobler-minded man would probably have given the money back to the governor, but I have never claimed to be such a man. Money is money, after all. Wonder, I figured, would surely not begrudge the man a new donkey, and maybe an extra cow or two. Phiniel's overwhelmed smile cracked his face in two as he took the money with both hands. I gave the rest to the family of the deceased brothers, to put headstones on their graves. Every man deserves some dignity in death.

I said earlier that three facts are undisputed, the pathologist's madness, the two brothers' deaths, and the killer's blindness. Here is a fourth one. Since the death of Wonder, there has not been a political killing in Gokwe. No young man has ever again killed another in the name of politics. And I am willing to stake my life on it that none ever will. You could say that this was Wonder's gift to Gokwe. In the terror of his death, he taught us all a new respect for life, for all our lives.