

Sunday Times

Intermediate
Phase
ENGLISH

Storytime

South African stories for children



basic education

Department:
Basic Education
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA



A message from the Minister of Basic Education



Dear Learner

My sincere wish is that this story book will transport you to a magical place where you will discover the treasures of books as they make you laugh, increase your knowledge, take you into new and different places and inspire you to achieve your greatest ambitions.

In order to realise all of this, the Ministry of Basic Education is encouraging you to spend at least 15 minutes each day reading at home. Read to your brothers and sisters, parents, grandparents or other adults at home. Make reading a habit that will enable you to read fluently with understanding and to open doors for your future success because a reading nation is a winning nation.

A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to read 'Motshekga'.

Ms AM Motshekga, MP
Minister of Basic Education



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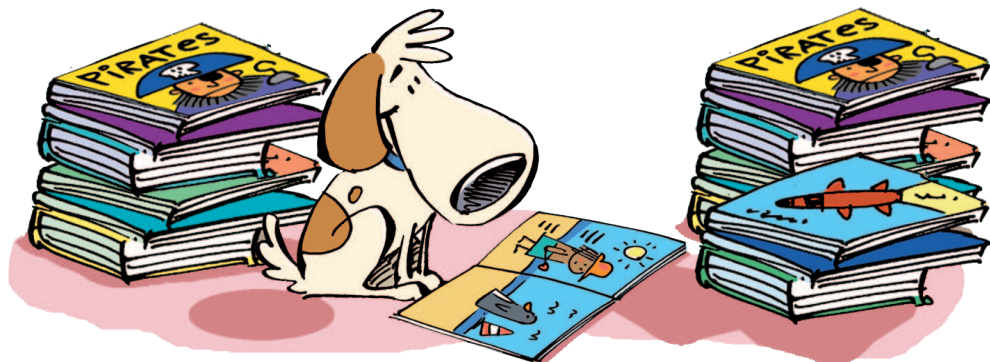
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For more information contact: Patti McDonald patti.mcdonald@timesmedia.co.za

The Magic Mokoro



Story by Wendy Hartmann
Illustrated by Val Myburgh



Long ago, there was a wise and kind old woman.
She lived on an island in the middle of the great
Zambezi River.



When the people in the nearby village were hungry, she took them fish. They were thankful and invited her to stay and eat with them. But she did not.

The chief of the village was a proud and greedy man.

“Who are you?” he demanded. “Where do you come from? And why was I not served first?”

The old woman just smiled, got into her mokoro and sailed back up the river.





This made the chief angry, so he followed her. He walked for many hours and eventually saw an island in the middle of the river. There, the old woman climbed out of the mokoro and went into her hut. He camped nearby to watch her.

The next day, she stepped into her mokoro and said,

Mokoro, mokoro, here is my wish.

Sail down the river to where there are fish.

The mokoro moved itself into the water and sailed down the river. The chief followed. The mokoro stopped at a spot where the water was calm. Then, the old woman spoke again.

Mokoro, mokoro, here is my wish.

Fill yourself up with just enough fish.

In a flash of silver, the fish jumped out of the water into the mokoro.

Then the old woman clapped her hands, held them to her heart and bowed her head in thanks. The mokoro sailed itself back to the island.

“That mokoro should belong to me,” said the chief,
“not to that old woman.”





He waited until the old woman was at the far end of the island. He swam across the river, stepped into the mokoro and repeated the words he had heard her say,

*Mokoro, mokoro, here is my wish.
Sail down the river to where there are fish.*

The mokoro took him to exactly the same spot. Then he said the rest of the words,

*Mokoro, mokoro, here is my wish.
Fill yourself up with just enough fish.*

There was a splash of silver and the fish jumped into the mokoro. More and more jumped in.



Fish covered the chief's feet and he could not move.

What he had not done was give his thanks. So, no matter how he shouted to make them stop, the fish kept jumping in. Soon the mokoro was full.



It was about to sink when the old woman appeared.

She clapped her hands twice, held them to her heart and bowed her head in thanks.

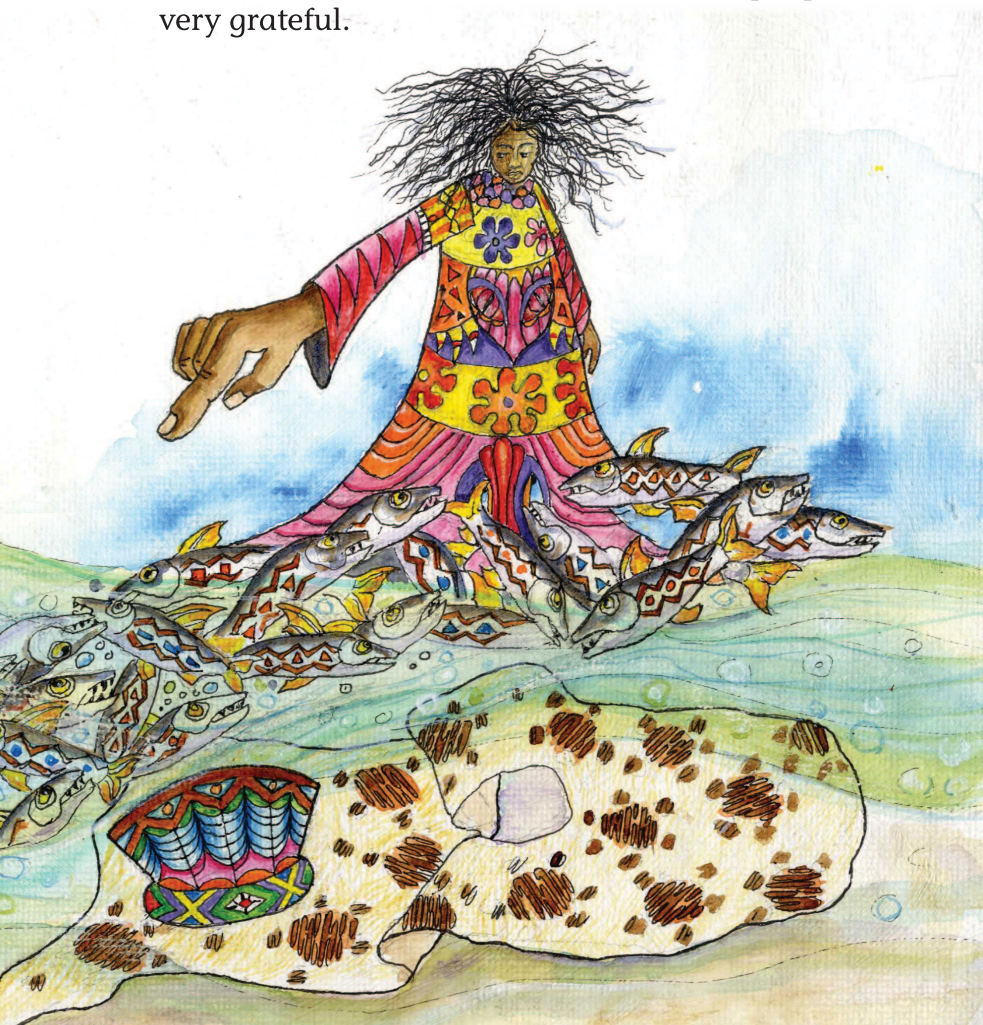
The mokoro sailed back to the island and emptied the fish and the chief on the bank. Then it turned, moved to the middle of the river and slowly sank to the bottom.

"You!" said the old woman angrily. "You will remain on this island and eat all the fish you have caught. You will not leave here until the pile is gone."



This time, when the old woman returned to the village, she had nothing with her. The magic mokoro was gone. She told the people what had happened to their chief.

Then, because she was kind, she showed them how to weave nets and catch their own fish. The people were very grateful.



To this day, the villagers live happily. They now have a kind and wise chief who rules them. They are able to catch fish and feed themselves. They never take too much and always share their food with others who do not have enough.

To this day, the wise old woman has never been seen again. As far as anyone knows, the magic mokoro is still there, at the bottom of the river.

And to this day, the old chief is eating the fish he caught. The pile never gets smaller and he is still on that island in the middle of the Zambezi River.



Mr Hare Meets Mr Mandela



Story by Chris van Wyk
Illustrated by Paddy Bouma

Mr Hare crept out of his forest home. The morning sky was blue. The grass was green. The trees swayed in the cool breeze. The forest was full of the songs of birds. But...

On his doormat lay something he'd never seen before: a brand new R200 note.

Mr Hare picked it up. "What is Mr Leopard doing here?" He turned it around. "Ah! Mr Mandela," he cried.



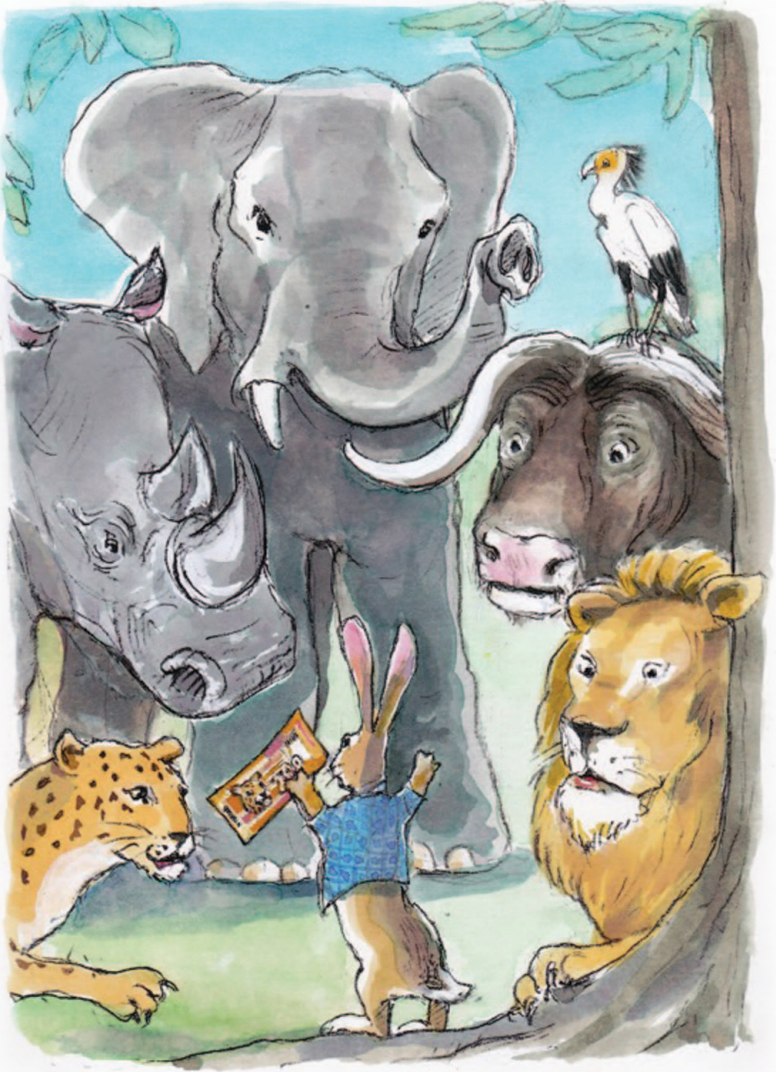
His left ear curled up and down as he thought. He looked up at Miss Secretary Bird who was watching him from a branch in the thorn tree.

"Please call a meeting of all the animals," he said.
"I have an important announcement to make."

She flew off calling, "Meeting everyone, at the Baobab tree, this morning. Meeting everyone..."

"What is it this time?" everyone wondered, forming a circle under the tree.

Mr Hare stood in the centre. He cleared his throat and began, "Fellow citizens of the forest, I have important news for you. This," he said as he waved the R200 note around, "has landed on my doormat. I don't know what it is or what it means, but it has Mr Mandela's face on it and so I'm sure it belongs to him..."



"It has my face on it too," said Mr Leopard with a playful snarl. "So maybe it belongs to me."

Everyone laughed except for Mr Hare. He was in no mood for jokes.

"I plan to go to the city this very hour to return this important note to Mr Mandela."

"What?" Mr Buffalo asked, shocked. "You will get lost there."

"Why would I get lost?" asked Mr Hare, pushing out his chest.

"Because you can't read," said Mr Rhino, pointing his sharp horn at Mr Hare.

"Oh nonsense!" snorted Mr Hare.

"It's true," Mrs Elephant stomped her foot impatiently. "In the City of Readers almost everyone can read. And those who cannot read are learning to read."

"Well, what could happen to me?" Mr Hare asked.

Mr Lion leapt forward, swishing his whiskers in Mr Hare's face. "Those who cannot read repeat their mistakes over and over again," he growled. "And so will you."

"Hah!" Mr Hare sniggered. "Not me, kitty!" With those words he marched fearlessly right underneath Mrs Elephant. Then he skipped down the path that led to the City of Readers.

Soon he began to hear the noises of the city. And then he saw it. He had never been in the city before. He glanced at Mr Leopard's face on the note. It seemed to be warning him not to go.

"But I am the Little Wise One," Mr Hare said. "I am cleverer by far than anyone in the City of Readers." And with a leap he entered the city.

The first people he saw were schoolgirls and boys.
They looked smart in their blue and yellow uniforms.
They carried schoolbags and books.

“Good morning, Mr Hare!” they greeted him.

“Hi there!” Mr Hare called back, proud that they knew him. But he was curious. “How do you know me?” he asked.

“We’ve read about you in our story books,” a girl said.
“About how Mr Tortoise tricked you in a race.”

They all laughed. Mr Hare gave them an angry look and went on his way.

He saw people rushing for a train and joined them. At the pay station a man in a smart uniform, standing behind a counter, held out his hand and Mr Hare said, holding up the R200, “I’m on my way to see Mr Mandela.”

The man grabbed the note out of his paw...

“Hey!” Mr Hare protested.

Then the man handed him
a R100 note.

Mr Hare examined the
note on the train.



“It’s turned blue,” he said,
puzzled.

“And Mr Buffalo has taken Mr Leopard’s place.” He turned the note around.

“But Mr Mandela is still here.” He took a carrot out of his pocket and nibbled happily, watching the scenery outside.

"You see, Mr Buffalo," he said to the R100 note. "Even though I can't read, I'm on my way to meet Mr Mandela."

"Excuse me, sir."

Mr Hare looked up at a man in a blue uniform. "You are not allowed to eat on the train. Can't you read that?"

He pointed to a sign above Mr Hare's ears that read:

PLEASE DO NOT EAT ON THE TRAIN

"Oh," Mr Hare said, putting the half-eaten carrot back in his pocket.

He got off at the next station and soon found himself on a busy street.

Bra Tsotsi watched Mr Hare trying to cross the road, and saw what he had in his paw.

"One hundred!" he said, licking his lips. He walked up to Mr Hare. "You seem lost, my brother," he grinned.

"I'm Bra Tsotsi, here to help new visitors to our city."

"I'm Mr Hare," he shook hands. "And I'm on my way to Mr Mandela," Mr Hare said. "To give him this." He held out the banknote.



“Ah,” said Bra Tsotsi. “Mandela is my best friend. I’ll take it to him.” He grabbed the R100 and disappeared into the crowds.

Mr Hare was not happy about how things were going. He wanted to meet Mr Mandela himself and shake his hand. But now, all he could do was turn around and go back home. And what would he tell the animals about meeting Mr Mandela?

“No,” he decided. “I must find Bra Tsotsi and take back the note.”

Quickly Mr Hare weaved through the bustling crowds, leapt over moving cars, and darted in and out of shops.

“And there he is!” Mr Hare spotted Bra Tsotsi in MaPhiri’s Peri-Peri Chicken Shop, chomping away on a R50 box of Wild Wings.

“Hey, Bra Tsotsi,” Mr Hare said, “give me back my note.”

Bra Tsotsi got such a fright that some peri-peri sauce got stuck in his throat, giving him a fit of hiccups.

“Here *hic* it *hic* is *hic*,” he said, handing over a R50 note.



"Pink?" Mr Hare held up the note, puzzled.

"And what happened to Mr Buffalo? But here's Mr Lion to tell me I need to read to survive in the city! Hah!" He turned it around. "But at least Mr Mandela is still here."



Mr Hare saw people standing in a taxi queue. Behind them, on the taxi shelter, was a picture of Mr Mandela.

"Ah," Mr Hare said. "They must all be going to visit Mr Mandela too." He joined the queue. And when the taxi came he got in.

"Where does Mandela live?" he asked the driver.

"At the end of the long walk to freedom, my friend," he said with a friendly smile. "I'll take you there."

They rode for half an hour, past a school, street hawkers, down a highway, past a church, through a suburb. Finally the driver stopped at a taxi rank.

"Your stop, my friend," said the driver. "Just walk up this road until you get to a big house with a big gate with a guard outside the gate. That will be R30." And he took the R50 note out of Mr Hare's paw.

Mr Hare was about to protest when...

"Your change, sir." The driver shoved a note in his paw.

Mr Hare looked at the new note. Again it was different from the last one. Instead of Mr Lion, it was Mr Elephant

who stared out at him. But when he turned it around there was Mr Mandela, still smiling. Mr Hare smiled back and began to hop up the long road.



On his way he passed a bakery. He stopped, sniffed the air. What was that lovely smell? He pressed his face flat against the bakery window and gazed at doughnuts, pancakes, pies, tarts, fruitcake, biscuits.

Mr Hare hopped into the shop.

“Can I help you, sir,” said a lady behind the counter.

“I’d like one of these,” he said, pointing to the doughnuts.

“No, no, one of those,” he showed her a slice of milk tart.

Then a wedge of chocolate cake, a biscuit, apple crumble, a koeksister.

“Please, sir, you have to make up your mind.”

Mr Hare finally pointed to a Chelsea bun.

“Ah!” the lady smiled. “Good choice.”

She slipped the Chelsea bun into a packet and handed it to him. The next thing he knew, Mr Mandela’s brown note was in her hands. And when she put it back in his paw, it was green! And who do you think had taken the place of Mr Elephant? There was Mr Rhino warning him about the City of Readers.



Mr Hare skipped out of the shop, taking big bites out of his Chelsea bun, and wondering, "How many times will Mr Mandela's note change colour before I meet him?" Then he saw the guard at the big gate. He skipped up to the guard, greeted him and asked:

"Does Mr Mandela live here?"

"Yes," he does.

"I'm Mr Hare of the African forest. I have an important note for him."

The guard said, "Do you have an appointment?"

"No," said Mr Hare. "I have a note."

The guard turned and spoke into an intercom.

"Sir, I have a Mr Hare from the forest..."

A deep, chuckling voice crackled on the intercom.

"Mr Hare! The great Mr Hare of the African forest?"

"Yes, Mr Mandela."

"Well, send him in!"

It was a great meeting. The big hand of Mr Mandela shaking the paw of the famous Mr Hare. The two men entertained each other with stories of the city and the forest, of lions and heroes, of freedom and adventure.

Then, Mr Hare told Mr Mandela why he'd come.

"I found this note on my doorstep," he said, handing over the R10. "It has changed colour so many times, and the faces of all my big friends from the forest have appeared on



it. I knew it was yours so I came to give it to you myself.”

Mr Mandela was puzzled, but he accepted the note with a smile. A photographer came to take pictures of Mr Mandela and Mr Hare. And a TV crew came to film them for *News at Six*.

When Mr Hare came home he called a meeting. He told all the animals about his exciting adventure.

He told them about the people he'd met, the places he'd seen. And how he had finally met Mr Mandela.

"And, my friends," he said, looking smugly at Lion and Elephant and Buffalo and Leopard and Rhino, "I did all this without being able to read one word." And with that said, the sun set and all the animals went back to their homes for a good night's rest.

The next morning, Mr Hare was awakened by a thud on his doorstep.

"What was that?" he wondered. "Maybe it's the angry stomp of Mrs Elephant coming to argue with me."

He peeped outside. Mrs Elephant wasn't there. But there was a big envelope on his mat.

He went out and looked around to see who had brought it. There was no one in sight.

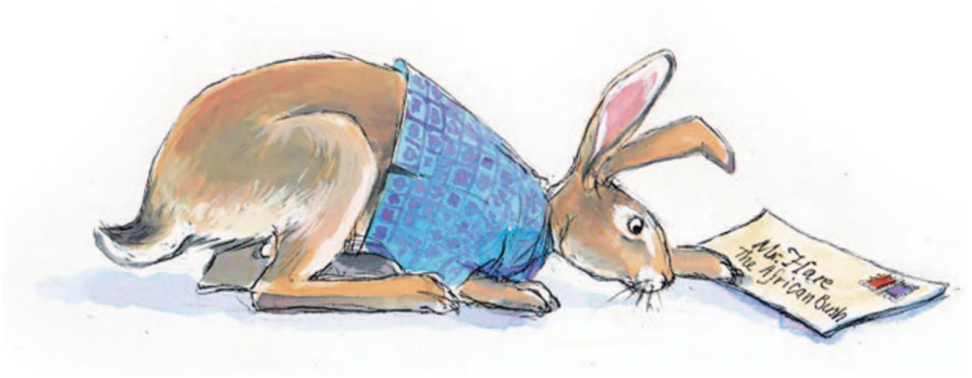
Mr Hare opened the envelope. It was a letter:

Dear Mr Hare

The whole country is still talking about your visit. Thank you for telling me all those stories, and for returning the R10 note. I have enclosed a R200 note for you to spend the next time you visit the city.

Warm regards,

Nelson Mandela



Because he could not read, Mr Hare was not interested in the letter. But something fell out of the envelope and fluttered onto the mat.

Mr Hare looked down at the R200 note. He could not believe his eyes.

“I don’t believe it!” he cried. “The very same place as yesterday morning.”



Without wasting time he called another meeting of all the animals.

“My friends,” he announced, “it’s a great mystery, the note has returned.” He waved it around for all to see.

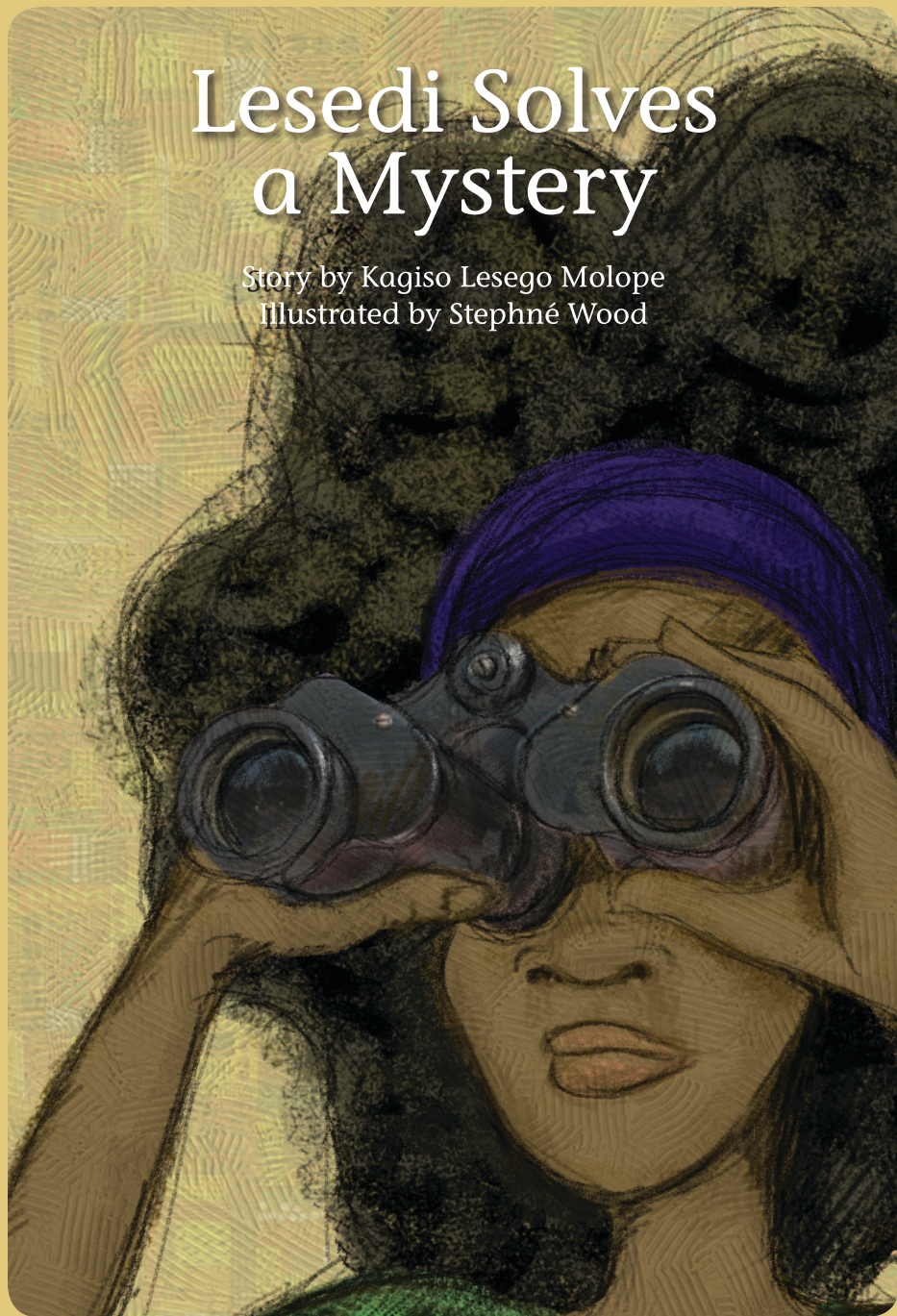
“And I have to journey back to Mr Mandela to return it to him.”

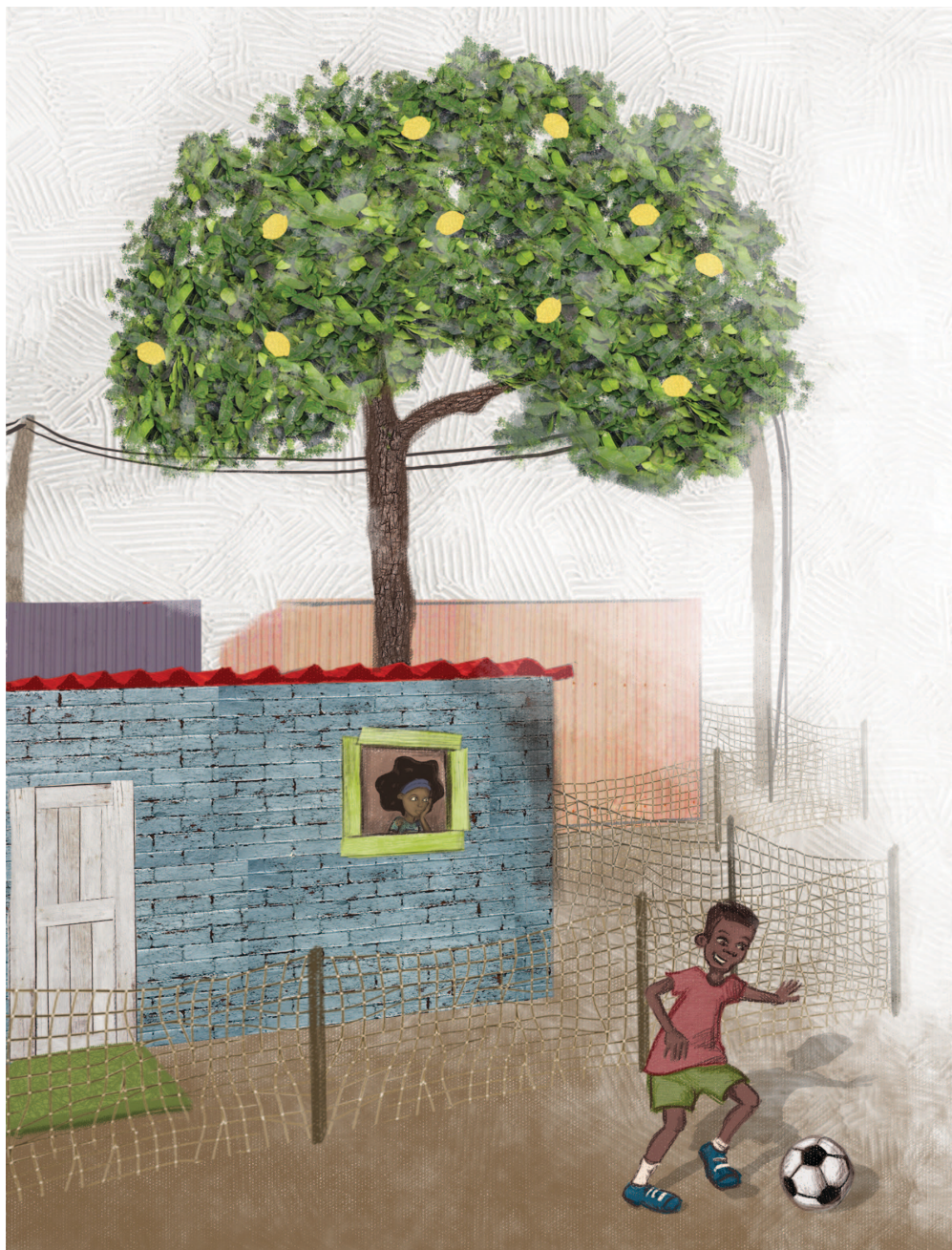
And, without another word he was away,
skipping down the path that led to the City of
Readers, the note fluttering in his paw.



Lesedi Solves a Mystery

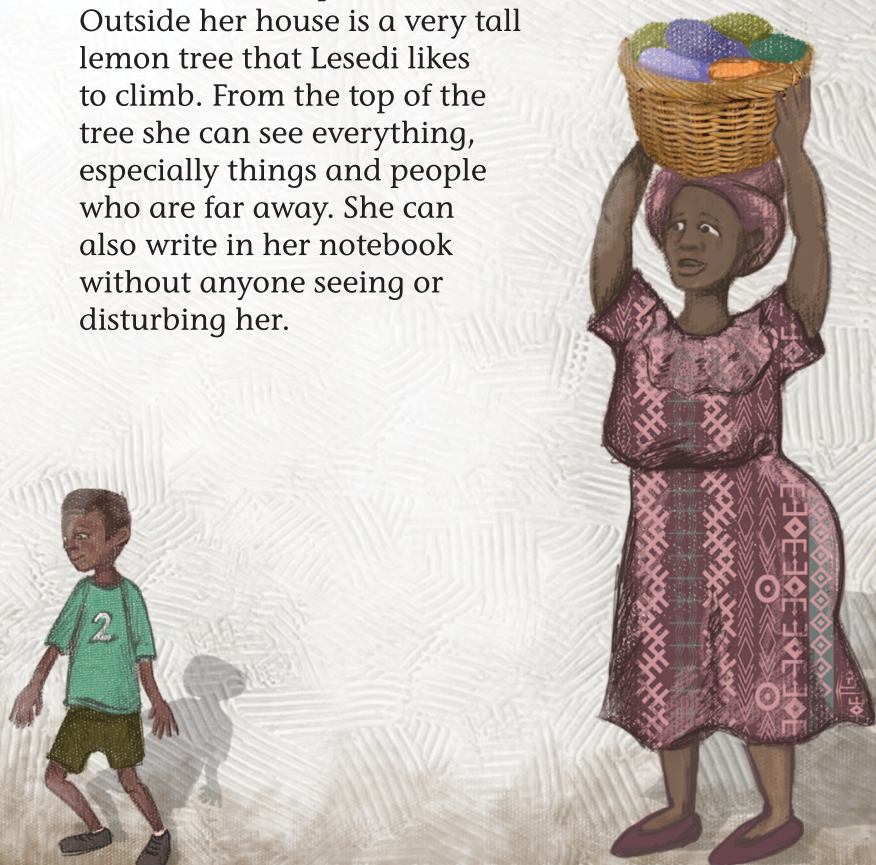
Story by Kagiso Lesego Molope
Illustrated by Stephné Wood





Lesedi likes to think of herself as Lesedi the Spy because when she grows up she wants to be a spy. Right now she sees herself as a spy-in-training. She lives in a small blue house at the corner of a very busy street in a very busy neighbourhood. She likes living at the corner because she can see the streets from different angles through her window.

Lesedi likes living at the corner because from her window she can see a lot of things. She has what her father calls “the perfect view”. Outside her house is a very tall lemon tree that Lesedi likes to climb. From the top of the tree she can see everything, especially things and people who are far away. She can also write in her notebook without anyone seeing or disturbing her.



She likes watching people go about their days, learning their habits. For example, Lesedi watches Rre Leina, who always wears a suit and tie.

He is out of his house very early in the morning and goes back when the sun goes down, when the other parents come home from work. Rre Leina carries nothing on his way out but, like other parents, always comes back with a loaf of bread and a pint of milk.

Lesedi watches him and knows that he plays cards and dice all day. She writes it down, just like she writes down everything she notices. So in her notebook she has:

*✕ Monday to Friday Rre Leina plays cards
at the steps of the Madi supermarket
and then he buys bread and milk at the
end of the day.*



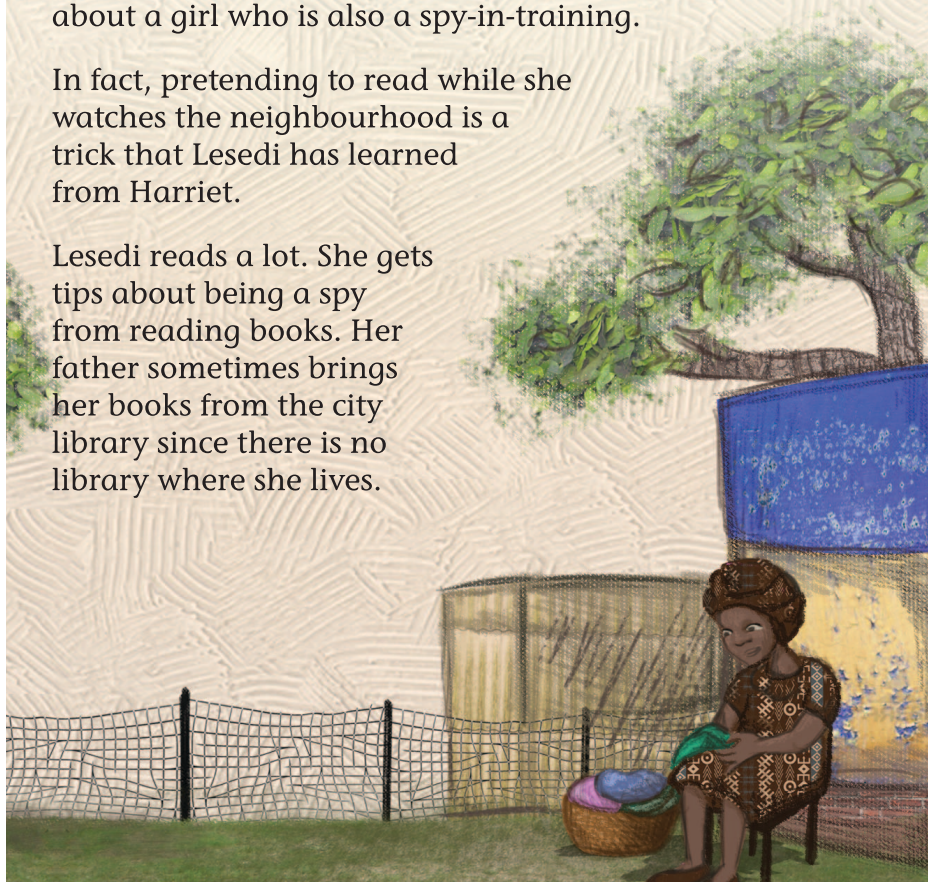
Lesedi can also see Mme Thumo, who sews clothes for people. Mme Thumo's backyard is visible from the top of the tree. She likes to sit in her backyard and draw when she is not in the house sewing.

When Lesedi has gone to bring clothes for mending, she has taken a closer look at the drawings, which are sometimes hanging in the backyard.

Today Lesedi is sitting up in the tree reading a book called *Harriet the Spy*. This is her favourite book because it is about a girl who is also a spy-in-training.

In fact, pretending to read while she watches the neighbourhood is a trick that Lesedi has learned from Harriet.

Lesedi reads a lot. She gets tips about being a spy from reading books. Her father sometimes brings her books from the city library since there is no library where she lives.





These are some of the things she has learned from books and they are in the first pages of her notebook:

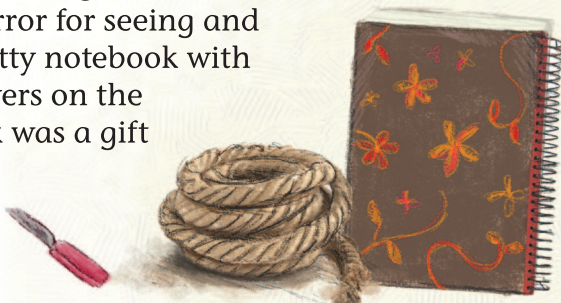
- ✗ A true spy knows not to be seen while working.*
- ✗ A true spy knows when to look and when to hide.*
- ✗ A true spy is never without her notes.*

Today she is wearing her favourite dress, which is mostly green, and the blue jeans she got from one of her brothers. Green is a really good colour for camouflage and jeans are really handy for climbing trees. Running shoes are also perfect as they don't make much noise and are good for running and climbing.

Her notes from this week are:

- ✗ Someone is selling fruit for money at school.*
- ✗ There's a new boy in the neighbourhood and his name is Tumiso.*
- ✗ The Motsei boys have not played outside all week.*
- ✗ Baba Khumalo says his fruit keeps disappearing.*

Lesedi is carrying her schoolbag and in it are her spy tools: a small rope in case she needs help climbing, a small knife for cutting ropes and things like that in an emergency, a mirror for seeing and a thick and very pretty notebook with orange and red flowers on the cover. This notebook was a gift from her mother.



When it is winter Lesedi adds a small jersey in case she's outside for a long time and it gets cold. But her favourite of all her tools is the small pair of binoculars that Baba Khumalo gave her when she turned ten.

One of Lesedi's concerns is that she needs money to buy a bus pass. So she is on her first job: find out what is happening to Baba Khumalo's fruit. If she solves the mystery, she will have money for a bus pass for the month. This is very exciting! A spy getting paid for doing what she loves!

Now she scans the streets with her binoculars and makes some notes but doesn't write them down just yet because she needs to keep her eyes on the job. The notes are that Tumiso is walking out of the Motsei house.

She follows him with the binoculars and sees that he's going to the shop. When he comes out he is carrying a large plastic bag. He walks back to the Motsei house. She writes down when he comes out that:

X Tumiso was in the house for 30 minutes. None of the Lesedi boys have come out. He is eating what looks like a chocolate bar. He is also carrying a large plastic bag.

Then she notes:

X Must take dress to Mme Thumo for mending after school.

Later Lesedi walks over to Mme Thumo and hands her a dress for mending. While she is there she makes sure to look around and listen very carefully.

Through the fence she can see the Motsei boys and the new boy are speaking in hushed tones, as if making secret plans



about something. There is a lot of rustling. It sounds like plastic bags.

Lesedi takes out her mirror and, with her back turned to the Motsei house, she pretends to look at herself in the mirror.

She hears one of the boys say, “Shh, there’s someone listening.”

Another one says, “It’s just a girl looking at herself in the mirror.” All three boys laugh. Lesedi stays still, but she is actually making notes to herself about the plastic bags and straining to hear what they are whispering.

Two important notes:

*X When I bump into Tumiso at the shop, he smells of fruit.
Also, his knees are very dirty.*

Later Baba Khumalo tells Lesedi that one of the Motsei boys had been at the fruit stand. The strange thing is that he’d been there alone. Lesedi looks around the stand and there are knee marks on the ground.

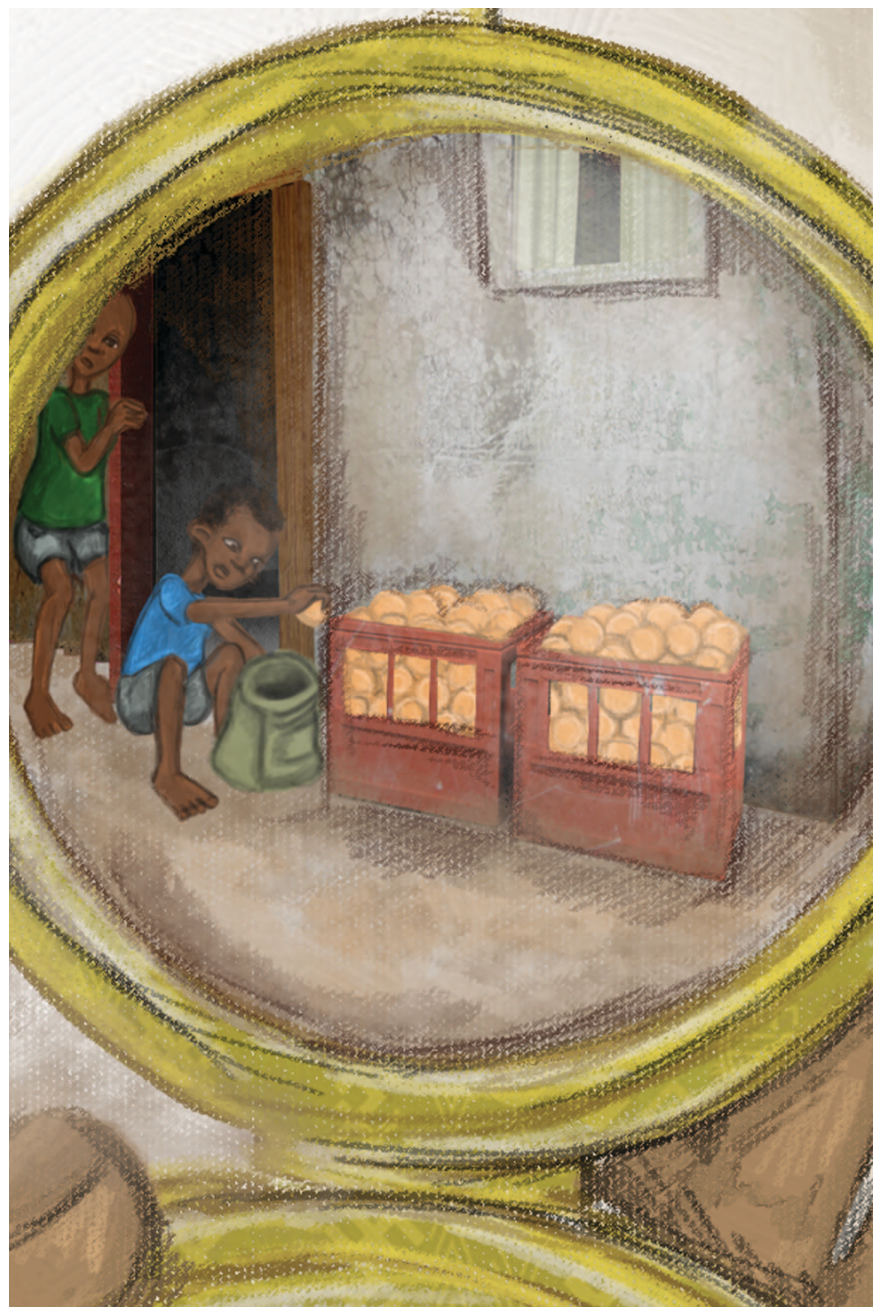
Lesedi goes home and looks through her notebook.

She climbs the tree and thinks and thinks and thinks.

As she is up in the tree she sees through her binoculars a pair of feet behind the fruit stand. Baba Khumalo can’t see the feet because he has his back to the stand.

It all comes together. When the feet disappear, she climbs down the tree and runs to Baba Khumalo.

“What I think is happening,” she tells Baba Khumalo, “is that one of them steals while the other is speaking to you.”



She explains to him the boys' plan.

"But what's the motivation?" asks Baba Khumalo.

"A good investigator always knows that."

"They're not allowed to eat a lot of sweets. So they sell the fruit. At school I heard there are people selling fruit and other things secretly. I think the boys sell the fruit and then use the money to buy sweets. They have to stay inside so that no one sees them eating them and tells their parents."

And this is how Lesedi solves her first mystery and earns a bus pass.



The Big Chase

Story by Tuelo Gabonewe
Illustrated by Angie Bowring



Leje Malau was a beautiful little boy. He had short curly hair, big white eyes and dark skin. In school he was one of the best athletes. His very quick feet meant he always came first in the 100-metre sprint. He'd only lost that event once in his six years at the primary school. He had the flu that day and finished second behind Selelo Bodiba, who was a tall boy with a long stride. When Leje Malau lost that race he cried like a kitten and nobody comforted him.

Leje Malau lived with his mother and father in a big house. His older sister was away at boarding school. He slept in a different bedroom each night. Leje was lazy and disobedient, and never did anything around the house. When his mother asked him to help her with the chores he got angry and ran off, so his mother did all the chores by herself. Leje had itchy feet, and walking was his favourite pastime. He never said "no" when his mother sent him to the shops to buy odds and ends daily.

Even though he was lazy and never helped his mother, Leje took his schoolwork very seriously. His parents had been invited to the primary school many times to receive his certificates. Some certificates said: Ace Learner. Others said: Top Athlete. All these certificates were displayed in the living area in the Malau home. Also displayed in the living area were all his medals and trophies. Leje Malau had a very promising future, and he was still only eleven years old. His parents couldn't be prouder.

A bright boy he was, but Leje was not a very nice person. He never played with other children, and he refused to be friends with anybody. He was mean and he was rude. When other children in school tried to speak to him, he didn't respond. He'd just sit there with his eyes on the ground. When they tried to sit with him he got up angrily and shuffled away. He always wanted to be alone.



Leje wasn't only mean towards his schoolmates – he treated animals badly too. There was a house that he walked past when he went to the shops every day. A sickly old man lived in that house. He had a dog that was always locked inside the yard behind the fence: a beautiful Doberman with a shiny coat and a square shape. Its tail was docked.

The Doberman, too, wanted to be friends with Leje. Every time it saw him go by it came running towards him,



wagging its tail. It would jump up and down, waving at Leje with its paw, smiling at him. When it got to the end of the fence and it couldn't follow him any more, the dog watched Leje for a long time, until he disappeared. The Doberman's master, the old man, was too old to take it for walks any more. He had arthritis too, so he avoided walking as much as he could. He was a widower and had no friends, so he spent the bulk of his time indoors playing old records.



Leje refused to be friends with the Doberman, and chose to treat it badly instead. He threw stones at it, and poked it with sticks through the mesh fence. The pain would make the dog moan and groan, but Leje wouldn't stop.

Hurting the defenceless animal somehow pleased him. He threw water at the dog, and banana peels, and old newspapers, and empty bottles, and all other kinds of rubbish. One time he unwrapped a toffee and threw it at the dog, and then he asked him, "What, you don't like sweets?"

Of course the dog said nothing. Leje laughed and walked away. The dog watched him walk away with tears in its eyes. The bad treatment didn't stop there. Leje's abuse of the canine captive got worse. The Doberman wouldn't give up though. It never stopped rushing to the fence when it saw him. It leapt up and down all along the fence, following him as he passed by, stopping every now and then to stick out a happy paw to greet him. The dog would have been very happy if the boy would just stick his hand in through the fence and stroke its coat.

One day, Leje Malau was coming back from the shop when he saw a group of donkeys next to the road. He'd seen many donkeys in his life, but had never got that close to them. Bad boy that he was, Leje Malau decided he was going to spoil the animals' fun. He looked around. There were no stones in sight, nor were there sticks. That didn't stop the naughty child. He wanted to hear the sound donkeys made when they were in pain. He chose his target, gritted his teeth and attacked. He kicked the donkey hard in the stomach. The donkey, hurt and angry, quickly got up. That wasn't what he'd anticipated.

He turned around and fled, the donkey at his tail! He was quick, but the donkey was even quicker. He ran faster than he'd ever done in his life, but the angry donkey ran even faster. The space between Leje and the donkey chasing him



was always getting smaller. Leje threw the plastic bag with the onions his mother had sent him to buy on the ground. He ran without looking back, his small heart beating fast!

“I’m sorry, donkey! I’m sorry! Somebody help me!” he screamed.

There were only a few metres between the donkey and Leje when the Doberman saw them. The dog got up immediately and ran at great speed from the door to the fence. It jumped over the fence – something it had never done before – and landed dangerously. It rolled a few times

in the dust before it got back on its paws. There was no time to shake off the dust! The dog sped off after the donkey, which was still chasing after the boy. That dog had the speed of a cheetah! It soon caught up with the donkey. It ran fast past the donkey, then turned and hit the brakes in front of it.

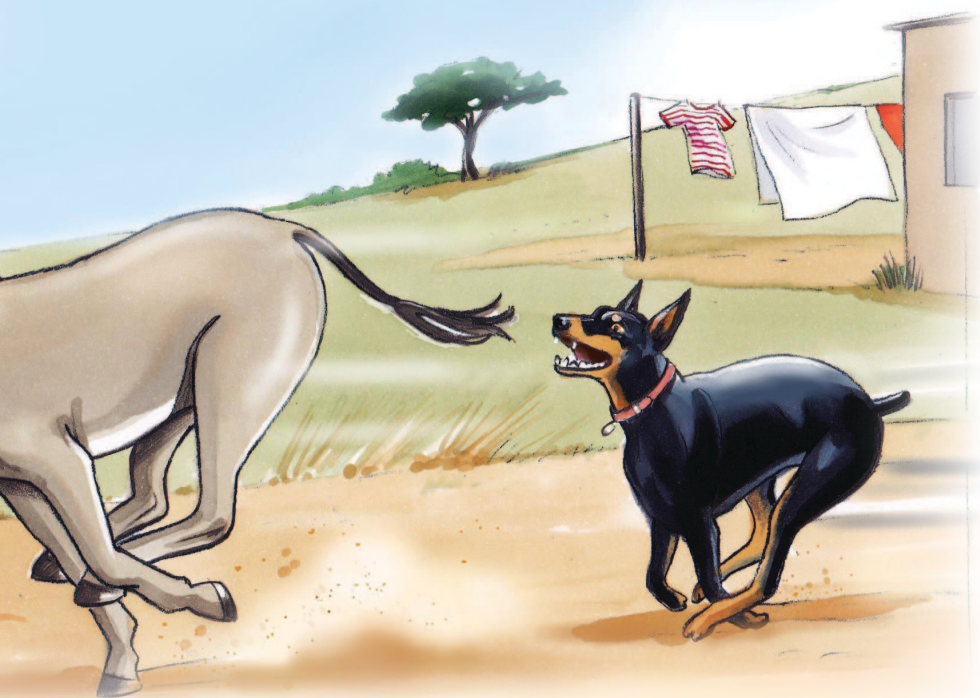
The donkey was much bigger than the dog, but that Doberman wasn't afraid. He flashed his sharp teeth, and the donkey braked like a bicycle. He barked, and the donkey, now scared, turned around and started running. The dog chased after it, snapping at its hooves.

Leje Malau watched with tears in his eyes as the dog he'd always treated unkindly saved his life. The dog kept at the donkey's hind hooves, barking and snapping, until they both disappeared.

Leje went back, picked up the plastic bag with the onions, and quickly ran home.

That night, Leje Malau didn't eat his supper. He took his plate and tiptoed out the house. He walked straight to the old man's house, his steps nervous. The gate was still shut, the old man and the dog nowhere in sight. Leje walked up to the front door, the plate with his supper still in his hands. When he got to the door he shifted the plate to one hand, and knocked. The old man took his time before he came and opened the door.





“Good evening, sir. I’ve come to see your dog,” Leje said.

The old man yawned. It looked like he’d been sleeping.

“Good evening, kid. Lebelo’s not here,” said the old man.



“Lebelo?”

“Yes. The dog.”

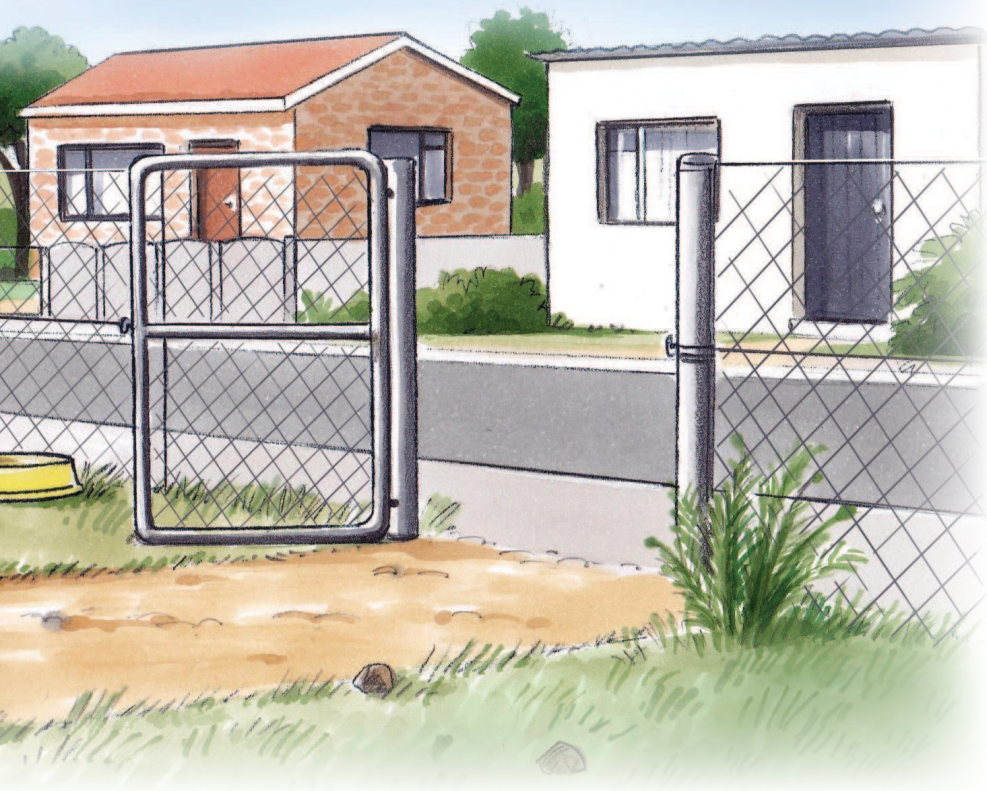
“Oh? Where is he?”

“He’s gone.”

“He’s gone? Gone where?”

“I don’t know, boy. He’s gone. I don’t think he’s coming back either.”

The elder yawned again, and gently pushed the door shut in Leje Malau’s face.



The boy couldn't believe it. He'd come all that way to thank the Doberman for risking its life for him, and the dog was gone. Leje gently placed the plate with his supper on the ground, in case the dog came back later. The boy's heart was broken. He cried all the way back home. He never saw that dog again.



A Message from the Birds



Story by Karen Briner
Illustrated by Shayle Bester

News of a certain kind can spread like wildfire under the right conditions. The news was that Vusi Jackson's mother had lost her mind. According to their neighbour on the left, she had lost it at exactly seven minutes past six, on the corner of Jacaranda and Tambo Streets. That's when Vusi's mom started seeing things that simply were not there.

The neighbour, Mrs Theta, a puffed up woman who lived for gossiping, took it upon herself to broadcast this news.

"Lindiwe Jackson thinks the birds are sending her messages," she told the postman. "She thinks they are arranging themselves in very specific ways on telephone wires and power lines so that they spell out words."

The postman nodded politely, unable to utter an, "uh huh," or "yebo", because Mrs Theta didn't like to be interrupted.

"The strange thing," she continued, "is that only Lindi can see these words. To any normal person, it just looks like a jumble of birds sitting on the wires. Even her own son thinks she's gone mad."

Vusi didn't like what Mrs Theta was saying, but he had to admit that for once, she was right. His mother was definitely seeing things that weren't there.

"Vusi, come quick!" his mother had called him out of bed that morning.

"See that?" she asked, pointing enthusiastically in the direction of the wires, "See how the birds are spelling out 'HELP ME'?"

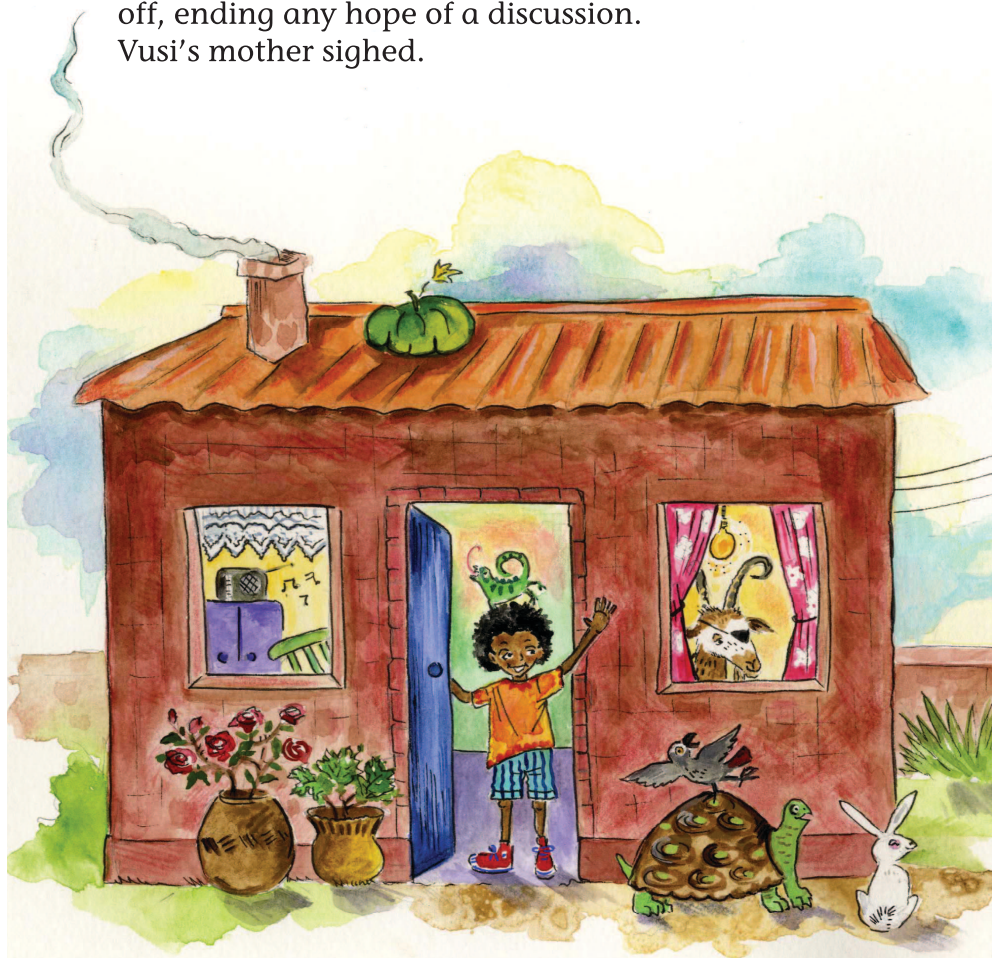
Vusi squinted hard. Try as he might, he could not see any words. Even when he looked from different angles, it made

no difference. A familiar knot of worry settled in his belly. People already thought his mother was strange. He heard the whispers when they were at the spaza shop: people talking about his mom's eccentric behaviour behind her back. The truth was she couldn't help herself when it came to helping others, especially those who couldn't speak for themselves.



If there was a sick or abandoned animal, she was the one who rescued it and nursed it back to health. They already shared their small brick house with a one-eyed goat, a green iguana, a giant tortoise, two rabbits, a skeletal dog, and a very rude parrot who had mortally offended Mrs Theta.

Just as Vusi wondered how to tell his mother she was seeing things, the birds suddenly flew off, ending any hope of a discussion. Vusi's mother sighed.



"That settles it," she said. "Help is needed. Vusi, bring me my handbag. I'm going on a rescue mission. If I'm not home by dark then feed the iguana, walk the dog, wrestle the goat, talk to Mr Pata, and do your homework."

Vusi's worry grew as he went off to find the bag. When he returned, Mrs Theta was still muttering beneath her breath.

"It's craziness. She fills her house up like a zoo. Takes in strangers when she can hardly feed herself or her boy. And that rude parrot. One day is one day, and on that day, I will wring that parrot's neck."

Vusi's mom waved goodbye as she drove off in her three-door car. The fourth door had fallen off so Vusi and his mom had patched it up with cardboard and painted it yellow with a smiley face. They'd used cling wrap to replace the window. Now Vusi watched with a sense of dread as the car disappeared around the corner.



After school, he fed the iguana and the tortoise fresh vegetables from the garden. Then he dutifully wrestled with the one-eyed goat in the backyard. When he was done, the goat climbed up onto the corrugated tin roof, where it liked to sleep. By then Skelly needed his walk. Vusi had helped his mom nurse the skeletal dog back to health after someone had thrown him off the back of a moving bakkie. Even though Skelly ate great volumes of food, his ribs were still visible beneath his skin. When Vusi ran his fingers over them, the bones felt like the bars on a xylophone.

Once he'd done his homework, Vusi had to talk to Mr Pata. This was the most difficult task of all. Mr Pata sat at the kitchen table all day and stared into space. Vusi's mom had rescued Mr Pata after he lost everything in a fire that was started by an overturned paraffin lamp.



The fire had spread through his neighborhood burning everything in its path with a cruel and amazing speed. Mr Pata would have died if someone hadn't dragged him out of his burning shack.

Mr Pata was lucky to be alive, but he didn't feel so lucky because he had lost his wife in the fire. He wandered the streets for days, with no place to go and little will to live. That's when Vusi's mom had found him, lost in grief, with his marimba strapped to his back.

Mr Pata hadn't uttered a word since the fire. He even preferred to sleep sitting up, at the kitchen table, with one eye half open in case of any emergency. The marimba sat in the corner, untouched for almost a year now, because Mr Pata couldn't bring himself to play it. His heart, said Vusi's mom, was filled with too much sadness.

It's hard to talk to someone who doesn't respond, but Vusi's mom said it was important to keep Mr Pata connected to the world. Every afternoon, as he swept the floor, Vusi would tell Mr Pata of the day's events. Now he told him about his mom and the unlikely message from the birds.

Suddenly a beaming Mrs Theta and a policeman appeared at the door.

"Your mother is at the Caledon Square Police Station. She will need a very good lawyer to get her out of the trouble she's in," announced Mrs Theta.

"She stole a sand shark from a tank and tried to release it into the ocean. Both your mother and the fish have been taken into custody."

Vusi's heart sank to the bottom of a pit in his stomach.



He knew the sand shark in question. He had walked past it with his mother many times before. It was in a tank that stood outside a restaurant in the mall where she worked as a cashier.

“Look,” his mother had said. “Look how cruel that is. The poor sand shark is sick. Its fins are frayed and it can barely move in that tank.”

Vusi’s mom spoke to the owner of the restaurant. She offered to take care of the fish herself, but the owner told her to mind her own business.

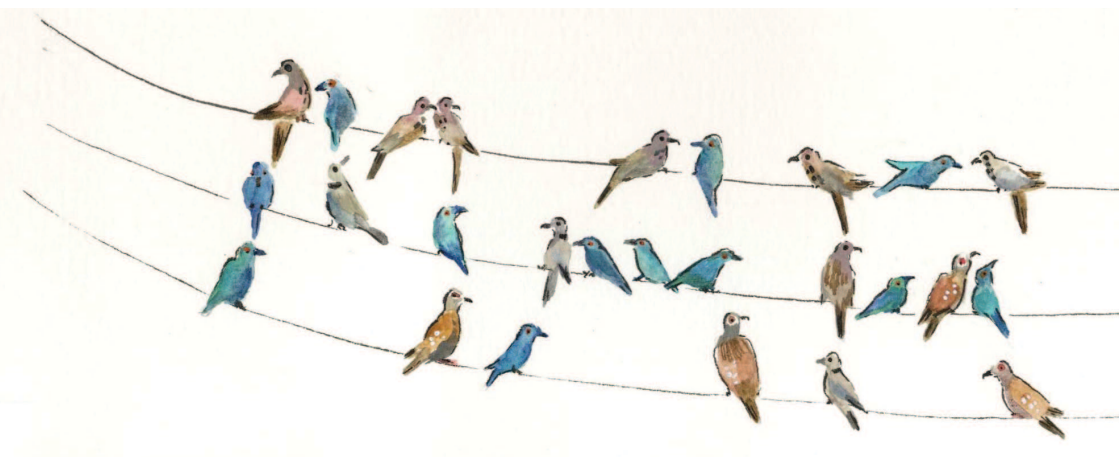
That night Vusi could not sleep. He thought of his mother all alone in a jail cell. The one-eyed goat couldn’t sleep either, so Vusi climbed up onto the roof and sat beside him. He didn’t know what to do. They had no money for a lawyer.

When the sun came up Vusi was filled with despair. He still had no answers. Above him he noticed a large flock of birds circling in the sky. He glanced at the telephone poles and the parallel wires strung between them. One by one, the birds were landing on the wires. Pigeons, doves, starlings.

Vusi blinked. He blinked again. He rubbed his eyes the way people do when they can’t believe what they are seeing. The birds were spelling out a single word. Vusi closed his eyes. When he opened them again, it was still there, ‘MARIMBA’ spelled out clearly in capital letters.

Seconds later, a backfiring minibus taxi startled the birds and they scattered into the clouds. The word was lost, but by then an idea was forming in Vusi’s mind.

Vusi raced back inside where he found Mr Pata standing with his marimba strapped to his back. Their eyes met. From the kitchen window, Mr Pata had a view of the telephone wires. Just from his look, Vusi knew that he had seen it too, the word, spelled out by the birds.



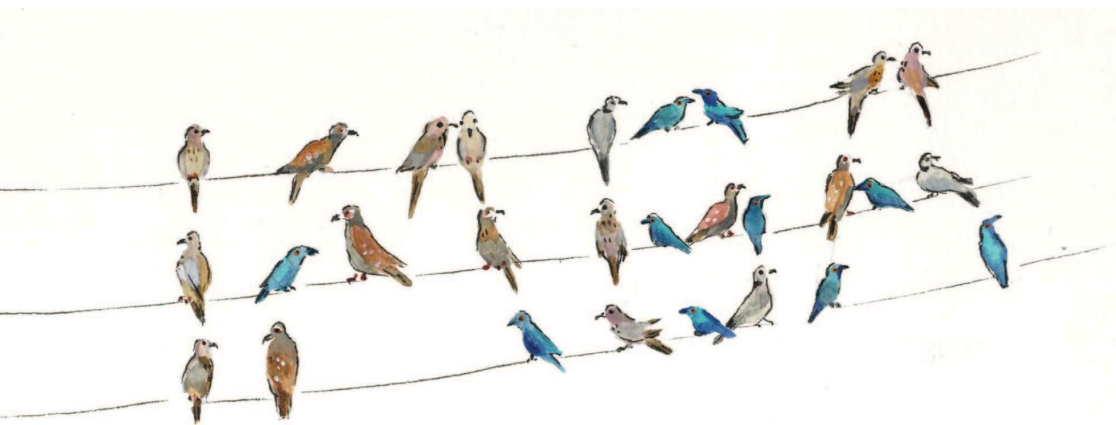
“Come Skelly,” shouted Vusi. “We’re going into town. You, me, Mr Pata and his marimba.”

When they finally reached the city centre, the sun was already high in the sky. They found a spot on the pavement where Mr Pata set up his marimba. Vusi nodded at Mr Pata who then began to play.

He started slowly at first, as if his hands didn’t quite remember where they were supposed to go. Before long he was beating out a beautiful rhythmic tune and soon his mallets flew so quickly over the wooden bars, they became a blur.

As Mr Pata played, Vusi pretended to drum on Skelly’s sticking-out ribcage, and the three of them created quite a spectacle. There was something magical and melancholy about Mr Pata’s music. People were drawn to it for reasons they could not understand.

It welled up from the bottom of Mr Pata’s broken heart and poured out into the street, touching everyone who heard it.



Soon a crowd of mesmerised onlookers gathered and money flowed into their collection tin.

“It’s done. We must hurry,” said Mr Pata. His voice was unexpectedly deep, warm and commanding.

The next day was the big day in court. Vusi’s mom sat next to her lawyer who arranged for the sand shark to be wheeled out in its unhappy tank. The judge was a stern man who looked like he had never smiled in his life. This pleased Mrs Theta, who sat waiting for the verdict, hoping to be first with the gossip.

After a solemn pause, the judge told Vusi’s mom that it was wrong to take an animal that belonged to someone else. Mrs Theta nodded in agreement. Then the judge declared that he was releasing her with just a warning. He said she didn’t belong in jail any more than the sand shark belonged in such a cruel and cramped space. He ordered that the sand shark be released into the ocean. He said that the world needed more people like Vusi’s mom: people who stood up for those who had no voice of their own.

Mrs Theta looked like she was going to explode.
“Objection!” she called, but the judge ignored her and
banged his gavel.

That night, in their little house, Vusi and his mom danced
to marimba music. On top of the tin roof danced the one-
eyed goat. Later Mr Pata sang and twirled Vusi’s mom
around under the stars.

As he drifted off to sleep, Vusi wondered whether he’d
really seen a message from the birds, or if he’d just
imagined it. He couldn’t be certain, but it didn’t matter.
All that mattered was that Mr Pata had found his voice, his
mom was home, and he loved her for all her eccentricity.



DEPARTMENT OF BASIC EDUCATION

Switchboard: 012 357 3000

Call centre 0800 202 933 | callcentre@dbe.gov.za

Email: info@dbe.gov.za

Facebook: [DBE SA](#)

Twitter: [@DBE_SA](#)

YouTube: [DBESouthAfrica](#)

ADDRESSES

Physical Address

Sol Plaatje House
222 Struben Street
Pretoria
0001

Postal Address

Private Bag X895
Pretoria
0001
South Africa