the pain of the Singer

An excerpt from the forthcoming novel *The Tenderness of Blood* by Mandlenkosi Langa.

After some twenty minutes' drive deep into the township, they stop in front of a wrought-iron gate. It is really fast getting dark, from the chimneys smoke is billowing, families preaparing the evening meal. The hibiscus hedge in front of house is trimmed — and high — partly shielding the facade of the house from view. Max gets out of the car and opens the black gate, looking uncomfortable in his suit. Mkhonto feels a surge of anger welling up in him and knows that all this anger is directed at himself for having, even unconsciously, passed judgement on his friend. I'll have to do something about this, he thinks, ashamed. Max returns and steers the car into the the gravelled driveway leading to the garage which is just a rough shelter of timber and zinc. Mkhonto feels Max's eyes on him as the latter pulls the handbrake and the car finally stops.

"You've been so quiet, Mkhonto," he says. Then appropos to nothing, he adds, "and the children have grown up, and they are also tired."

When Mkhonto gets out of the car, feeling the cold winter wind blowing from the east, a massive tawny Alsatian comes bounding, dragging a length of chain fastened to a thin wire that runs the length of the yard. He looks at the dog and stands completely still, relaxing so that it shouldn't smell fear in him. Despite the fact that Max is his friend, he doesn't know how much training the dog has got — and he has seen what these dogs can do to a man. Max goes to the growling beast which is now straining against its leash, its fangs glistening in the diffuse light of the early Friday evening. Max goes down on his haunches and allows the animal's massive head to rest on his shoulder. He strokes it, murmuring softly into the dog's cocked ears. The animal stops its growling and starts wagging its tail. Max stands up and brushes the dog's hair off his jacket.

"That's a beautiful dog," Mkhonto observes.

"Ja," Max agrees. "Some friends advised me to get a dog. I had three of these, they were brought here as puppies. Two died. Poison. A lot of unpleasant things have been said to me by the police. I think all of it stems from the fact that I handle all these political cases. Then I think of what happened to Carlson, and I certainly don't want that happening to me." He locks the door of the car, his movements swift and abrupt. "I'm only worried about Zodwa and Thembi. There is nothing I can do about their safety, really. Or even mine for that matter. When these bastards want you they get you. I'm a lawyer and I use my brains to work for the Movement. It's the only contribution I can make. Lots of people have advised me to leave the country, but then, my roots are here, my fight is here and I can only use my skills here. Outside South Africa, I'm

aid, I can only function as a mere shadow of man I once was. And I don't think my family uld forgive me for that."

"I can see you," Mkhonto says unkindly, olding one of those multi-dollar United Nations s, speaking in Geneva about the plight of uthern African refugees."

"That's your Botswana experience talking."

"Be kind to yourself, "Mkhonto says.

Before Max can compose a retort, the front or bursts open and a little beautiful girl comes running and heads for Max. She grabs him und his long legs and cries, "Daddy!"

Her father picks her up, urgently, his eyes rching her face the way a diviner stares into bottom of an empty teacup. Mkhonto watches her and daughter — and the child must be about nt years old — and he thinks about the daughter never claimed, Thaba. He thinks of her mother. ere are they? Probably somewhere in Durban. s at this moment, watching Max kiss his little ghter, that he realises that love exists after all.

x loves his child. Max puts her down and fles her carefully combed hair.

"Thembi," he says, "say 'Hello' to Uncle honto."

The child looks at Mkhonto with those concerting eyes some children have. He can that she is a little plagued by near-sightedness wonders vaguely why she isn't wearing glasses.

"Hello," she says simply, offering her hand. hand feels very small and fragile in his and he omes careful with his grip.

"Hello, Thembi," he says. "Hey, Max, is this t of the surprise you have for me, bro?"

"Take it all in slowly, friend," Max says, ding them to the open door. "There's still ne more." Impulsively, Thembi thrusts her e hand into Mkhonto's and — with this child's te gesture of acceptance filling him with a ring happiness — they enter the house.

The house. The lounge is opulently but taste- y furnished, all the colours blending into a wing symphony, giving the room an effect t can only be acquired through a decorator's ch. Mkhonto sinks into a sofa of eiderdown tness, beige, the colour of the living room e of settees and chairs and a table which had n pushed into the corner to give more space the room. The arrangement of the furniture kes the visitor realise that Max likes to enter- . There is a glistening B & O stereo set next to bay windows that are partially obscured by vy maroon drapes. On the corner of the room ats a television set. "Apartheid's audio-visual ," Max snorts. It looks like some nightmare ature from outer space, completely dominating lounge with its presence. On a little round le is a telephone, black, ready to shriek and w whatever peace there is in the house into e flying fragments. On the walls are two collage nts by Romare Bearden, a water colour painting Walter Batiss and a haunting silk-screen print of haunted muscians signed by Thami Mnyele s ornate scrawl. Mkhonto ogles these creations that seem very much alive until he comes to a framed dagguerrotype photograph of a man's face that looks vaguely familiar. The face is oval, uncertain light causing a shadow that runs down the bridge and the wings of the nose, effectively skewering the face into two parts, the jaw jutting in an unconscious gesture of defiance. The chiselled lips give the mouth the effect of a ready smile and, paradoxically, depthless cruelty; it is a mouth used to issuing commands. It is also a no-nonsense face and it reminds Mkhonto of his own father's face — those staring eyes, unwavering, bespeaking the silent strength of the owner behind them. As a photographer he has dealt with many, many faces and it irks him that he cannot place this one; it is like meeting a man in a train and his eyes tell you that you have no right not to remember his name.

Max appears. He has discarded his suit and is now wearing an old pair of blue jeans, tennis shoes, an open-necked shirt — and an apron. Mkhonto smiles at this transformation. Max is holding a bottle of whiskey in his right hand and two small soda bottles in his left. He places the load on a tray on the glass-topped coffee table, pushes some legal magazines, books and papers aside. He rushes back to the kitchen and returns with two ashtrays.

"Who's this, Max?" Mkhonto asks, pointing at the enigma on the wall. "I think I know most of your relatives and none look as distinguished as this man here."

Max turns to Thembi, handing her the magazines and books. "Tell Uncle who that is love."

"That's Bab' uJohannes Nkosi, *malume*," the child says, shyly, and adds the debris of paper to the bundle in her arms and heads for the study somewhere in the labyrinths of the house. Mkhonto stands there, everything coming to him, unstoppable like a river. Of course! He remembers reading about Johannes Nkosi, how he was shot dead by the police in Pietermaritzburg when addressing thousands of people who had hearkened to the Communist Party's call for the burning of passbooks. When was that? Oh, ja, Dingane's Day, December 16, 1930. He remembers feeling outraged when he read that the doctor who gave evidence at the inquest said that all the dead had been horribly mutilated. Nkosi had been struck by a single bullet in his head, but the post mortem showed that his skull had multiple fractures and he had stab wounds all over his body. There are many, many more who are dying, Mkhonto thinks, and the police and their paid agents always come out of it all absolved of any blame. An eye for an eye, a death for a death — that happened to that injuction?

"I keep that photograph there," Max says from the kitchen, "to remind myself and my family that this shit has been going on for a long time. There's no moment when we should relax

our vigilance."

"What do these guys do when they come to see you?" Mkhonto asks, going to the table and looking at the bottles. "Don't they hassle you for that picture?"

"Well," Max says, coming to the lounge and sitting on the sofa, "they come and rant and rave and make all the threatening sounds. But with me they know exactly where to stop. They know that even if I'm a kaffir, I'm that type of kaffir who can make a hell of a big noise. I get the feeling that they are a little afraid of me. That," he adds, throwing some ice cubes into the glasses, "makes me shit scared."

"Maybe they don't know who it is."

"That's a possibility," Max says. "You know there is this story of this auntie from Grahamstown who had a picture of Lenin on her bedroom wall. One day the Security Branch heavies came to do what they call routine searching. They saw this picture and asked her who it was. She told them it was the picture of her late boss who had been very good to her."

"They didn't charge her under the Communism Act?"

"Shit, no. They left it there. Furthermore Lenin is wearing a cap on that one."

"It's amazing how we can live with fear in this country. Thanks," Mkhonto says, accepting a glass of whiskey from Max. He takes a sip and the liquor burns his throat. He feels the amber liquid coursing down his stomach, filling him with a warm glow. Thembi, who has sat unobtrusively in her corner for all this time, stands up and goes to the stereo set. She gets on her knees in front of the set as though praying to the mechanical god, takes a stack of records from the rack. Her eyebrows are knitted together in an adult study of concentration. It looks funny on one so young. Now and then she raises her eloquent eyes to look at the men. Mkhonto can see that that her mind is trying to wrestle with this ritual of drinking that adults indulge in. He thinks of his own uncle, Alonzo, his nephew, Thulani. He remembers the time he visited them in the coastal town of Groutville, a stone's throw from the late Chief Albert Luthuli's home. It was a very hot Saturday and they were sitting in Alonzo's cramped sitting room, sipping vodka and orange juice from tall glasses that Mkhonto had purloined from the Holiday Inn and given to Sis' Betty on their tenth wedding anniversary.

Thulani was three years old, as sharp as a razor, talking a mile a minute. When Alonzo went to the kitchen to see to the pots — Sis' Betty was on duty at the hospital — Thulani picked up his father's empty glass and gave it to his uncle, indicating that he also wanted a shot. Let me fix this kid, Mkhonto thought evilly, never to ask for liquor again. He poured a stiff shot and gave it to his nephew. Thulani took the glass with his two hands and swallowed the scorching drink in one gulp. Mkhonto expected the little boy to choke on the drink and splutter. But what the child did really surprised him. He gave Mkhonto the empty glass and said, "*Futhi, malume* — again, uncle!"

Thembi puts the record on the turntable. There is the crackling sound of the needle resting on the empty grooves. Then the lounge is suddenly filled with the warm throbbing sound of bass strings and horns. Then Mkhonto hears a woman's voice, like the voice he heard in the car — rasping this time, scraping his nerve ends, pain and pleasure mixed — singing a sad song that speaks of chains and men transported to the furthest corners of the earth to work in cotton plantations. She sings of lovers in that strange and distant land, of a small girl who stands on the seashore clutching a posy of withered flowers, watching boats and barges going by, waiting for strange men to come and stay with her for the shortest while and save her from a staring loneliness that is driving her out of her mind. Although the lyrics of the song are not in his language, the pain of the unknown singer is something that Mkhonto has lived with all his life. This little girl, gnawed by this yawning loneliness, is no different from the little girls he has watched being claimed by the streets on which he grew up. The singer's sorrow, then, from this great and unbrideable distance, becomes his own. He wonders whether it is the effect of liquor that makes him feel so wretched. The voice, now, is laden with a plea for understanding a proud person is forced to make when everything is lost. Her song, in a curious way, becomes his song, the story of the women of his life.

She makes love just like a woman, she sings, and he is taken back to the night when his school went to attent a requiem mass at St. Peter's Cathedral on Commercial Road for nineteen people who had died in a train accident. His parents were not Catholics, but the school principal *was* and he had ordered that all the students of Thembalihle High School should be there, whether they were Protestants, Methodists, Seventh Day Adventists, animists or atheists. Many a Christian boy had been brought to within an inch of knocking on the mythological Pearly Gates after disregarding the principal's injuctions. His word was law. Mkhonto did not fit in any of these categories. He had a vague notion that there was something that had caused his father's trousers to be repeatedly patched on the knees. That something was called God. Mkhonto, who had never seen this God do anything for his family, preferred not to believe in Him: at the same time he never denied his existence. Moreover, he just didn't like church services. His dislike was born of instinct. He always felt uneasy, even in his father's church, when he saw the transformation that came over people as soon as they entered the holy place. On this day they were herded into the cathedral, he watched the many people assembled there, dressed in robes of mourning, the colour of the

night. There was a hushed sillence as the priest intoned the prayers of the dead in a deep, solemn voice that sounded as though it came from a deep cavern. It was this voice that caused Mkhonto and — of this he was sure — his schoolmates around him to start seeing the terror the living have of death. Death is okay, he thought, as long as it's about five miles away from us. After the mass, the priest, an ascetic looking Irishman, said that he would introduce something unusual in a catholic church service in that the evening's programme would include short speeches by people who knew some of the deceased. Mkhonto was hearing the word "decased" for the first time and he thought that people probably got diseased before they became the deceased. Amazed at his own arcane humour, he almost broke out laughing.

He fought very hard against this laughter because he had the idea that the minute it began he would be in hysterics. A handful of speakers went to the podium and said all they knew about the ones who had been snatched from their midst with such swiftness. The common theme in all the speeches was that it was very strange that such accidents always seemed to befall black people only. It was mighty strange, praise be to God. Many speakers had tears in their eyes — and bitter gall on their tongue — by the time they left the podium. A middle-aged woman who could have been anyone's mother, had to be helped to her seat after finishing her short contribution, sobbing without control. A hush went up the church hall when a very young woman — she must have been around eighteen — went to the stand. She was dressed in a long, black dress that was a couple of sizes too large. This accentuated her slight frame. She said something, shyly, about some of the young people who had died. Some had been her friends and, mirrored in the eyes of some of the young men, she had seen the images of the terrible things that lay athwart the path to liberation. Now they were gone, snuffed out like so many beautiful candles. *Anyway*, she said shrugging, *I want to sing a song for all those who perished in this train disaster and all those who have met their end in ever so many man-made disasters that follow our people like a tax collector*. somewhere behind him Mkhonto heard a woman moaning softly at this intense expression of private grief, so softly that he knew it needed only one more word from the girl up there in front and the woman would be completely beyond control. He heard shuffling behind him as though a thousand rats were scurrying away and the moaning became lower and lower in volume until it became totally inaudible, swallowed by a voracious silence. Then — there was the sound of the church organ, piping with the suddenness of a bright light turned on in inky darkness; the sound was cut down like a scream of a dying person. Then the girl began to sing her sad, sad song *a cappella*. Her slender brown arms rose unexpectedly, embracing the congregation, the whole world, making it part of the grief it had tried to distance itself from. Her voice, as clear as the song of a bird that sings near a timeless river, filled the nooks and crannies of the church the way wet cement fills cracks on a concrete floor; it bounced against the pictures of Jesus on his way to Golgotha. The cross and the icons made of cheap imitation gold shook. The people shuddered. The young woman sang of a time when man would no longer rejoice at the sight of chains, a time when all the countless generations would rise as one to howl against injustice, when all the chains would shrivel into foil and drop down on their own. Her voice was laden with hundreds of years of pain. When she came to the end of her song, her arms dropped to her sides and she slowly went down, down as though her shoulders were supporting an unbearable load. Then she straightened up, her eyes as dry as parchment paper, and smiled a self-conscious smile that masked unutterable pain and said, simply, *Thank you*. When she walked down the aisle to take her place, her silky robes rustling, there was a renewed moaning in the church. Mkhonto bent his head so that his chin rested on his chest, hiding his face so that his schoolmates wouldn't see the tears that had sprung into his eyes, going down his cheeks and entering the corners of his mouth, tasting of salt and sweat, scalding.